

CHAPTER 8

Taking
Tests

Jeanne L. Higbee of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, contributed her valuable and considerable expertise to the writing of this chapter.

Now that you've learned how to listen and take notes in class and how to read and review your notes and assigned readings, you're ready to use those skills to achieve high scores on tests and exams.

Many students entering college assume that every problem has a single right answer and the instructor or the textbook is always a source of truth. Actually, though, some questions may have more than one correct answer, and your teachers may accept a number of answers as long as they correctly answer the question.

Most college instructors expect you to use higher-level thinking skills like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. They want you to be able to support your opinions, to see *how* you think. You can cough up a list of details from lecture notes or readings, but unless you can make sense of them, you probably won't get much credit.

IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL LEARN

- How to prepare for an exam
- Study tips that will help improve your grades
- How to do better on essay exams
- Strategies for succeeding on various kinds of objective tests
- How to handle a take-home exam
- How cheating hurts you, your friends, and your college

Exams: The Long View

You actually began preparing for a test on the first day of the term. All of your lecture notes, assigned readings, and homework were part of that preparation. As the test day nears, you should know how much additional time you will need to review, what material the test will cover, and what format the test will take.

Three things will help you study well:

- **Ask your instructor.** Ask whether the exam will be essay, multiple-choice, true/false, or another kind of test. Ask if the test covers the entire

term's worth of material, or just the material since the last test. Ask how long the test will last and how it will be graded. Some instructors may let you see copies of old exams, so you can see the types of questions they use. Never miss the last class before an exam, because your instructor may summarize valuable information.

- **Manage your time wisely.** Have you laid out a schedule that will give you time to review effectively for the exam, without waiting until the night before?
- **Sharpen your study habits.** Have you created a body of material from which you can effectively review what is likely to be on the exam? Is that material organized in a way that will enable you to study efficiently?

Planning Your Approach

Physical Preparation

1. **Maintain your regular sleep routine.** Don't cut back on your sleep in order to cram in additional study hours. Remember that most tests will require you to *apply* the concepts that you have studied, and you must have all your brain power available. Especially during final exam periods, it is important to be well rested in order to remain alert for extended periods of time.
2. **Maintain your regular exercise program.** Walking, jogging, swimming, or other aerobic activities are effective stress reducers, may help you think more clearly, and provide positive—and needed—breaks from studying.
3. **Eat right.** You really are what you eat. Avoid drinking more than one or two caffeinated drinks a day or eating foods that are high in sugar or fat. Eat a light breakfast before a morning exam. Greasy or acidic foods might upset your stomach. To maintain a good energy level, choose fruits, vegetables, and foods that are high in complex carbohydrates. Consider a banana, a slice of cantaloupe, or other foods high in potassium to help prevent muscle cramps. You also might take a bottle of water to the exam.

Emotional Preparation

1. **Know your material.** If you have given yourself adequate time to review, you will enter the classroom confident that you are in control. Study by testing yourself or quizzing one another in a study group so you will be sure you really know the material.
2. **Practice relaxing.** Some students experience upset stomachs, sweaty palms, racing hearts, or other unpleasant physical symptoms before an exam. See your counseling center about relaxation techniques.

3. Use positive self-talk. Instead of telling yourself “I never do well on math tests” or “I’ll never be able to learn all the information for my history essay exam,” make positive statements, such as “I have attended all the lectures, done my homework, and passed the quizzes. Now I’m ready to pass the test!”

Design an Exam Plan

The week before the exam, set aside a schedule of one-hour blocks for review, along with notes on what you specifically plan to accomplish during each hour.

Join a Study Group

Study groups can help students develop better study techniques. In addition, group members can benefit from differing views of instructors’ goals, objectives, and emphasis; have partners to quiz them on facts and concepts; and gain the enthusiasm and friendship of others to help sustain their motivation.

Study groups can meet throughout the term, or they can review for midterms or final exams. Group members should complete their assignments before the group meets and prepare study questions or points of discussion ahead of time.

Before a major exam, work together to devise a list of potential questions for review. Then spend time studying separately to develop answers, outlines, and mind maps (discussed below). The group should then reconvene shortly before the test to share answers and review.

Tutoring and Other Support

Often excellent students seek tutorial assistance to ensure their A’s. In the more common large lecture classes for first-year students, you have limited opportunity to question instructors. Tutors know the highlights and pitfalls of the course. Most tutoring services are free. Ask your academic advisor or counselor or campus learning center. Most academic support centers or learning centers have computer labs that can provide assistance for course work. Some offer walk-in assistance for help in using word processing, spreadsheet, or statistical computer programs. Often computer tutorials are available to help you refresh basic skills. Math and English grammar programs may also be available, as well as access to the Internet.

