

Test-Taking Strategies – Common Questions

MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAMS:

How do I read the question carefully so that I can understand what a question is really asking?

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- As you read the question, underline key terms. Be especially careful with questions containing double negatives.
- Don't read anything in or out of the question. Make sure you restrict your response only to the topic at hand. For example, if you had a PSY 120 question about a student having problems getting motivated, stick to the description of the problem. Don't infer reasons — go with what was stated in the question.
- Break the question into smaller parts. Sometimes long questions are hard to keep up with. Read slowly, sentence by sentence, and make sure you understand each part rather than focusing on the question as a whole. It may help to cover part of the stem or some of the options with your hand so you can focus better.



How can I decide between two very close answers?

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- When you don't know the correct response, compare each option with the stem and analyze how each is different. One response may have something that others do not have.
- Responses that are more precise or technical are more likely to be correct. However, responses using technical terms not mentioned in the material studied are probably incorrect.
- If unsure, select the response that seems to be more inclusive.
- If you are guessing between two responses, avoid options containing words such as “none,” “all,” “always,” and “never.” Choices using “some” or “often” are more likely to be correct.
- If two options are identical, they are both wrong, unless there is a choice which includes both options.
- Examine opposites carefully: one is definitely incorrect, and one is likely to be correct.
- Explain answers in the margins, especially when you feel like there are “two” best answers.

How do you deal with a lot of “none of the above,” “all of the above,” “a and b,” etc. choices?

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- Refer to the strategies for the first question above. Sometimes these questions are difficult simply because it is hard to understand what the question is asking.
- It's often better to cover up the options while you read the question. Once you have read the question, think of the correct answer first, then uncover the options and find your response(s) among them.
- Read each possible option individually and decide on the correctness of each. We often become stressed when we see terms such as “all of the above” or “none of the above” and we try to read all of the responses together.
- Choose “all of the above” when two or more choices are definitely correct. However, only one response has to be wrong for this choice to be incorrect.

I often lose concentration while taking multiple-choice tests. How do I keep that from happening?

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- Try to focus on each question in turn. Don't worry about one question while trying to answer another. You might even want to cover up all of the other questions besides the one you are working on.
- Start with what you know. This will often give you a more clear focus than trying to answer questions you don't know.

I don't seem to study the right information. I get to the material on the test and discover that I don't know any of it.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- There are two parts to test taking — one is the actual taking of the test and the other is the preparation for the test. All of the test-taking strategies in the world will not help you whiz through a test if you haven't prepared properly.
- If you are taking the test and feel totally lost, there are still some test-taking strategies you can use. For instance, use the test itself as a source of information. Many times teachers will unwittingly supply the answer to one question in another part of the test.
- Answer from the perspective of the class. Even if you are unsure about the facts, you probably have an idea of the perspective of the subject.
- Answer the questions that you know first and save the difficult questions for later. You can boost your self-efficacy by starting with material that you know. You also want to get credit for everything you know and not run out of time.

Are multiple-choice tests easier than essay tests?

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

This question depends on several factors such as:

- Your skills — sometimes we tend to be better at one type or the other.
- Content — it may be that answering multiple-choice tests in geography is a very different experience from answering them in English.
- Teacher's expectations — At what level does the instructor want you to know the material? People often believe that multiple-choice tests are easier to answer, but that is not necessarily true. Multiple-choice questions can be written at a high level of difficulty.

These are just some of the factors that could affect the response to this question.

ESSAY EXAMS

I feel so rushed while taking essay exams! How do I avoid this?

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- You probably will feel quite rushed. Many exams you take are meant to be "speeded tests" to see how well you can work within a time limit.
- Many classes, especially history, will give the questions to you a few days before the test. There is a reason for this! It is important to practice composing an answer to those questions before the test. At the very least, compose an outline. In a typical class period, there is not enough time to always brainstorm thorough answers and finish the test.
- Essay exams tend to be broad questions. As you review your notes, look for broad themes in them rather than focusing on details, unless your instructor specifically tells you otherwise. This strategy will help you predict potential questions.
- Give yourself a time limit for each question so that you don't devote too much time to any one part of the test.
- If you are running out of time, finish your essay with an outline. You might get some points with an outline versus not putting anything down..

How do I overcome writer's block when I get to the test?

