

# Improving Your Test-Taking Skills

## OBJECTIVE TESTS

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### SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

**“You are already an experienced test-taker who can become better.”** Taking tests is an activity that you have had much experience as a result of going to school. As you probably are aware, some students are better test-takers than others. Some students who seem to know a lot about a subject and seem well-prepared can do poorly on a test because of being too nervous, working too slowly and not finishing, or working too quickly and making careless mistakes. Some other students who seem to know less and seem less-prepared might do better by simply applying effective test-taking skills. As you can see, how well students do on a test may not necessarily be an indication of how much they actually know.

Being an effective test-taker involves more than just knowing the subject matter. Being an effective test-taker involves knowing and applying specific test-taking skills as well. Test-taking is a skill that you can improve.

**“You are who you are no matter how you do on a test.”** Keep this thought in mind always: Tests are not a measure of who you are as a person. Tests try to measure, indirectly and sometimes imperfectly, how well you learned the material. Failing a test does not mean that you are a failure. You are the same person after the test as you were before the test; you just happened to do badly on a test. Remember that how you perform for a single test will not determine how well you will perform for the rest of your life.

**“Your feeling of anxiety about tests is natural.”** You and almost everyone else experiences test anxiety, a temporary condition in which you have fears and concerns about taking a test. You’ll never really eliminate test anxiety completely and you may not want to; a little bit of nervousness can start the adrenaline flowing to make you feel more energetic and attentive. Also, the better prepared you are, the more test-taking skills you have, and the more positive you are, the less test anxious you’ll feel.

### TYPES OF OBJECTIVE TESTS

Three common types of objective test items are multiple-choice, true-false, and matching. The term “objective” is used because the answers for these types of test items are either right or wrong and require no interpretation or judgment on the part of the scorer as is the case with subjective tests like essays. Your answers either match the answers on the answer key or they don’t.



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For multiple-choice test items, you must read a question or an incomplete statement and select the best answer from a set of possible choices. For true-false test items, you must read a statement and decide if the statement is “true” (accurate/correct) or “false” (inaccurate/incorrect). For matching test items, you must find the relationship and pair together information given in two columns or lists. Generally, studying for objective tests requires focusing on main ideas and details.

### **PREPARING FOR THE TEST**

#### **Before the Test**

01. Preparation for your first test begins the first day of class when you receive your course syllabus and find out when you are having your tests. From that day, every page you read in your textbook, every page you take of lecture notes, and every homework assignment you do are all preparing you for the test. **GO TO EVERY CLASS MEETING** so you don't miss lectures and any important announcements about the test. **KEEP UP-TO-DATE ON CLASS WORK**, especially reading assignments. **MARK AND/OR WRITE IN YOUR LECTURE NOTES AND TEXTBOOK** to identify what information is important and how the information is organized. Write questions based upon this information in your lecture notes and textbook. Study by reciting aloud and/or writing from memory the answers to the questions. 
02. We tend to fear the unknown or the unexpected so **FIND OUT ABOUT THE TEST** from the instructor and the course syllabus. Find out what type of test items (i.e., multiple-choice, true-false, matching) will be asked, what topics will be covered and/or emphasized, what source of information will be emphasized (i.e., the textbook and/or the lecture), how many items the test will contain, what materials and supplies (i.e., pens, pencils, bluebooks, Scantron answer sheets, class notes, textbooks, dictionaries, calculators, notebooks, textbooks, etc.) will be needed or permitted, when the test will be given, and how much class time will be available for the test. 
03. **ANTICIPATE TEST QUESTIONS.** Think about or find out "What does the instructor want us to learn in this course?," "What topics have been stressed in the lecture and textbook?," "Am I expected to just memorize information and be able to recall it or am I expected to understand the information and be able to summarize, explain, interpret, or apply it?" Review the syllabus, lecture notes, textbook assignments, handouts, and end-of-chapter questions as sources of information and possible test questions. Study guides with practice questions and answers are sometimes available in book form or on a diskette/CD ROM to accompany the course textbook. Previous tests and quizzes from the instructor or students who have taken the class are other sources of information and possible test questions. Remember that the purpose of obtaining these tests, if available, is not to memorize the questions and answers or problems and solutions but to see what topics were covered, what topics may have been emphasized, what types of problems or questions were asked, what kinds of thinking were required to answer the problems or questions, how the answers were worded, etc. 
04. **STUDY ON A REGULAR BASIS** in short, frequent sessions (e.g., one-hour time blocks: study 50 minutes and take a 10-minute break) during the week to increase retention. Use the small amounts of time available time before, between, and after classes, and waiting time to

study. Using a weekly schedule on which you indicate your daily activities can help you to find and plan study times. Locate study locations with the least amount of interruptions and distractions.



Studying in a group can be helpful to some students. Study groups can provide support and motivation and opportunities for active involvement, help to identify important information, and clarify information through mutual sharing and discussion.