Now It’s Time to Study

Through the consistent use of proven study techniques, you will already have processed and learned most of what you need to know. Now you can focus

your study efforts on the most challenging concepts, practice recalling information, and familiarize yourself with details.

Review Sheets, Mind Maps, and Other Tools

To prepare for an exam covering large amounts of material, you need to condense the volume of notes and text pages into manageable study units. Review your materials with these questions in mind: Is this one of the key ideas in the chapter or unit? Will I see this on the test? You may prefer to highlight, underline, or annotate the most important ideas, or you may create outlines, lists, or visual maps containing the key ideas. Or you can use large pieces of paper to summarize main ideas chapter by chapter or according to the major themes of the course. Look for relationships between ideas. Try to condense your review sheets down to one page of essential information. Key words on this page can bring to mind blocks of information. A *mind map* is essentially a review sheet with a visual element. Its word and visual patterns provide you with highly charged clues to jog your memory. Because they are visual, mind maps help many students recall information more easily.

Figure 8.1 shows what a mind map might look like for a chapter on listening and learning in the classroom. See if you can reconstruct the ideas in the chapter by following the connections in the map. Then make a visual mind map for this chapter and see how much more you can remember after studying it a number of times.

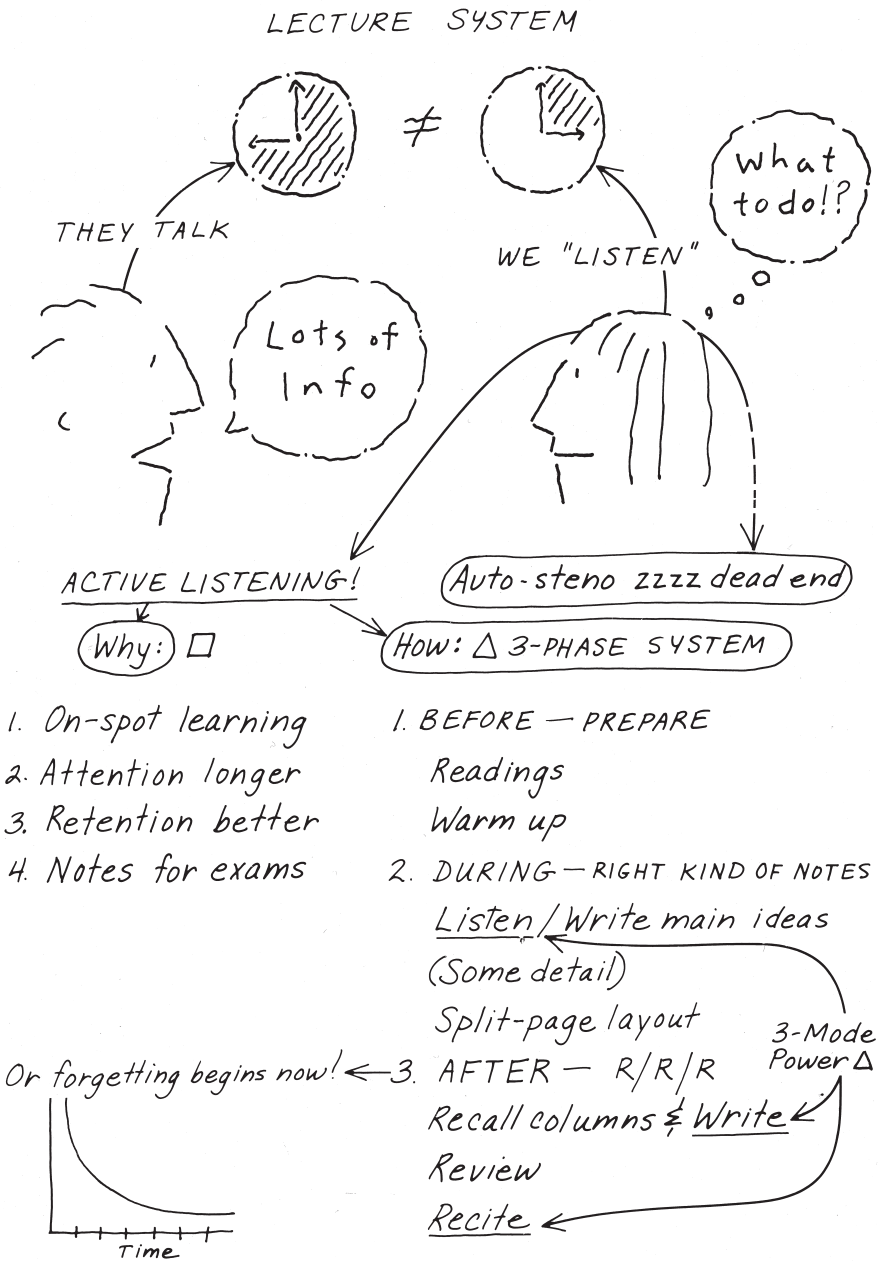
In addition to review sheets and mind maps, you may want to create flash cards or outlines. Also, do not underestimate the value of using the recall column from your lecture notes to test yourself or others on information presented in class.