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- Temporary lapses in concentration are common. Just because you can't remember something at first doesn't mean it's totally lost to you. You might want to try glancing over other parts of the test. As you read other questions, you might see terms that will refresh your memory.
- If you are really stuck, try to think of a title for your essay. If you think of title, you can give yourself a perspective or a focus from which to answer the question.

How do I make sure that my essay is organized?

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- Write a rough outline before you begin.
- Writing practice essays before the test will help you hone your organization skills. Timing yourself while writing these practice essays will help to give you a more realistic testing situation.
- Giving your essay a title is also a way to give yourself a focus.

I have problems when the entire exam depends on only one or two questions.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- When an essay counts for a large portion of your grade, don't see it as one big question. Instead break the essay down into smaller, more manageable portions to answer.

Test-Taking Strategies – Identifying Patterns from Past Exams

Many times instructors are predictable, creatures of habit. Instructors will typically construct each of their exams in the same fashion. The trick to increasing your success on your next exam is to identify the patterns used by the instructor for constructing the test from. If you are able to determine where exam material is being extracted from, you are a much more focused, successful, and proficient exam taker. After you take your first exam with an instructor, you can focus your studying on the most important resources and avoid spending too much time on material that won't be on the exam.

1 WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING

To protect the integrity of exams, instructors don't always hand back exams. They will most likely let you view the test if you come to their office to view the materials. However, immediately after an exam, you probably can recall most of the material on the exam. Believe it or not, immediately following the exam is when you will be able to help make the next exam you take be a success.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE EXAM, WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING YOU CAN REMEMBER ABOUT IT:

- What questions were asked on the exam? (write down as many questions as you can remember)
- What did you know well?
- What did you struggle with?

2 WHERE DID THE ANSWERS COME FROM?

For Step 2, you will want to find the answers for each of the test questions you identified during Step 1. Answers to the test questions may be pulled from a number of resources (your text book, lecture, power point, homework, etc.) introduced by your instructor. Now you want to work on identifying patterns, the following questions will help you with this process.

What resources (book, lecture, Power Point, homework) was your test based on?



TEXT BOOK

Were questions pulled from ...

- Bolded Vocabulary
- Headings
- Summaries
- End of Chapter Reviews

LECTURE

- Do you remember hearing the information in class but it wasn't in your notes?
- If a test question was based on lecture materials, do you recall how much time the instructor spent lecturing on that topic in class?

POWER POINT

- Was the power point presented as a stand-alone document or was it part of a lecture?
- Was the power point available outside of a lecture (accessible through Canvas or some other means)?

HOMEWORK

- Were there exam questions similar to homework problems/ assignments?
- Some assignments are not mandated but suggested, would those materials have given you a better understanding of your exam questions?

STUDY GUIDE

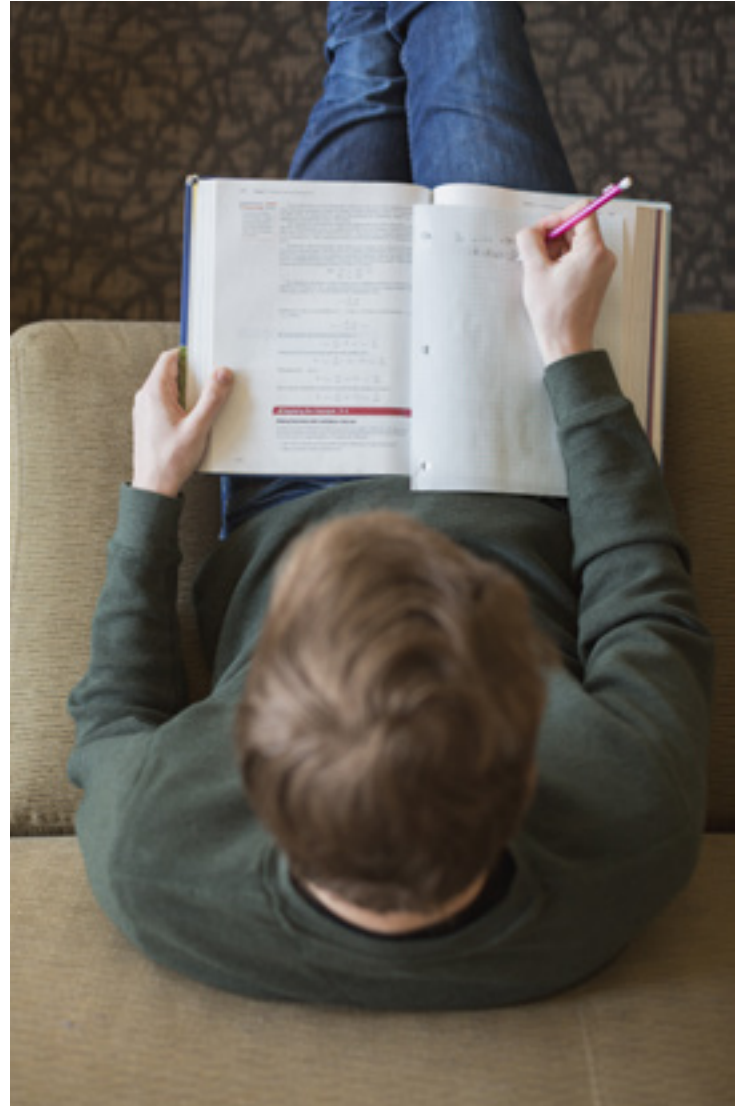
- Did the study guide (if one was provided) give you specific topics or general ideas to study?
- Were there topics not on the study guide that appeared on the exam?

