

MULTIPLE-CHOICE TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

Students who have not learned good test-taking skills are working with an unseen handicap. In almost every objective test, they give up points needlessly due to undisciplined testing behavior, irrational responses to test items, or a variety of other bad habits.

Effective test-taking is not about gimmickry. It is not about outwitting the test in a guessing game or applying some magical formula to test-taking. Instead, the successful student must apply critical reading and thinking skills to the test and avoid making careless mistakes.

Have you ever studied for a test and felt like you knew the information; then when you actually took the test, you didn't do very well? Part of not doing well on a test is nervousness, not being sure what the directions are and other such reasons. Knowing how to take a test can reduce fear and create much better situations for you. Knowing the content is the most important step in preparing for the test.

It is possible that you may know the content but remain unprepared because you really don't know how to take an exam.

Establish a Good Attitude

1. Learn how to control nervousness. Take one step at a time. A little nervousness is common. Don't worry about things you don't know.
2. Think positively. Your goal is, "I'm going to the best I can," rather than, "I'll never make it through this test."
3. Be physically fit. To perform well on a test requires that you be alert. Having a good night's rest and eating a good breakfast can contribute to your success.
4. Know your personal strengths and weaknesses when you take a test. All students have weaknesses of one kind or another. Establish a plan to improving your weaknesses.

Cut Out Careless Errors

Let's begin by dealing with the careless kinds of mistakes that make you moan and groan when you get your test back. First, let's state the obvious: read the directions carefully. Many of you are in such a hurry to start the test that you do not read the instructions and make careless errors as a result.

Secondly, monitor your time so you do not get in a last-minute rush to finish the test. If there are 50 items and your teacher limits the testing time to 50 minutes, then you obviously have only about a minute to answer each question. The point here is not that you should time each item with a stopwatch. Simply monitor your progress periodically to make sure that you do not get caught in a time crunch.

Third, do not start second-guessing yourself and changing your original answers. Research has indicated that your first hunch is more likely to be correct. You should only change answers to questions if you originally misread them or if you have encountered information elsewhere in the test that indicates with certainty that your first choice is incorrect.

Finally, allow enough time to go through the test to make sure that you have not left an item blank, mis-marked the answer sheet, or made some other simple oversight.

Three Phases of Objective Test Taking

It might help to think of your objective test taking as falling into three distinct phases, which, if followed in sequence, should improve your final grade:

Phase One: Go through the test and answer only those items that you are confident you can answer correctly, skipping the other items momentarily. This strategy helps you build confidence and assures that you will get credit for what you know if you run low on time. Also, as you read and answer questions, you are making mental associations and reviewing the material. A term listed further into the test may be the one that was just on the "tip of your tongue" when you were trying to answer an earlier item.

Phase Two: Go back through the test and focus on items you skipped in the first phase, using a slightly different strategy: identify and eliminate what you are relatively sure are incorrect answers. Try cutting down on the possible choices to improve your odds.

- Based on the knowledge you have of the subject, eliminate choices that are definitely wrong or unlikely.
- On multiple-choice items, eliminate choices that do not link grammatically to the stem of the question. Some tests may not phrase the incorrect answers as carefully as the correct one. If a choice is added to complete the stem and the result is an awkward or ungrammatical construction, it is most likely an incorrect answer.
- Eliminate choices that would be logically excluded by other possible choices. For example, if the possible answers to an item are a.) sleeping, b.) listening, c.) staring, or d.) napping, since a. and d. mean basically the same thing, and since only one answer can be correct, then it is logical that neither could be the correct answer.
- Now for the tough part. Any remaining questions are those which you either simply do not know the answer to, or those in which the answer is buried deep in your memory and may or may not surface before the end of the exam. Now you need to look for clues in the wording of the questions. Do you know which answers are definitely not correct? Does the question ask the name of a woman rather than a man? Do two or more answers have the exact same meaning?
- If you have a difficult time deciding between two close answers, try using the true/false technique. Read the stem using both answer choices and try to determine which one makes a more true statement.

Phase Three: Once you have exhausted your knowledge and narrowed the choices remaining by eliminating unlikely answers, it's time to make your best guess. But you don't have to make this a coin-flip decision.