Summaries

A written summary can be helpful in preparing for essay and short-answer exams. By condensing the main ideas into a concise written summary, you store information in your long-term memory so you can retrieve it to answer an essay question. Here's how:

- 1. Predict a test question from your lecture notes or other resources.** For example, one of the major headings in this chapter reads, "Join a Study Group." From this you might predict a question such as "Discuss the merits of joining a study group."
- 2. Read the chapter, article, notes, or other resources.** Underline or mark main ideas as you go, make notations, or outline on a separate sheet.

Figure 8.1 Sample Mind Map on Listening and Learning in the Classroom



3. **Analyze and abstract.** What is the purpose of the material? Does it compare, define a concept, or prove an idea? What are the main ideas?
4. **Make connections between main points and key supporting details.** Reread to identify each main point and supporting evidence.
5. **Select, condense, and order.** Review underlined material and begin putting the ideas into your own words. Number in a logical order what you underlined or highlighted.
6. **Write your ideas precisely in a draft.** In the first sentence, state the purpose of your summary. Follow with each main point and its supporting ideas.
7. **Review your draft.** Read it over, adding missing transitions or insufficient information. Check the logic of your summary. Indicate the sources you used for later reference.
8. **Test your memory.** Put your draft away and try to recite the contents of the summary to yourself out loud, or explain it to a study partner who can provide feedback on the information you have omitted.
9. **Schedule time to review summaries and double-check your memory shortly before the test.** You may want to do this with a partner, but some students prefer to review alone.

■ Taking the Test

1. **Print your name on the test and answer sheet**—and sign it if your campus requires a signature.
2. **Analyze, ask, and stay calm.** Take a long, deep breath and slowly exhale before you begin. Read all the directions so that you understand what to do. Ask for clarification if you don't understand something. Be confident. Don't panic. Answer one question at a time. For an essay exam, read all questions first so that your mind can be thinking ahead.
3. **Make the best use of your time.** Quickly survey the entire test and decide how much time you will spend on each section. Be aware of the point values of different sections of the test. Are some questions worth more points than others?
4. **Answer the easy questions first.** Expect that you'll be puzzled by some questions. Make a note to come back to them later. If different sections consist of different types of questions (such as multiple-choice, short answer, and essay), complete the type of question you are most comfortable with first. Be sure to leave enough time for any essays.
5. **If you feel yourself starting to panic or go blank, stop whatever you are doing.** Take a long, deep breath and slowly exhale. Remind

yourself you will be okay and that you do know your stuff and can do well on this test. Then take another deep breath. If necessary, go to another section of the test and come back later to the item that triggered your anxiety.

- 6. If you finish early, don't leave.** Stay and check your work for errors. Reread the directions one last time. If using a Scantron answer sheet, make sure that all answers are bubbled completely and correctly.

Essay Questions

Some types of exams tend to be exercises in memorization. Many college teachers, however, including the writers of this book, have a strong preference for the essay exam because it promotes higher-order critical thinking. Generally, the closer you are to graduation, the more essay exams you'll take. To be successful on essay exams, follow these guidelines:

- 1. Budget your exam time.** Quickly survey the entire exam and note the questions that are the easiest for you, along with their point values. Take a moment to estimate the approximate time you should allot to each question, and write the time beside each number. Be sure you know whether you must answer all the questions or choose among questions. Start with the questions that are easiest for you, and jot down a few ideas before you begin to write. Wear a watch so you can monitor your time, including time at the end for a quick review.
- 2. Develop a very brief outline of your answer before you begin to write.** Use your first paragraph to introduce the main points, and subsequent paragraphs to describe each point in more depth. If you find that you are running out of time and cannot complete an essay, at the very least provide an outline of key ideas. You will usually earn more points by responding to all parts of the question briefly than by addressing just one aspect of the question in detail.
- 3. Write concise, organized answers.** Many well-prepared students write fine answers to questions that may not have been asked because they did not read a question carefully or did not respond to all parts of the question. Answers that are vague and rambling tend to be downgraded by instructors. You are less likely to ramble if you write an outline beforehand and stick to it.
- 4. Know the key task words in essay questions.** Being familiar with the key word in an essay question will help you answer it more specifically. The following key task words appear frequently on essay tests. Take time to learn them, so that you can answer essay questions more accurately and precisely.