WERE YOU ABLE TO FIND ALL THE ANSWERS TO YOUR TEST QUESTIONS?

- It is critical that you meet with your instructor to understand what resource was used to formulate the question. Instructors provide their office hours on their syllabus, this is probably the best time to meet and discuss your question.


3 IDENTIFYING PATTERNS

- Do you think your instructor pulled equally from all resources OR are they selecting more heavily on certain resources?
- What did you know well? Were those questions pulled from a specific resource?
- What did you struggle with? Were those questions pulled from a specific resource?
- Were there questions that you thought you knew the right answer to but ended up getting wrong? Do you know why this happened? If no, seek help from your instructor to gain a better understanding.
- Were there other patterns you identified?



Test-Taking Strategies – Strategies for Different Types of Test Questions

MULTIPLE CHOICE TESTS

- Carefully read the directions. Some tests might want you to choose all the correct answers.
 - Read each question thoroughly before looking at your choices.
 - Come up with the answer in your head before looking at the possible answers, this way the choices given on the test won't throw you off or trick you.
 - Be sure to read all the answers before selecting the correct one. There may be two that are similar but only one is right.
 - Don't read anything in or out of the question. Make sure you restrict your response only to the topic at hand. For example, if you had a PSY 120 question about a student having problems getting motivated, stick to the description of the problem. Don't infer reasons — go with what was stated in the question.
 - Break the question into smaller parts. Sometimes long questions are hard to keep up with.
 - Read slowly, sentence by sentence, and make sure you understand each part rather than focusing on the question as a whole. It may help to cover part of the stem or some of the options with your hand so you can focus better.
 - Underline key words and phrases in the question.
 - Pay special attention to words that could throw you off i.e., "which of the following is not..."
 - Eliminate answers you know aren't right.
 - Incorrect answers almost always contain words such as always, never, all, none and every.
 - Correct answers almost always contain words such as often, most, rarely, may sometimes be, can occasionally result in, and are often.
 - Choose "all of the above" when two or more choices are definitely correct. However, only one response has to be wrong for this choice to be incorrect.
 - Watch the meaning of sentences containing double negatives. Cross out both negatives and then answer the question.
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- A positive choice is more likely to be true than a negative one.
 - Usually the correct answer is the choice with the most information or is more inclusive.
 - When you don't know the correct response, compare each option with the stem and analyze how each is different. One response may have something that others do not have.
 - Responses that are more precise or technical are more likely to be correct. However, responses using technical terms not mentioned in the material studied are probably incorrect.
 - If two options are identical, they are both wrong, unless there is a choice which includes both options.
 - Examine opposites carefully: one is definitely incorrect, and one is likely to be correct.
 - Explain answers in the margins, especially when you feel like there are two "best" answers.
 - Many times the longest or most inclusive answer is the correct one.
 - When absolutely guessing, select the middle responses (e.g., B or C).

TRUE/FALSE TESTS

- Answer these questions quickly.
- Look for qualifiers. All, only, never, and always are mostly false. Generally, often, usually, and sometimes are almost always true.
- If any part of the question is false, then the whole statement is false.
- Most true/false tests contain more true answers than false answers. When in doubt, guess true. You have more than a 50% chance of being right.
- Negatives are confusing. If the question contains negatives, like no, not, cannot, circle the negative and read the sentence that remains. Decide whether that sentence is true or false. If it is true, the opposite or negative is usually false.
- Every part of a true statement must be true. If any one part of the sentence is false, the whole sentence is false despite many other true statements.

