

# TEST TAKING

## *Before the Test*

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### **Time Management**

- ✓ Refer to the syllabus often and plan ahead for quizzes and exams.
- ✓ Map out your schedule up to the day of the test.
- ✓ Review for several short periods rather than one long study session or trying to cram. You will retain information better, be less fatigued and less stressed.

### **Identify & Prepare for Exam Format**

- ✓ Review for the test by writing your own test questions, rereading key material, and summarizing your notes.
- ✓ Study from past tests if available.
- ✓ Complete and refer to study guides.
- ✓ Muscle memory: study for your exam at about the same time as the test so your mind and body are ready at that hour.

### **Condense/Organize/Memorize Information**

- ✓ Overlearn the material – don't stop quizzing yourself until you can give the correct answer several times.
- ✓ Develop mnemonic aids for memorizing lists, terms, etc.
- ✓ Study in accordance with your learning style (e.g. note cards, visual aids, saying terms out loud, rewriting notes, etc.).
- ✓ For math courses, solve several problems for each *type* of question.

## *During the Test*

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- ✓ Look over the entire test and read directions very carefully.
- ✓ Do a “data dump” – write down any memorized formulas, equations, and lists before you answer any questions.
- ✓ Take your time – don't rush and try not to focus on what others are doing.
- ✓ Complete the questions you're confident about first.
- ✓ Review your answers before turning in your test.

## *After the Exam*

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- ✓ Review incorrect answers independently or with your tutor, instructor, and/or peers.
- ✓ If test anxiety is an issue, attend a Testing Skills/Anxiety workshop or make an appointment with the college counselor.

## *Resources*

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### Study Guides and Strategies

<http://www.studygs.net/>

Multilingual resources site for test taking, reading/retention and study skills

### How to Study

[www.howtostudy.org](http://www.howtostudy.org)

Resources on test preparation, note taking, reducing test anxiety, etc.

### Time Management Calculator

<http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/TMInteractive.html>

A great resource to see how much time is leftover in your day for studying!

links to study tips and test taking strategies websites

<http://www.eop.mu.edu/study/>

Links to various collegiate and organizational websites on study skills

# Test Taking Strategies

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## **When you take a test,**

you are demonstrating your ability to understand course material or perform certain tasks. Successful test taking avoids carelessness.

Examples of objective tests are true-false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank.

Examples of subjective texts are short answer, essay, or oral exams

NB: If you have any doubts about the fairness of tests, or of the ability of tests to measure your performance, please see your academic counseling service.

## **These suggestions may help you avoid careless errors!**

### **Prepare:**

- **Analyze how you did on a similar test in the past**  
Review your previous tests, and sample tests, especially when studying for the final exam.  
Each test prepares you for the next: the more tests you take, the better you will develop your test taking strategies.
- **Arrive early for tests**  
Before a test, list everything you will need for it that is allowed. (pencils/pens, calculator, dictionary, watch, etc.)  
Good preparation helps you focus on the task at hand
- **Be comfortable but alert**  
Choose a good spot in the room and make sure you have enough space to work,  
maintain comfortable posture in your seat, but don't "slouch"
- **Stay relaxed and confident**  
Keep a good attitude.  
Remind yourself that you are well-prepared and are going to do well.  
If you find yourself anxious, take several slow, deep breaths to relax  
Don't talk about the test to other students just before entering the room: their anxiety can be contagious

### **Test Taking:**

- **Read the directions carefully**  
This may be obvious, but it will help you avoid careless errors
- **If there is time, quickly look through the test for an overview**  
Note key terms, jot down brief notes  
If you can, mark the test or answer sheet with comments that come to

mind.

Ask if that is permitted!

- **Answer questions in a strategic order:**
  1. **Answer easy questions first**  
to build confidence, score points, and mentally orient yourself to vocabulary, concepts, and your studies. It may also help you make associations with more difficult questions.
  2. **Then difficult questions** or those with the most point value  
With objective tests, first eliminate those answers you know to be wrong, or are likely to be wrong, don't seem to fit, or where two options are so similar as to be both incorrect.  
With essay questions, broadly outline your answer and sequence the order of your points.
- **Review:**  
Resist the urge to leave as soon as you have completed all the items  
Review your test to make sure that you
  - have answered all questions
  - did not mis-mark answers
  - did not make simple mistakes

Proofread spelling, grammar, punctuation, decimal points, etc.

**Change answers to questions if you made a mistake, or misread the question**

or if you find information elsewhere in the test that indicates that your first choice is incorrect

**Decide on and adopt study strategies that work best for you**

Review your test preparation and identify those habits that worked well and replace those that don't!