Analyze To divide something into its parts in order to understand it better.

Compare To look at the characteristics or qualities of several things and identify as well as define how the things are alike and how they are different.

Contrast To identify the differences between things.

Criticize/Critique To analyze and judge something. A criticism should generally contain your own judgments (supported by evidence) and those of other authorities who can support your point.

Define To give the meaning of a word or expression.

Describe To give a general verbal sketch of something, in narrative or other form.

Discuss To examine or analyze something in a broad and detailed way.

Evaluate To discuss the strengths and weaknesses of something. Evaluation is similar to criticism, but the word *evaluate* places more stress on the idea of how well something meets a certain standard or fulfills some specific purpose.

Explain To clarify something. Explanations generally focus on why or how something has come about.

Interpret To explain the meaning of something.

Justify To argue in support of some decision or conclusion by showing sufficient evidence or reasons in its favor.

Narrate To relate a series of events in the order in which they occurred.

Outline To present a series of main points in appropriate order. Ask the instructor what type of outline he or she wants.

Prove To give a convincing logical argument and evidence in support of some statement.

Review To summarize and comment on the main parts of a problem or a series of statements.

Summarize To give information in brief form, omitting examples and details.

Trace To narrate a course of events. Where possible, show connections from one event to the next.

Multiple-Choice Questions

Preparing for multiple-choice tests requires you to actively review all of the material covered in the course. Reciting from flash cards, summary sheets, mind maps, or the recall column in your lecture notes is a good way to review these large amounts of material.

Take advantage of the many cues that multiple-choice questions contain. Careful reading of each item may uncover the correct answer. Always question choices that use absolute words such as *always*, *never*, and *only*. These choices are often incorrect. Also, read carefully when terms such as *not*, *except*, and *but* are introduced before the choices. Often the most inclusive answer is correct. Generally, options that do not agree grammatically with the first part of the item are incorrect.

If you are totally confused by a question, leave it and come back later, but always double-check that you are filling in the answer for the right question. Sometimes another question will provide a clue for a question you are unsure about. If you have absolutely no idea, and there is no penalty for guessing (ask your instructor), look for an answer that at least contains some shred of correct information.

True/False Questions

Remember, for the question to be true, every detail of the question must be true. Questions containing words such as *always*, *never*, and *only* are usually false, whereas less definite terms such as *often* and *frequently* suggest that the statement may be true. Read through the entire exam to see if information in one question will help you answer another. Do not begin to second-guess what you know or doubt your answers because a sequence of questions appears to be all true or all false.

Matching Questions

The matching question is the hardest to answer by guessing. In one column you will find the term, in the other the description of it. Before answering any question, review all of the terms or descriptions. Match those terms you are sure of first. As you do so, cross out both the term and its description, and then use the process of elimination to assist you in answering the remaining items.

Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

First, decide what kind of answer is required. Be certain that your answer completes the sentence grammatically as well as logically (for example, don't use a verb when a noun is required). Look for key words in the statement that could jog your memory.

Machine-Scored Tests

Don't make extra marks or doodles on the answer sheet. The machine can't tell the difference. Make certain you're bubbling in the right dot in the right

row. If you decide to change an answer, erase the original mark completely. Otherwise it may cancel out both choices.

Take-Home Tests

A take-home test, by its nature, is an open-book test. This means your instructor will expect precise and comprehensive answers, since you are (*a*) not under the pressure of time and (*b*) able to look up facts without penalty. Take-home tests usually require a lot more of your time than the one or two hours of an in-class exam, and grading standards are usually higher.

Academic Honesty

Colleges and universities have academic integrity policies or honor codes that clearly define cheating, lying, plagiarism, and other forms of dishonest conduct, but it is often difficult to know how those rules apply to specific situations. Is it really lying to tell an instructor you missed class because you were “not feeling well” (whatever “well” means) or because you were experiencing vague “car trouble”? (Some people think car trouble includes anything from a flat tire to difficulty finding a parking spot.)