ESSAY TESTS

- Read the essay questions.
- If you have a choice of answering 2/3 essay questions, decide which ones you are going to answer.
- Read the questions carefully and do everything that it asks you to do — some essay questions contain more than one part.
- Budget your time and begin to plan. Outline or diagram the main points you want to cover.
- Write out examples, sources and quotes you want to use to support your essay.
- Start with a thesis statement or idea that explains what you will be covering in your essay.
- Use the 5—paragraph method.
 1. Introduction — what will be covered in the essay.
 2. Body — three supporting claims/paragraphs (use examples, quotes, sources to support).
 3. Conclusion — short and to the point.
- Write legibly. Organization, clear thinking and good writing are important. So is neatness.
- Save time at the end so you can reread and revise your essay.
- Keep your eye on the time. Make sure you're not spending too much time on one answer at the expense of others.
- If you run out of time, jot down the last few ideas in point form. Your teacher will be able to see where you were going with your answer, especially if you used an outline before you began.



FILL IN THE BLANK/SHORT ANSWER TESTS

- These questions often ask for definitions or short descriptions.
- Similar to essay questions.
- Over learn the material — learn the material backwards and forwards so you can answer questions as fast as you can write.
- Look for grammatical hints. For example, a sentence that begins with “an_” indicates that the word starts with a vowel.
- Use the best word or phrase you can think of.
- Use flashcards, writing the key terms, dates and concepts on the front and the definition, event, and explanations on the back.
- Try to anticipate questions that will be asked on the test and prepare for them. Usually what your instructor emphasizes in class will be on the test.
- Try not to leave an answer blank. Show your work/write down your thoughts, even if you don't get the exact answer, partial credit is usually awarded.
- If you don't know the answer, come back to it after you finish the rest of the test and make an educated guess.
- Other parts of the test may give you clues to what the answer may be.
- Read the question carefully and make sure that you answer everything that it asks for. Some short answer questions have multiple parts.



OPEN BOOK TESTS

- Write down any formulas and definitions on a separate piece of paper along with the page numbers of where more information can be found.
- Know what information is found in each chapter.
- Know where information can be found in your notes — create a table of contents for easy access.
- Open book tests are usually the most difficult type of test.
- Spend an equal or greater amount of time preparing as you would for a normal test. The open book test will most likely be harder than if it were a closed book exam.
- Focus on learning the main ideas and get a feel for where they are located in the book, learn the details later if there's still time.
- Highlight important points, use post-it notes, bookmarks and make notes in your book, if it is allowed.
- Bring all the resources that your professor or teacher allows.
- Answer the easy questions that you know off the top of your head first, then go back and answer the questions where you need to reference your book.
- Use quotations from the book to support your view, but don't include too many quotes, be sure to give your own insight and commentary.

MATH TESTS

- Repetition is important in math. You learn how to solve problems by doing them so keep doing practice problems but don't do it blindly. Make sure you learn how to recognize when/why you should use a specific method to solve a problem.

- Work on practice problems for each topic ranging in levels of difficulty.
- When practicing, try to solve the problem on your own first then look at the answer or seek help if you are having trouble.
- Mix up the order of the questions from various topics when you are reviewing so you'll learn when to use a specific method/formula.
- Make up a sheet with all the formulas you need to know and memorize all the formulas on the sheet.
- When you get your exam, write down all the key formulas on the margin of your paper so if you forget them when you're in the middle of the test you can look back at the formula.
- Read the directions carefully and don't forget to answer all parts of the question.
- Make estimates for your answers ... i.e. if you are asked to answer $48 \times 12 = ?$, you could expect a number around 500, but if you end up with an answer around 5000, you'll know you did something wrong.
- Show all your work (especially when partial credit is awarded) and write as legibly as possible.
- Even if you know the final answer is wrong, don't erase your entire work because you may get partial credit for using the correct procedure.
- Check over your test after you are done with it. If you have time, redo the problem on a separate piece of paper and see if you come up with the same answer the second time around. Look for careless mistakes such as making sure the decimal is in the right place, that you read the directions correctly, that you copied the numbers correctly, that you put a negative sign if it is needed, that your arithmetic is correct and so on.