

Successful Exam Strategies

connections between ideas, making sure you've explained transitions in your thought.

If you run out of time, note key words and ideas you would have included in outline form at the end of your answer—instructors will often give partial credit if you give them a clear idea of where you were headed with your answer, even if you couldn't get there.



FAST FACTS

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A test is not an infallible judge of your knowledge. Studies have shown that people with equivalent levels of knowledge can perform differently on the same test, depending on how well honed their “test smarts” are. There are many methods “test smart” students use to help themselves while taking exams.

Here comes another exam. You've allocated plenty of time and energy to preparing for it. You feel you know the material really well. All semester, you've been attending classes faithfully and doing the readings. Not only that, you're sure you understand the substance of the course.

But when you start taking the exam, you have a hard time answering the questions. You don't recognize the relationship between the questions you're being asked and the material you've been learning all semester. You give it your best shot, but when the instructor announces, “Time's up,” you're only two-thirds of the way through the exam.

What's going on here? Since you understand the substance of the course, that's not the problem. What's probably happening is that the strategies you have for taking tests need to be improved. A test is not an infallible judge of your knowledge. Studies have shown that people with equivalent levels of knowledge can perform differently on the same test, depending on how well honed their “test smarts” are. There are many methods “test smart” students use to help themselves while taking exams.

These methods are referred to as “study skills”; that is, they're methods that experience and research have shown help many students in many different kinds of classes perform up to their capabilities. Not knowing a particular study skill should not be cause for embarrassment; after all, no single individual knows every method for studying in college! The important thing to remember about study skills is that anyone can learn them. So if you find yourself having trouble taking exams, maybe it's just a matter of learning a few new skills.

Understand what the test wants from you

Often, we think of tests only from our own point of view as students. That is, when you're a student, you tend to think of a test in terms of the demands it makes on you and whether you can answer these questions. But it's also important to look at tests from the point-of-view of your instructors. For them, the test is not a stressful exercise, but an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they know.

This knowledge is almost always, at the college-level, a test not only of your memory—college courses tend to assume you can memorize things—but a test of whether or not you can use the knowledge you've gained. The “test” in a college course is not so much “How much do you remember?” but “Can you

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apply your new knowledge in the way I've shown in this course?" Under the pressure of trying to remember all the material a course has presented, it's easy to forget that tests try to measure not just memory, but *application*. Understanding what tests in college really want from you is part of taking them well.

Manage your test-taking time

If you find that you consistently don't have enough time to finish exams, the problem may partly be how you're taking the test. Many students—especially those who are anxious based upon past experience not finishing exams—start writing as soon as they've received the test, and try to go through the test sequentially. Ironically, this can be one of the reasons students have trouble finishing an exam in time.

This strategy may help you manage your test time:

When you receive the test, take 5 or 10 minutes to look the whole thing over. Make sure you've read the directions and the questions thoroughly.

Once you have an overview of the test, you need to decide how to juggle two priorities. First, you need to decide which questions you can answer easily, which questions you're feeling shaky about and which questions you can only guess at. Second, you need to divide the amount of time you have by the number of questions in proportion to how much each question is worth. You don't want to spend half your test-time answering a question worth only 10% of the total grade.

We suggest beginning by answering all the questions that you feel fairly certain about first. One of the advantages to this system is that sometimes you can remember the answers to questions you felt shaky about by answering related questions you feel more certain about. Also, starting this way is a good way to gain confidence.

Once you've answered the questions you feel confident about, clock management becomes more of an issue. See how much time remains and begin answering the questions you feel shaky about next. You don't want to spend too much time on any one question, though. If you're having trouble answering, move on to the next question.

Finally, try to answer the questions you felt most unsure of. Again, monitor your time according to how much the question is worth.

If you have any time remaining after you've finished, check over your answers. Not only might you catch a mistake, but telling yourself you're going to stay even after you've finished cuts down on the temptation to hurry through the exam to get it over with.

One practical tip: If you find the pressure of the test makes it hard for you to remember to look at the clock or your watch, put your watch in front of you on your desk.