Types of Misconduct

Institutions vary widely in how they define broad terms such as lying or cheating. One university defines cheating as “intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, notes, study aids, or other devices . . . [including] unauthorized communication of information during an academic exercise.” This would apply to looking over a classmate’s shoulder for an answer, using a calculator when it is not authorized, procuring or discussing an exam (or individual questions from an exam) without permission, copying lab notes, purchasing term papers over the Internet, watching the video instead of reading the book, and duplicating computer files.

Plagiarism, or taking another person’s ideas or work and presenting them as your own, is especially intolerable in academic culture. Just as taking someone else’s property constitutes physical theft, taking credit for someone else’s ideas constitutes intellectual theft.

On most tests, you do not have to credit specific individuals. (But some instructors do require this; when in doubt, ask!) In written reports and papers,

however, you must give credit any time you use (1) another person's actual words, (2) another person's ideas or theories—even if you don't quote them directly, and (3) any other information not considered common knowledge.

Many schools prohibit other activities besides lying, cheating, unauthorized assistance, and plagiarism. For instance, the University of Delaware prohibits intentionally inventing information or results; the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, outlaws earning credit more than once for the same piece of academic work without permission; Eastern Illinois University rules out giving your work or exam answer to another student to copy during the actual exam or to a student in another section before the exam is given in that section; and the University of South Carolina at Columbia prohibits bribing in exchange for any kind of academic advantage. Most schools also outlaw helping or attempting to help another student commit a dishonest act.

Reducing the Likelihood of Problems

To avoid becoming intentionally or unintentionally involved in academic misconduct, consider the reasons it could happen.

- **Ignorance.** In a survey at USC Columbia, 20 percent of students incorrectly thought that buying a term paper wasn't cheating. Forty percent thought using a test file (a collection of actual tests from previous terms) was fair behavior. Sixty percent thought it was all right to get answers from someone who had taken an exam earlier in the same or a prior semester.
- **Cultural and campus differences.** In other countries and on some U.S. campuses, students are encouraged to review past exams as practice exercises. Some campuses permit sharing answers and information for homework and other assignments with friends.
- **Different policies among instructors.** Ask your instructors for clarification. When a student is caught violating the academic code of a particular school or teacher, pleading ignorance of the rules is a weak defense.
- **A belief that grades—not learning—are everything,** when actually the reverse is true. This may reflect our society's competitive atmosphere. In truth, grades measure nothing if one has cheated to earn them.
- **Lack of preparation or inability to manage time and activities.** Before you consider cheating, ask an instructor for an extension of your deadline.

Here are some steps you can take to reduce the likelihood of problems:

1. **Know the rules.** Learn the academic code for your school. Study course syllabi. If a teacher does not clarify his or her standards and expectations, ask.

- 2. Set clear boundaries.** Refuse to “help” others who ask you to help them cheat. You don’t owe anyone an explanation for why you won’t participate in academic dishonesty. In test settings, cover your answers, keep your eyes down, and put all extraneous materials away.
- 3. Improve time management.** Be well prepared for all quizzes, exams, projects, and papers. This may mean unlearning habits such as procrastination.
- 4. Seek help.** Get help with study skills, time management, and test taking. If your methods are in good shape but the content of the course is too difficult, see your instructor, join a study group, or visit your campus learning center or tutorial service.
- 5. Withdraw from the course.** Your school has a policy about dropping courses and a last day to drop without penalty. You may decide only to drop the course that’s giving you trouble. Some students may choose to withdraw from all classes and take time off before returning to school if they find themselves in over their heads, or some unexpected occurrence has caused them to fall behind. Before you withdraw, you should ask about campus policies as well as ramifications in terms of federal financial aid and other scholarship programs. See your advisor or counselor.
- 6. Reexamine goals.** Stick to your own realistic goals instead of giving in to pressure from family or friends to achieve impossibly high standards. You may also feel pressure to enter a particular career or profession of little or no interest to you. If so, sit down with counseling or career services professionals or your academic advisor and explore alternatives.

YOUR PERSONAL JOURNAL

1. Assuming you have taken an exam, what strategies did you use to prepare? How did they work? If you haven’t taken an exam, what strategies do you plan to use? Why?
2. It has been said that exams only measure how well you can memorize information, and because some people have a natural-born talent for memorization, exams aren’t fair. Can you support or punch any holes in this argument?
3. Are you facing any issues related to academic honesty? What are they? What are you doing about them?
4. If you knew you could get away with cheating on an exam, would you do it? Explain your answer.