*Adapted from <http://www.studygs.net/tsttak1.htm>*

# Test Strategies: Barriers to Test Performance

Student Success Center  
Eastern Illinois University



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Stress and test performance are related to each other. For most people, test performance falls off because they are over-stimulated by stress in their lives. These life stressed can be divided into physical barriers (body), cognitive barriers (thoughts), and preparation.

## Physical Barriers to Test Performance

Just before you take a test or during the test itself, so you experience: jitters, sweaty palms, stomach or bowel pains, racing pulse, heart pounding, or the inability to focus and concentrate? These are physiological symptoms of stress. Here are some ways to reduce their effects.

1. **Get plenty of sleep** the night before the test. If you are sleepy, your ability to think clearly and to remember will be affected. Cramming is an ineffective study strategy that inhibits recall.
2. **Avoid stimulus like coffee or sugar** prior to test. Skip your morning coffee and don't eat the sweet roll. These substances add chemical stress. Don't take stimulants or drink coffee to stay awake the night before the test.
3. **Eat a balanced diet.** It is important for optimal functioning that your body has all the nutrients it requires. Eat foods from all four food groups and don't skip meals.
4. **Learn to relax.** Take time to learn about relaxation process and what works for you. The techniques you choose should feel comfortable, be brief and be the type you could do in the testing room in front of other people (hot baths work but are impractical).

Here are some ideas:

- ◆ Breathe deeply but slowly for 30 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- ◆ Imagine heavy weights on each shoulder and push down and stretch the muscles of your neck and shoulders.
- ◆ Visualize your anxiety as a color concentrated in different parts of your body. Visualize the colors slowly draining out through your hands and feet.
- ◆ Say to yourself, "I am relaxed in my body, I am relaxed in my mind, now I am ready."

## Cognitive Barriers to Test Performance

Just before you take a test or during the test itself, do you spend a lot of time worrying about your performance? Do you expect to do poorly on the test no matter how much time you spend in preparation? Do you talk to yourself and tell yourself how badly you are doing? These self-statements or “self-talk” are barrier to your test performance. Here are some examples of cognitive errors:

1. **Overgeneralizations:** “I can never get math,” or “I always do poorly on essay tests.”
2. **Catastrophizing:** “Taking a test in a horrible experience,” or “If I do poorly on this test, I’ll ruin my whole life.”
3. **Using an Inappropriate Example:** “My uncle Larry flunked this course when he was in college,” or “This guy in my Spanish class told me that Professor Johnson gives horrible tests.”
4. **Improper Inference:** “I just have to accept that I will never do well on tests.”
5. **Conflicting Goals:** “I want to do well on this test, but I just have to make the party on the night before.”
6. **Personalization:** “If I flunk this test, I’ll consider myself a total failure.”
7. **Using a Single Standard:** “I have to get at least a ‘B’ on this test or it won’t mean a thing.”

Many other examples are possible. “Self-talk” is as individual as the people who take tests. Listen to what you say to others and then listen to what you say to yourself. Learn to ask yourself the questions.

**“What am I telling myself that is making it harder for me to perform well on this test?”**

Begin constructing positive self-statements to replace counter-productive, negative self-talk. Use affirming statements while you study and when taking tests. Remind yourself of past successes, how well you’ve prepared, and your knowledge of the material. Visualize yourself doing well on the exam; most importantly, visualize yourself doing YOUR BEST! Remember, an exam grade represents only your performance on the particular test, not your overall knowledge.

## Preparation Barriers to Test Performance

Maybe you aren’t experiencing the kind of symptoms mentioned in the first two sections. No matter how physiologically calm you are, no matter how cognitively clear and confident you are, you aren’t very likely to do well on a test for which you didn’t spend the time to prepare. Remember this old saying:

**“Aim at nothing and you will hit the target every time.”**

Test preparation is aiming to do well. One key strategy to help you improve your aim is to stimulate actual testing conditions while you study. For example, if you will be doing 10 math problems in 50 minutes, do that as a dress rehearsal—time yourself, work without reference to your notes or text. Learn how to work *smart* and *fast* before the actual exam. Your rehearsal will help you target areas that you need to focus on and will confirm what you know.