You're Thinking Critically . . . You're Not Guessing

You can improve your odds by keeping in mind some important information about language:

Be especially cautious of items that contain absolute terms -- words like always, never, invariably, none, all, every, and must. It is not impossible, but it is much more difficult, to write an absolute statement that is accurate and valid. Try substituting a qualified term for the absolute one, like *frequently* or *typically* in place of *always* or *most*, or *some* in place of *all* or *every*. If the statement

is more or less valid than the original one, take that into consideration in choosing your answer. The opposite tendency also gives you valuable clues. Sometimes, test designers will add qualifying or clarifying terms or expressions to the right answer on multiple-choice items. The result is longer, more detailed items.

- The "decoys" on a multiple choice test questions may not be worded so carefully; they may sound a little too absolute or too "pat." With the qualifiers missing, the validity of the statement is highly suspect:

Some Other Tips for Multiple-Choice Tests

Multiple choice items consist of a question or an incomplete statement, called the "stem," typically followed by four to five choices. Most often only one is the correct or "best" answer and the others are called distracters or decoys. A few strategies can help you do your best on multiple choice tests.

- First, cover the answers to an item and read only the stem of the question. See if you can provide the correct answer without having to be prompted by the choices. If an answer comes to mind, then look at the choices and select it if it is listed there.
- If you apply the first strategy and no answer pops into your head, try the second: join each choice to the question or the stem and consider it as a true/false item. The answer that sounds most valid or "most true" should be your choice.
- And third, test designers are often limited in their "supply of decoys," and as a result will make up terms to use for that purpose. To the student who has missed classes or not studied, the made-up decoy is hard to detect. If you have been attending regularly and have done a good job of preparing for the test, you should not choose an answer that sounds totally new to you.
- Remember that the "distracters" are usually written as almost correct. It is your task to effectively think through the question to make sure that you select the correct answer.

If you find yourself having to guess on multiple-choice items, you might keep the following tip in mind.

- If two of the choices have balanced phrasing or echo each other, choose one or the other. Again, human nature comes into play in this tendency. If the correct answer on a nursing test on the effect of a given drug is "lowers body temperature," it might be logical for the first decoy item that pops into the teacher's mind to be "raises body temperature." When researchers analyzed a wide range of teachers' tests, they found that the correct answer is often one of the phrases that has a parallel or "echoed" decoy item.

Test Taking Skills

Taking the first exam may be a trauma, but after that you should be able to predict what type of questions they will give.

1. Your best defense for doing well on exams is to study on a regular basis. Do not plan on doing all of your studying the night before the exam. Pulling all-nighters leaves you short on sleep and thus less able to perform well. It creates an unnecessary stress which again reduces your ability to perform. And it does little to help prepare you for long-term

memory. Learning only to take an exam is short-sighted. If you are able to study on a regular basis, the night before an exam should require simply review of the material to refresh your mind and some extra work on the newest material or the most difficult material.

2. It is a good idea to read through the test before you begin to take it. When you read *through* the test, get a feel for the information that is *on* the test, and for the amount of time you can afford to spend on any one part of the test. Budgeting time can be an important factor in getting through an exam.
3. When you read through the test, pick out questions that you find “easy” -- i.e., you are sure of the answer. Answer those first. They build confidence and frequently get you in gear to reason through questions you are not sure of.
4. Don't be afraid to use the test as a source of information. Sometimes, another question will help you answer the one you are stuck on.
5. Develop a sense of self-confidence. You may not know every item on the test, but you *do* know a good amount of information. Use the information you do have. For example, on multiple-choice questions, if the answer doesn't pop out at you, use a process of elimination. Get rid of the options that cannot be right, and then work with the ones that are left.
6. Go over your test when you are finished. When you go over the test, make sure that you read the question correctly and that you answered what was asked. Do not change answers unless you are certain that you made a mistake. If you are not absolutely sure the answer you want to change is incorrect, go with your first impression. Almost without fail, first associations are correct.
7. Unless you are penalized for guessing, always answer all questions. If you don't know the answer, try to put down something that is reasonable. The AP test no longer penalizes you $\frac{1}{4}$ point for wrong answers, so it behooves you to make “educated” guesses.
8. Be deliberate in your reading; words are there for a reason. Do not imagine what isn't there.

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