### The Day before the Test

05. **GATHER TOGETHER ALL MATERIALS AND SUPPLIES NEEDED**—textbooks, notebooks, Scantron answer sheets, Blue books or sheets of lined paper (along with paperclips or a small stapler to keep the sheets together to turn in), graph paper, dictionary, calculators (with extra batteries), #2 pencils (at least two; a small pencil sharpener is helpful), pens (at least two with black or blue ink), “cheat” sheets (sheets with formulas or information, if permitted) a watch to keep time, etc.—for the test and have them ready the night before the test to avoid added anxiety from the last-minute rushing around on the morning of the test trying to find or buy what you need. You may even want to plan and set out what you are going to wear. Plan to **GET A GOOD (8-HOUR) NIGHT’S SLEEP** so you will be alert for the test.



### The Day of the Test

06. **EAT A NUTRITIOUS MEAL**—fruit, whole-wheat toast, non-sugary cereal, low-fat milk, lean meat, or eggs. Use the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Guide Pyramid (see <http://schoolmeals.nal.usda.gov/py/pmap/htm>). Avoid drinks with caffeine like coffee, hot chocolate, tea, or soda for the caffeine “jolt” that may upset your stomach or make you more nervous; sugary foods (chocolate candy bars, donuts) that give you a quick “rush of energy” but also a quick “crash”; greasy foods (French fries) that are hard to digest and make you sluggish and can upset your stomach; acidic foods or drinks (citrus fruits or juices) that may upset your stomach; salty snacks (potato chips, pretzels, popcorn) that can make you more nervous; and alcohol and drugs that will affect your memory and mental performance.



07. **PLAN FOR EMERGENCIES AND TRAVEL DELAYS.** Allow yourself extra travel time in case of an unexpected delay. If an emergency arises and you are unable to take the test, contact the instructor as soon as possible even if you have been warned about the dire consequences of missing a test. At the beginning of each quarter, write down your instructors' office telephone number, e-mail address, and office room number as well as the department office’s telephone number and room number. If you cannot speak directly to the instructor, leave a message about your absence and the nature of your emergency on the telephone voice mail or with the department secretary or have a friend deliver a written message. Try to speak directly to the instructor as soon as you can.



08. **PLAN TO ARRIVE WITH SUFFICIENT TIME TO PREPARE YOURSELF** so that you are not rushing in at the last minute feeling flustered and nervous. Arriving early allows you to find your seat and get your materials and supplies ready. **AVOID LAST-MINUTE CRAM SESSIONS** where students are asking each other last minute questions or are nervously cramming. Leave the room, if necessary, to avoid feeling panicky because you hear other students talking about topics you should have studied or things you think you don’t know.

09. **USE RELAXATION TECHNIQUES.** Being anxious is natural. Expect to be nervous. Take several slow, deep breaths just before you receive the test to calm yourself. Use positive self-talk to tell yourself how you are prepared and ready to do your best on the test. Visualize being successful taking the test. Close your eyes and see yourself calmly going through the test, not being intimidated by difficult problems/questions, and finishing the test. See yourself receiving your test with a letter grade of “A” written at the top and being congratulated by your instructor.



### TAKING THE TEST

#### During the Test

10. **READ AND LISTEN CAREFULLY TO ALL DIRECTIONS**, clarifications, and corrections before starting the test to avoid losing points for doing the wrong thing such as not choosing the "best" answer, selecting one answer when told to select all that apply, doing more questions than needed if instructed to select only so many, marking or writing the answer incorrectly, or misunderstanding a question because you missed an announced typographical error or omission on the test. Ask the instructor for clarification if a direction is not clear.



11. **SURVEY THE TEST.** Briefly look over (not read) the entire test before you begin to answer any questions to see if the test is complete (all the pages are included) and readable so that you can get another copy of the test, if necessary, before you start. Also, look to see the number, type, and point values of the test items, and gauge their approximate difficulty to help you make decisions about how to allocate your time to answer the items.



If you think you may forget any particular facts, formulas, dates, names, terms, or other items, jot these down in the margins or on the back of the test for later reference.

Write your name on each page of the test or answer sheet first thing for easy identification in case the pages become detached from each other.

12. **STAY TASK ORIENTED.** Feeling angry at the instructor if the test seems unfair (i.e., the test seems too long or too hard, the test doesn't cover the material you studied, etc.) or using negative self-talk about how poorly you are going to do or what the effects of failing will be disrupt your concentration and mental energy away from the test. Instead, make your self-talk positive and task-oriented on how you plan to work through the test.

**Leaving the test early.** If other students are leaving before the test ends, think to yourself that maybe they are leaving because they don't know the answers and have given up or maybe they are just careless test-takers who don't bother to check their answers. Remind yourself that effective test-takers make use of all available test time. Remember that with all the mental effort you will be exerting along with the pressure of a time limit, mistakes are possible. Your grade on the exam will be based upon how well you performed, not on how early you finished. Even if you have answered all the questions, use the available time left to check your work, even if you are the last student left in class.

**Cheating.** If tempted because of the importance of the test or pressured by a classmate to cheat (e.g., crib notes with answers, obtaining an illegal copy of the test, signals in the classroom to exchange answers, looking at another's test, etc.), remember the consequences of

cheating: a failing grade, suspension (temporarily not allowed to return to school, or expulsion (permanently not allowed to return to school and making transfer to another school difficult).