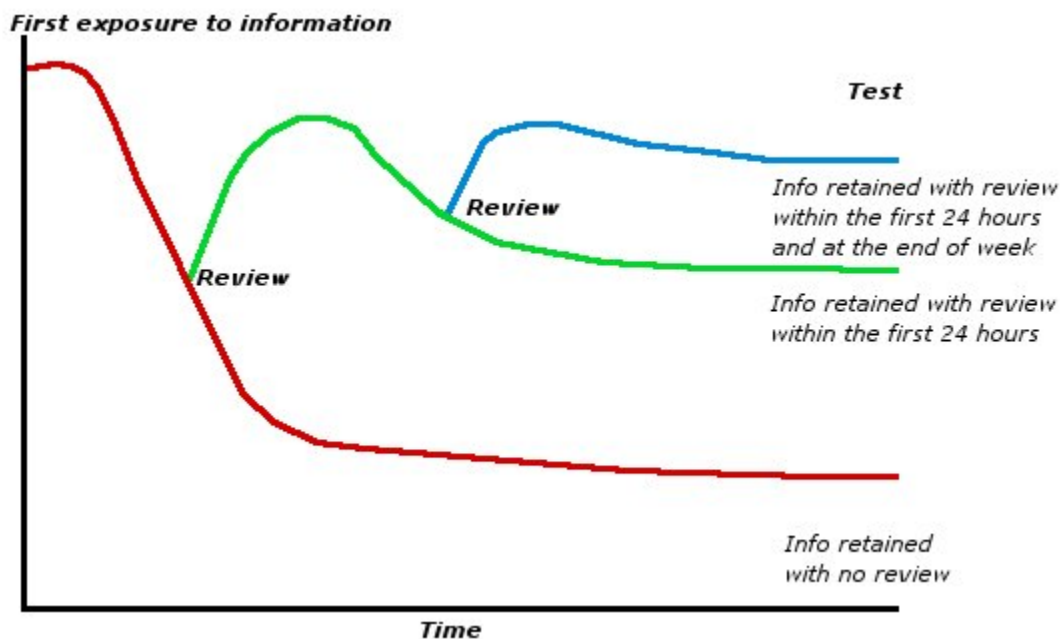
## The Importance of Review

The most important part of note taking is *reviewing your notes after class*. Notes do very little if they are never looked at again! The average student forgets up to 80 percent of the information within 24 hours of learning it. Students can dramatically increase the amount of information they retain by reviewing the information within that first 24 hours.

When reviewing, edit and clarify notes, focusing on main ideas and key points. One way of doing this is by using the Cornell System. To further improve retention, do a weekly review as well. Choose one night of the week (weekends work well for this) to go over notes from the past week of class for all of your classes. Plan to spend about 30 minutes per class.

Review also improves retention of information from textbooks and can be done in almost the same manner. After reading each chapter or section of the text, do a short review within 24 hours and a comprehensive review on a weekly basis.

Nobody is anxious to add another task to their list of things to do, but reviewing often saves time in the long run, since consistent review leads to less cramming before tests. Studying for a short period of time each day is more effective than studying for many hours on a single day.



*Adapted from WWU's Tutorial Center*

# How to Keep Calm During Tests

[www.utexas.edu/student/utlc](http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc)

1. **Prepare well in advance.** Keep up every day if you can, but don't judge yourself harshly if you don't. Avoid last-minute cramming. Don't go without sleep the night before.
2. **Know the time and place** of the test and what you need to bring. Be on time, neither too early nor too late, with blue books or supplies. Don't rush.
3. **Don't talk about the test** with classmates immediately beforehand, especially if you know this sort of thing raises your anxiety level.
4. Read over the test and **plan your approach.** Ascertain point values per part, time limits for each section, which question you'll start with to boost your confidence, etc.
5. Don't hesitate to **ask for clarification** from the professor, teaching assistant, or proctor if you have questions about instructions, procedure, etc.
6. **Be clear about your job.** A test is a thinking task, and your job during an exam is to think as clearly as possible based on what you currently know. Focus on your job (the thinking process) and practice letting go of what you don't control (the grading). Approach the test determined to think to the best of your ability, but also accept the limits of what you currently know as a beginner.
7. **Reduce anxiety with activity.** If your mind goes blank and you can't think of anything to write, go on to another question or another part of the test. On an essay question, jot down anything you can recall on scratch paper to stimulate your memory and get your mind working.
8. **Relax yourself physically** during the test, especially if you notice that you are not thinking well or your muscles are tight. Pause, put your test down, and take several slow, deep breaths. Tense and release your muscles. Do this in particular if you notice that you are worrying excessively about one problem, not reading carefully, and unable to recall information you know.
9. **Pay attention to the test**, not to others. Don't waste time wondering how other people are doing.

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# How to Keep Calm During Tests

[www.utexas.edu/student/utlc](http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc)

## ARE YOU "TEST ANXIOUS"?

1. Are you aware of being really nervous on a test, maybe so nervous that you don't do your best and you lose points, even though you know you've studied well and are prepared?
2. Does your stomach ever get tight or upset before or during a test? Hands cold and sweaty? Headaches? Do you have trouble sleeping the night before a test?
3. Do you ever find your mind racing, or dull or "muddy," so that you can't think clearly while taking a test?
4. Do you ever forget material you studied and learned, maybe only to remember it again later after the test is over?
5. Do you "overanalyze" questions, see too many possibilities, choose the complex answer and overlook—and miss—the simpler, correct one?
6. Do you make many careless errors on tests?

