

Don't Get TESTY: Improve Your Test Preparation and Test Taking Strategies

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I. Before the Test

- a. **Avoid cramming.** You learn better when you space out your studying over a period of time. Going to class, taking notes, and completing reading and homework assignments in a timely manner all count as review time for your classes, so devote time to these activities each week. Your brain requires repetition of material over an extended period of time in order to process the information and move it into long-term memory. If you review course materials one hour a day for six days, you will remember more than if you study for six hours the day before your test.
- b. **Don't skip classes! Ever.** One lecture contains a lot of information, and one missed class might mean that you spend twice as much time gathering and attempting to understand information that you missed. If you must miss class, communicate with your professor ahead of time. Afterwards, communicate with a classmate to find out what you missed; then, follow up with the professor to make sure you have all of the materials. Never ask a professor, "Did I miss anything important?" Of course you did!
- c. **Identify suitable study spots and use them regularly.** Vary your study locations to increase the number of associations you make with the material. The more associations, the more likely you will remember!
- d. **Take care of yourself.** Eat healthily, exercise, don't consume mass quantities of alcohol or caffeine (both can interfere with your sleep), and get at least eight hours of sleep per night.
- e. **Find out everything you can about the test.** Don't be afraid to ask your professor about the topics that will be covered on the test, the format of the test questions, (short answer, essay, multiple choice, T/F, etc.), and the number of points allotted to the various test questions.
- f. **Practice ACTIVE studying!** Contrary to popular belief, information does not get burned into your brain just because you spend a considerable amount of time looking at it. People learn best when they find ways to engage with course material, to relate it to things they already know, and to interact with the material using a variety of learning strategies that represent the most common learning styles (visual, auditory, and tactile). Practice active studying by using some of these techniques:
 - Write down questions as you study (these can be questions that you think will be on the test, or simply questions for which you don't have the answers). Make up a 20- question review quiz and exchange it with a study partner who has done the same.
 - Every time you read or take notes on a new topic, spend some time summarizing the information. Use your notes, textbook, or a study partner to be sure you summarize correctly and don't omit important information.
 - Connect what you are learning with what you already know. Include these connections in your notes.
 - Use mnemonics (memory tricks). Ex: ROY G BIV. Make up your own mnemonics for the material you are learning.
 - Talk through ideas with a study partner, a study group, or a tutor in the Writing and Learning Commons.
 - Make visual aids. Flash cards, diagrams, time lines, and color-coded notes are a few examples.

II. During the Test

- a. **Be on time and prepared** on the day of the test (bring all necessary materials with you). Try to get to the test site early so you can relax. Do not study during this time.
- b. **Think positively and relieve tension in your body.** If you've followed all of the suggestions above for preparing for your test, you should feel good about your level of preparation!
 - If you feel tense, stiff, or nervous, try constricting certain muscle groups for 10 seconds and then slowly relaxing the muscles. Slow your breathing by inhaling slowly through your nose to the count of 10 and then exhaling slowly through your mouth to the count of 10. Repeat as necessary.

- If you review class material on a regular basis throughout the semester and follow these suggestions, but you still have anxiety about upcoming tests, contact Counseling and Psychological Services (<http://www.wcu.edu/7946.asp>) to learn about relaxation techniques and other strategies that may help.
- c. **When you receive the test, write down any mnemonics you created or any formulas you may need when answering questions.** This will be a helpful resource for you to refer back to as you work through the test.
 - d. **Survey the test before answering any questions.** Pay attention to the types of questions and the number of points allotted to each type of question.
 - e. **Budget your time.** If the multiple choice questions are worth 2 points each but the short answer questions are worth 5, start with the short answer questions and answer as many of them as possible. Allow time to check your answers and to make sure you answered every question. No one is going to win a prize for being the first to finish a test, so don't rush.
 - f. **Read the directions and answer each question completely.** If a question has multiple components, underline each component and be sure to address each one in your answer.
 - g. **If you are confused by a question, ask your professor for clarification.**
 - h. **If you are instructed to write your answer on a separate sheet of paper, use only the front side of the paper.** This will make your responses easier to read. Don't forget to write your name on every piece of paper!
 - i. **Answer the questions you know first.** The object of the game of test taking is to score as many points as possible, and every question you answer correctly equals points on your scoreboard. Do not get stuck on questions you don't know; mark them with an * and come back to them later. Other questions may trigger your memory or provide clues that will help you answer the difficult questions.
 - j. **Use strategies suited to different types of test questions:**
 - **Multiple Choice:** Answer the question to yourself before you look at the choices. Be sure to read all of the choices given and to pick the best one. If you are not sure of the answer, cross out those that you know are wrong and make an educated guess from the remainders. Pay special attention to the "all of the above" option on multiple choice questions.
 - **Short Answer:** If you don't know the exact answer but do know something related to it, write what you do know. Never leave a question blank; your professor may reward partial credit for an incomplete response.
 - **True/False:** Always remember that for a statement to be true, it must be entirely true. Watch out for qualifying words like *no, every, entirely, best, always, only, worst, none, frequently, all, usually, often, never, generally, seldom, many, frequently, sometimes, most, ordinarily, few, and some.*
 - **Matching:** It may be helpful to know if some of the matching items can be used more than once. If they can't, match the easiest items first and cross them off. Use the process of elimination to make educated guesses for the remaining items.
 - **Essay or Long Answer:** Read the question carefully, then:
 1. Plan – make an outline that includes all the important facts you want to mention in your answer.
 2. Begin your answer by restating the question or writing a topic sentence.
 3. Write your answer by elaborating on all the facts and ideas in your outline.
 4. Re-read and edit.

III. After the Test

- a. **Make an appointment with your professor** to go over your test and to resolve any unanswered questions or confusion you may have.
- b. **Meet with a tutor in the Writing and Learning Commons.** Make an appointment to go over your test with a tutor and to begin preparing for the next one.
- c. If you answered a question incorrectly because you wrote the wrong information in your notes, be sure to **revise your notes** so you won't make the same mistake again.
- d. **Correct your test and keep it as a study guide!** Keep any other study materials (flashcards, timelines, study guides) you created; these will come in handy if you are required to take a comprehensive exam at the end of the semester.