5. What behaviors are you thinking about changing after reading this chapter? How will you go about changing them?
6. What else is on your mind this week? If you wish to share it with your instructor, add it to this journal entry.

READINGS

How to Ace College*

A Harvard professor reveals secrets from his 10-year study of successful students.

By Alisha Davis

There's so much focus on how to get into college these days, and not much advice about what to do once you get there. Back in the 1980s, the then Harvard president Derek Bok asked Richard J. Light, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, to study students on campus. The result of this 10-year survey is the book *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, which offers practical advice to school administrators, parents, and, most importantly, to the students themselves. In an interview with *Newsweek's* Alisha Davis, Light discusses how to translate good intentions into practice.

DAVIS: What was the most surprising thing you discovered?

LIGHT: I had originally anticipated that most students would want the leaders of the college or the leaders of the school to treat them as grown-ups and get out of their way. The surprise is that student after student, 70 to 75 percent, said, "We need advice. We don't know what to do. How do we know which is the right history course to choose? How do we know how much time to spend on extracurriculars or homework?"

DAVIS: You talk a lot about the importance of finding a faculty mentor or a teacher. How should students do that?

LIGHT: It takes some initiative. If you don't have a reason to go talk to a teacher, invent one. I am a student advisor, and the first thing I ask my freshmen is, "What is your job this semester?" Students always say, "My job is to work really really hard." And I say, "Excellent, but that's not enough. Your job is to get to know at least one faculty member this semester. Just think, you're going to be here for eight semesters. Even if you succeed only half the time, four years later, you will now have four faculty members who can write a job

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recommendation or serve as a reference.” Kids almost always say they never thought about it that way.

DAVIS: What mistakes do parents make?

LIGHT: Although parents obviously mean well, they generally give lousy advice when it comes to picking courses. In terms of academics, the students who were least happy tended to get the requirements out of the way before getting to the “good stuff.” They took big courses, and then they said they felt their first years were too anonymous. The happiest students took a mix of courses that included small seminars. When I asked the unhappy students why they took so many requirements, almost all of them said that’s what their parents suggested. It’s counterintuitive for parents, but students should be taking small, specialized courses from the start.

DAVIS: What was one of the concrete differences between those students who prospered and those who struggled?

LIGHT: The one word that most sharply differentiated the two groups was the word “time.” For a bunch of middle-aged professors like me, the idea of time management is a no-brainer, but for students sometimes it’s not as obvious. Students really have to keep an eye on how they spend their time, and I have two suggestions for them. The first is to make a thorough evaluation of their schedule. I tell students to keep track of how they spend their time every day for a week. The most important change students need to make is often not how much they study, but when. Studying in a long uninterrupted block is much more effective than studying in short bursts. All students are pressed for time, and they need to be with their friends and participating in extracurriculars. It’s how you divide up that time that makes the difference. One busy undergraduate told me, “Every day has three halves: morning, afternoon, and evening. And if I can devote any one of those blocks of time to getting my academic work done, I consider that day a success.” Other students can learn from that.

DAVIS: Why do you emphasize extracurricular activities in your book?

LIGHT: Students who are involved in extracurriculars are the happiest students on campus and also tend to be the most successful in the classroom. They find a way to connect their academic work to their personal lives. For example, I spoke to a young woman who was a ballet dancer in high school. She joined the college ballet company, but she kept getting stress fractures and noticed that many of the other dancers were having the same problem. She began to wonder why and she decided to explore that in her coursework. That decision changed her life. She took science classes. She applied for a research grant. When she graduated, she applied to medical school to become an orthopedic surgeon. Her whole education was so much more meaningful because it connected to her life. If students can apply what they are learning to their real life, they are more engaged and tend to get more out of it.

How to Be a Great Test Taker*

Three simple words can help you replace test anxiety with test confidence: prepare, prepare, prepare.

By Mark Rowh

Sometimes it seems that life is just one big test. Pop quizzes. Chapter tests. Final exams. The daunting national examinations for those planning to go to college. You can't even get your driver's license without passing a test.

"Tests are a part of life," says Judy S. Richardson, professor of reading at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. "We take tests all of the time. I recently had to take one, even at my age, just to apply for a research grant. We may have to take them to apply for a job, or to join the armed forces."

IMPORTANCE OF TESTS

Tests are not just commonplace; they're also important. "Our society places an emphasis on test scores," says Maureen D. Gillette, associate dean of the College of Education at William Paterson University in New Jersey. "Most colleges and universities look at SAT or ACT tests as a measure of a student's potential for success in college. Students should realize that some people and institutions will make certain judgments about them, whether accurate or not, based on test scores."

