



Taking Exams

Before beginning, it is important to point out that while learning strategies for taking exams can help you to increase your scores, nothing reduces normal test anxiety or ensures good test results better than regular study. When a solid foundation of knowledge has been built up, strategies for presenting what you know on an exam can have a greater impact.

The very first strategy you should employ is to have a mental plan for how to go about taking the test. An effective approach might include the following activities in sequence: Immediately write down on the back of the exam anything you think you might forget. Get familiar with the test by skimming it over before answering any questions. Read the test directions carefully. Read each question thoroughly and answer the easy questions first. Go back over the test to check for errors. A similar strategy for math exams should include a plan to double-check answers, particularly for the kinds of errors you typically make.

Objective exams commonly use true-false, multiple choice, completion, and matching questions. To perform well on this type of exam, you will need to use both general and specific strategies.

General strategies include techniques for completing the entire exam. For example, answer all questions even if you have to guess on some; answer the easy questions first, then come back to the harder ones; change an answer only when you are sure that your second choice is a better choice; and look out for information in one question that can help you to answer another question.

Specific strategies for objective exams involve using a special approach for each specific type of question. For true-false questions, begin by assuming that each statement is true until you have determined that it is false. In such questions, one word often makes an answer an overstatement, an understatement, or a misstatement, thus making the entire statement incorrect. In particular, be alert for absolute words that do not allow for exceptions, such as "all," "every," "must," or "never." Remember, if any part of a true-false statement is false, then the entire statement is considered false. For multiple-choice questions, begin by identifying the key words in the first part of the question. Then, treat each choice as a true-false question. That is, read the first part of the question, complete it with one of the possible answers, and then determine whether the answer makes the statement true or false. Unless it asks you to identify the incorrect answer, eliminate all answers that make it false. As you make your choices, watch out for answers that are at one extreme or the other and for answers that use unfamiliar words. When two or more answers appear to be correct, the most specific one is more likely to be the correct choice.

When faced with a completion question for which you cannot recall the specific term, try demonstrating what you know by describing the answer as best you can in your own words. Some instructors will give partial credit if you show them that you understand a concept, even if you cannot remember the name for it. When answering matching questions, save time by starting with the column of longer items so that you only have to sift through the short answers as you search for a match. To eliminate having to look through the same answers repeatedly, cross out answers as you use them.

Essay exams not only test your understanding and recall but also demand that you can organize and present your knowledge thoughtfully and thoroughly. Short answer essay questions usually require a written response that directly answers the question and is no longer than a paragraph. To answer this type of essay question, turn the question around to begin your answer. For example, suppose you are faced with a question "What is the function of rehearsal in transferring information from short term to long term memory?" The opening sentence of your answer should begin: "The function of rehearsal is transferring information from short term to long term memory is . . ." Then you should answer the question as directly and concisely as you can. Don't pad your answers but also don't leave out any relevant details.

Long answer essay questions use specific direction words to ask for longer, more involved responses. Your first task, therefore, should be to carefully note whether you are expected to "describe," "explain," "justify," or do any of twenty other possible directions. Because long answer essay responses can be rather lengthy, the next thing you should do is plan your answer before writing it down. Some students actually make a brief outline. As before, once you start to write, the first sentence of your answer should rephrase the question and provide a direct response. With long answer essay responses, however, this sentence should briefly summarize the ideas you intend to discuss. As you develop your answer, then, make each main point the topic point in a new paragraph, and be sure to discuss each one fully. One way to try to ensure that your ideas are developed sufficiently is to write your answers as if your instructor were hearing this information for the first time.

If time should begin to run out before you are able to finish the exam, try jotting down a brief outline of any answers you have not finished. You may get partial credit for demonstrating some knowledge of the topic.