**A "yes" answer to any one of these questions suggests that you may be experiencing test anxiety.**

Of course, everyone is anxious about tests; if you weren't, you wouldn't try. A certain amount of tension is good, because it acts as a motivator.

**But** it has been estimated that as many as 20% of college students may suffer from nervousness that is so severe a couple of things may happen:

- Their grades may drop, because anxiety interferes with their mental processes and keeps them from doing their best.
- And the quality of their life may decline, because they're so miserable when they have to take tests.

Most test-takers may benefit from suggestions for ways to self-calm and maintain a productive level of tension while preparing for and taking tests.

# Problem Solving Tests

www.utexas.edu/student/utlc

## Preparing for Problem-Solving Tests

1. Review class notes and reading. List the major concepts and formulas from both.
2. Highlight those topics/problems that your instructor emphasized and note **why** they're important.
3. The single best way to prepare for problem-solving tests is to **solve problems**—lots of them. Be sure to work problems not previously assigned.
4. Analyze all problems you work by answering the following questions
  - What concepts, formulas, and rules did I apply?
  - What methods did I use?
  - How did I begin?
  - Have I seen this problem before?
  - Is it similar or dissimilar to other problems I've done?
  - How does my solution compare with the examples from the book and class?
  - Could this problem be worked another way? Can I simplify what I did?
5. In your own words, write what you did and why next to each problem-solving step.
6. Look for fundamental problem types. Typically a course has approximately 5 fundamental groups of problems; make sure you can recognize them.
7. Practice working problems out of sequence. For example, work a problem from Chapter 7, then one from Chapter 5, then one from Chapter 10. This randomness will allow you to see how different problems relate to each other and will simulate the test-taking experience.
8. Work with a time limit. Aim to solve as many problems as you will have on the test within the test time limit (i.e., 30 problems in 50 minutes).
9. Create a practice test. Consider cutting and pasting a test together from your homework problems.

## Taking Problem-Solving Tests

1. Before starting the test, turn it over and jot down all the formulas, relationships, definitions, etc. that you need to remember.
2. Review the whole test, skimming the questions and developing a general plan for your work. If any thoughts come to you immediately, write them in the margin.
3. Plan your time. Allow more time for high point value problems, and reserve time at the end for reviewing your work and fixing any emergencies.
4. Start with the easier problems, i.e. the ones for which you can specify a solution method quickly. This will reduce anxiety and facilitate clear thinking.
5. For the more difficult problems, follow these steps:
  - Be certain that you understand the problem. Mark key words, identify the givens and unknowns in your own words, sketch a diagram or picture of the problem, anticipate the form and characteristics of the solution.
  - Make a note—in symbols, diagrams, graphs or tables—of all the information given.
  - For complex problems, list all the formulas you consider relevant to the solution, then decide which you will need to get started.

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# Problem Solving Tests

www.utexas.edu/student/utlc

6. If you still have no solution method, try the following:
  - If possible, write out an equation to express the relationships among all the givens and unknowns, accounting for **all** the data and facts in the problem.
  - Think back to similar practice problems.
  - Work backwards. Ask yourself, "What do I need to get the answer?"
  - Solve a simpler form of the problem if dealing with complex configurations. Or substitute simple numbers for unknowns; try to reduce the amount of abstract thinking required.
  - Break a problem into a series of smaller problems, then work each part.
  - Guess an answer and then check it. The checking process may suggest a solution method.
7. If all else fails, mark the problem and return to it later. You may find clues in subsequent problems that will help you find a solution.
8. For all problems, both easy and difficult, don't forget the following tips:
  - Once you're established the solution method, follow it carefully. Check each step for consistency in notation. Document all your work thoroughly and neatly so it's legible.
  - Evaluate your solutions. Check your answer against the original problem to make sure it fits.
9. Try all test problems. If your mind goes blank, relax for a moment and contemplate the problem. Or mark it and return to it later.
10. If you run out of time and still have problems remaining, try to set the problem up in a solution plan so that you'll have a chance of receiving partial credit.

## Analyzing Returned Problem-Solving Tests

1. Read the comments and suggestions.
2. Locate the source of the test. Did the problems come from the lectures, the textbook, or homework?
3. Note any alterations. How were the problems changed from those in the notes, text, and homework?
4. Determine the source of your errors. Asking yourself the following questions should be helpful.
  - Did your errors result from carelessness? For example, did you fail to carry a negative sign from one step to another?
  - Did you misread questions? For example, did you fail to account for all the given data in your solution method?
  - Did you consistently miss the same kind of problem?
  - Could you produce the formulas, or did you recall them incorrectly?
  - Were you unable to finish the test because you ran out of time?
  - Were you unable to solve problems because you didn't practice similar ones?
  - Did you have difficulty on the test because you were too anxious to focus on the questions?

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