Talk about pressure! With so much depending on the results, exams can be overwhelming. But they don't have to be. The right frame of mind and the use of smart test-taking strategies can help any student succeed.

Too often, people take a negative view of tests. Yet they actually have some positive features, according to Richardson. "Tests help us practice sharp, alert thinking," she says. "Answering test questions involves more than knowing a specific, literal answer. It also means knowing how to read between the lines, and then apply it to a situation. That is what we are expected to do every day, and so tests may help us be ready for that daily experience."

PROPER PREPARATION

In addition to these benefits, though, the primary goal in test taking is to do well. For some students, the objective might be a passing score. For others, the desired outcome might be an A grade. But what is the best guarantee of doing well in the testing process?

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The most basic factor, experts agree, is preparation. “Always be prepared for the test,” Richardson advises. “Take notes, ask questions, read the material, guess what the teacher will be asking. Then when you see the test, you will have a confident reaction. You will be able to think clearly and do better on the test.”

On the other hand, failing to prepare is the biggest mistake you can make. This may seem obvious. But in addition to lacking the necessary knowledge, lack of preparation can weaken your mental state.

“If you do not prepare all along, when you see the test, you may panic,” Richardson notes. When fear creeps in, even the best student is unlikely to succeed.

Preparing for exams can include a variety of strategies. At a minimum, any important material should be read at least once, and preferably more, until you have absorbed the main points. Simply scanning over textbooks or notes is not enough.

“Reading it once is not studying,” says Dr. Michael Epstein, professor of psychology at Rider University in New Jersey. He advocates taking a structured approach in which students review information both before a test and afterward.

Before taking an exam, you should commit important concepts to memory through focused study. Try using whatever memory techniques work best for you. This might mean writing notes, asking yourself questions and then answering them aloud, or employing clever memory devices.

MANAGING TIME

Key to the process is time management. Don’t assume you can wait until the last minute and then make up for lost study time. Rather, be sure to prepare in advance. After all, you know tests will be coming up in virtually every course you take. Similarly, test dates for standardized tests are published months ahead of the actual dates.

“The most effective way to study for a test is to review briefly all along and then review some more before the test,” Richardson says. “Cramming is not too effective.”

Advance preparation need not be a solitary process. In fact, most teachers will work with you because they want students to succeed. So in the days or weeks preceding an exam, make sure to consult with your teacher and determine just what to expect. According to Dr. Douglas B. Reeves, author of *The 20-Minute Learning Connection: A Practical Guide for Parents Who Want to Help Their Children Succeed in School*, asking questions far in advance of a test is always a good idea.

“First, learn the rules of the game,” he says. “It’s OK to ask the teacher what the test covers. Teachers appreciate it when students express an inter-

est and want to do well. You are not cheating [if you] ask about the material on the test and the types of questions that will be used.”

Another strategy is to create practice test questions. “Put yourself in the teacher’s shoes,” Reeves says. “How would you test someone about this material? Of course, you can’t create test questions unless you take time to read and learn the material.”

Don’t just mimic the efforts of other students. Analyze your own learning style, and employ methods that work best for you.

“Learn the ways you learn best,” says Richardson. “I learn by taking notes and making charts. Some learn by making diagrams. Be active in listening to your teacher and reading the material. And try to summarize in your own mind what you learned each day. You can do this in the car on the way home, on the bus, and so forth—it takes just minutes to do.”

Another tip is to hone your writing skills. “Of all the skills you can practice, the mastery of nonfiction writing is the one that will help you most in almost any test situation,” says Reeves. “Even with a multiple-choice test, practice writing the reasons that a given answer is right or wrong.”

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

For some students, studying together can be helpful. “Study in groups,” Gillette advises. “Most students retreat to individual spaces to study. If they have misconceptions or simply do not understand the material, they often study for hours but don’t make any progress toward learning the material or preparing for a test.”

To be effective, group study must include plenty of interaction. “When studying in small groups, use practice problems,” Gillette says. “Discuss your answers together and share information. Then you’ll have a greater understanding of why the correct answer is right and why incorrect ones are wrong.”

When it comes time to sit down and take a test, make sure those giving the tests are aware of any special needs you might have. If you have a disability or your first language is not English, ask about measures such as a longer testing period or having a reader.

“If you need them, don’t be afraid to utilize these supports,” Gillette says. “A test should measure knowledge of the material tested, not the test taker’s ability to use a particular format.”