13. **HAVE A PLAN** of how you will work through the test. Make a quick schedule of how much time you will spend on each question so that you can progress through the test to earn the most points in a given amount of time and to allow for time at the end to check your work or answer problems/questions that were guessed at or skipped. You might consider doing problems/questions that are worth more points first but these problems may be harder and take more time to complete. In general, plan to get the most points in the least amount of time. Periodically, check your schedule and your watch to see if you are ahead or behind and then adjust your pace as necessary. Remember to allow time before the end of the test to check your answers.



14. **READ ALL PARTS OF EACH QUESTION** carefully before responding. Be systematic in your approach. You might work on the test items in order of presentation answering the "easy" questions as you come to them to build your confidence, gain points, and leave you more time for more difficult items instead of wasting time skipping back and forth over the test trying to find "easy" questions." However, if you note an apparent difference in the relative difficulty of the items, in the relative time needed to read and answer the items, or in the relative point values of the items, you may need to adjust this strategy and move around from section to section in order to earn the most points in the time available.

15. **SHOW AND GET CREDIT FOR WHAT YOU KNOW.**

**Writing and marking your answers.** When working problems, write legibly and show your work. You may be able to receive partial credit if you do not finish the problem. Showing your work also makes checking your work easier and helps you to avoid careless mental mistakes.

If you are marking your answers on a Scantron score sheet for machine scoring, be careful of stray pencil marks or smudges or incomplete erasures that the computer scoring scanner may misread and affect your score. Be careful filling in the correct "bubble" on the answer sheet especially when you skip problems/questions. Mark carefully so you do not need to check later for accuracy.

**Drawing a "blank."** If you draw a "blank" and can't remember the answer for a test item, avoid panicking. You probably do not have to answer every question correctly in order to pass. Do not spend time pondering or agonizing over items you don't know. Focus on the problem/question you are working on, not the ones you had problems with or the difficult ones you are anticipating. Have a system for marking questions. For those questions you leave blank, mark the questions with a check (✓) if they seem "doable/answerable" and with a zero (0) if they seem "undoable/unanswerable." For those questions you answer with a guess, mark the questions with a question mark (?). These markings will allow you to go on and come back later and easily find these questions for reconsideration before the end of the test.

**Asking the instructor a question.** If you have a question about a test item as you are taking the test, use your judgment as to whether you will stop to ask the instructor or wait until later. Consider the time you will be using versus the points the question is worth (e.g., spending 5 minutes to get a clarification on a test item worth only 1 point may not be worthwhile).

16. **TAKE A QUICK BREAK.** Periodically put your pencil or pen down, open and close your writing hand, stretch your neck (e.g., head rotation) and shoulder (e.g., shoulder shrug) muscles to help relieve tension. Continue to use deep breathing and positive self-talk to reduce anxiety.



Head rotation and  
shoulder shrug



17. **PLAN FOR AND USE THE TIME BEFORE THE END OF THE TEST** to go back to reconsider test items that were skipped and to check the test to see if all the parts of every question were answered. If using a Scantron scoring sheet, check to see if any extraneous marks need to be erased.

**Changing answers.** Change your answer only if you remember the information or you find information or clues in other test items or you have a new insight on how to answer the problem/question.

**Guessing.** Always guess if there is no penalty for guessing (i.e., no points deducted for wrong answers). Avoid leaving any test items unanswered especially if you begin to run out of time. Remember that on most tests, a question with “no answer” and a question with a “wrong answer” are both worth zero points—so guess. If logical reasoning doesn't provide an answer, look for any pattern in the responses (e.g., on true-false tests, more of one kind of answer, either true or false; on multiple-choice tests, certain options—a, b, c, or d—appearing more often) as a guide to guessing.

18. As you leave class, **GIVE YOURSELF CREDIT FOR YOUR EFFORTS**, and plan to wait for the actual test results. Nothing is to be gained by second-guessing how you did or could have done and feeling discouraged.

### **FOLLOWING UP AFTER THE TEST**

#### **When the Test Is Returned**

19. Look at the test results in positive terms on what you were able to do and as a guide to what you still need to learn or understand better. Feel good about the efforts you are taking to improve your test-taking skills and to earn better grades. **THINK ABOUT HOW YOU CAN IMPROVE** by seeing what kinds of mistakes you made and if there is a pattern of mistakes (e.g., you emphasized the wrong source of information--the textbook or the lecture notes, studied the wrong material, misunderstood a concept or misapplied a principle or procedure, carelessly marked wrong answers or skipped problems/questions without answering or guessing, misread the directions, misread the questions) so that you can adjust what you study or be more careful on how you answer on the next test.
20. If you are in doubt about your answers or your performance, **TALK TO YOUR INSTRUCTOR**, not to complain about how difficult or unfair the test was or how you were “cheated” out of points but to seek the instructor’s help. Let the instructor know you want to do better and are willing to put in the required effort and work.