Understand the nature of an objective exam

An objective exam is an exam formatted around "multiple-choice" or "true/false" answers. "Objective" in this sense means an exam that tries

to test your ability to recall, relate and apply specific information and your ability to reason logically from evidence.

Studies have shown that some students are very aware of how they can use the form of an objective exam to their benefit while others are not. Understanding how such tests are constructed—how they "work"—can help you get the credit you deserve for the knowledge you have.

There are two general rules to remember about objective exams: (1) always check previous questions for help in answering questions you're unsure of and (2) always answer all of the questions unless there's a penalty for giving the wrong answer.

True/False Questions

There are three things you can do to help your performance on true/false questions. Here is a sample true/false question:

Abraham Lincoln, a past president of the United States, was not only America's first president, but president during the Civil War.

First, check all parts of the question for validity. One of the most common mistakes in answering true/false questions is missing a word or two that are crucial to understanding what the question is really asking. This question asks you to know not one, not two, but three things: Was Lincoln ever president? Was Lincoln the first president? Was Lincoln president during the Civil War? If the answer to any of these questions is no, the answer to the whole statement is false. Since, as any student of U.S. history knows, Lincoln was not

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America's first president, the answer is false.

Second, remember that specific determiners are usually false. A "specific determiner" is an item that moves the statement from the general to the specific. In the above example, "first" is a specific determiner. If you don't know the answer to a true/false question for sure, ask yourself whether all the details fit. Why include the determiner "first" here? You would be right to suspect it is an attempt to trip you up.

Third, be careful to account for negatives within the question. The above question can ask you to know the same information but be "True" if it reads "Abraham Lincoln, a past president of the United States, was not America's first president, but president during the Civil War." The inclusion or exclusion of negatives can change the whole meaning of a question.

Multiple-choice questions

Here is a sample multiple-choice question:

Most historians agree the Civil War was caused by:

- a. John Brown
- b. Slavery
- c. Different economic systems in the South and North
- d. American society
- e. b and c

Remember, even though this is an "objective" exam, you're being asked for the best *available* answer, which is clearly "e." Some historians have other answers to this question, but you're being asked to pick from the answers you're given. Don't be

deceived by the multiple-choice format into believing you just need to know facts. You're being asked to make a judgment here.

Beware of partially correct answers. Read all answers before circling your choice. If you were in a hurry, you could easily trip yourself up by circling "b. Slavery" before reading the next answer, which is also correct.

Remember that highly restrictive choices are usually not correct. In some sense, you could certainly argue that "a. John Brown" is a correct answer, since many people have identified his attempt to start a slave revolt by seizing the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry as the war's spark. But it is unlikely that a history course will be satisfied with the idea that one person started such a massive conflict. Avoid too specific answers.

Remember that it is also possible for an answer to be "correct" but too general. Answer "d. American society" is certainly correct, but since this answer could be the "answer" to any question asked about a cause in American history, it's too general to be correct.

As a general rule, if you have to guess, pick longer and more detailed answers over short answers. The longest answer here is "Slavery and the different economic systems in the South and North," which happens to be correct.

Understand the nature of an essay exam

Essay exams ask you to demonstrate that you can organize ideas, present them coherently and (often) apply

them to a particular situation.

It is especially important in an essay exam to read the questions carefully. Often, the questions are lengthy. You may wish to underline key terms as you read. Here are some verbs that often appear in essay exam questions:

Compare: Present similarities and differences

Contrast: Present differences

Demonstrate: Show the truth of an assertion

Discuss: Present all sides of an argument in detail

Illustrate: Use an example to present an idea

Summarize: Use your judgment to organize and present the main points of a topic

Support: Prove an assertion with evidence

It is important to pay attention to these and other verbs that describe the precise intellectual activity you are to perform in answering a particular essay question.

After you are sure you understand what you are being asked to demonstrate that you know, jot down a short outline of what you plan to say. If you launch right into an answer you will sometimes find yourself heading up dead-end paths that could have been avoided with a little planning.

Be sure to read your answers over, if you have time. Especially check the