TACKLING STANDARDIZED TESTS

What about standardized tests such as the SAT? Many of the same strategies apply as for other types of examinations. In addition, it’s wise to avoid getting caught up too much in the hype often associated with these exams.

“Prepare, but don’t stress out,” says Gillette. “If you study hard during the year, take appropriate courses in school, and do some test preparation, it is likely that you will do fine.”

She adds that it can be worthwhile to take steps such as purchasing commercially made practice test material, studying in small groups as well as alone, doing practice problems, and using the answer key to discuss right and wrong answers.

“With measures like these, good students should have all the preparation they need,” Gillette notes. “Many parents spend a lot of money on test preparation courses. Some people may value this route, but I really do not think it is necessary.”

If you’d like to learn more about test-taking strategies, check out books on the subject along with Web sites such as the one provided by the National Council of Teachers of English at <http://www.ncte.org>. But don’t depend too heavily on the World Wide Web.

“Remember, you can drown in Internet information,” Reeves says. “When you are preparing for a test, you need focus, not 300 pages downloaded from the Web. Learn the rules of the game, get the information you need, and then write practice questions and practice responses. That’s your best plan.”

For More Information

For more information on test-taking strategies, check out these books:

No More Test Anxiety: Effective Steps for Taking Tests and Achieving Better Grades (includes audio CD) by Ed Newman. Learning Skills Publications.

The Student’s Guide to Exam Success by Eileen Tracy. Open University Press.

Study Power: Study Skills to Improve Your Learning and Your Grades, by William R. Luckie. Brookline Books.

IF YOU DON’T DO WELL ON STANDARDIZED TESTS

What happens if you take the SAT or ACT exam and don’t score as well as you would like? First, don’t panic. You can always retake exams, and many students earn better scores with repeat efforts—especially after taking SAT preparation classes or otherwise focusing their efforts. Taking standardized tests two or three times may require some effort, but it can pay off.

At the same time, it’s important to realize that colleges look at more than test scores when evaluating admission applications. Grades, extracurricular activities, leadership, and community service are all important. Special skills in areas such as music, athletics, or writing can also gain favorable attention. Of course, in the most competitive situations, students who have high test

scores—along with other capabilities—will have the edge. But SAT or ACT scores are only part of the equation.

The kind of college you plan to attend makes a big difference too. Some schools—mainly community colleges—practice open admission. This means that anyone who can benefit is admitted. Many others admit students with less than stellar exam scores. If you're concerned about test scores, apply to several colleges with different admission standards. That way you'll be covered if you are not accepted by your first choice.

“Remember that a test score is not a measure of the worth of a person,” says Maureen Gillette of William Paterson University. “I have known many students whose personal determination and drive for success are far greater predictors of academic achievement than their standardized test scores.”

Five Steps for Test Success

Tests vary widely in approach and complexity. But these few basic steps will prove helpful for almost any type of exam.

- 1. Be prepared.** It's simple but true: The better you know your subject, the more likely you are to succeed with any exam. Spend your time wisely, reading and rereading the material, answering practice questions, and so forth.
- 2. Know how the test will be structured.** Before studying for a test, make sure you know how it will be set up. Will it include essay questions? True or false? Multiple choice? Ask your teacher just what to expect. If it is possible to preview some test questions in class well in advance of the actual test date, then do so. It may also help to compare notes with other students who have taken tests from the same teacher. In a way, taking a test is like running an obstacle course. The more you know about its layout, the better prepared you will be.
- 3. Use your “test smarts.”** While completing any exam, take full advantage of the time available. Don't just plow into answering questions. Read them carefully, and then answer each one with care. At the same time, be sure to pace yourself. Calculate how much time you have for each question, and make sure you don't run out of time before answering all the questions. If the test lists how many points are possible for each question, spend a greater proportion of your effort on those carrying the greatest weight.
- 4. Stay calm.** When you're completing a test, try not to let your nerves get the best of you. Remember that even if you do not do well on a given exam, there will be more opportunities to improve your performance.
- 5. Review results.** When a teacher returns a completed exam, don't make the mistake of looking only at your score. Instead, re-read any questions

you missed, and make sure you understand why they were wrong. By mastering the correct answer for such questions, you will increase your knowledge while also gaining a better understanding of what your teacher expects.

DISCUSSION

1. With a small group of your fellow students, decide which is more or less common in beginning college courses: objective (true/false, multiple choice, fill-ins, etc.) or subjective (essay) testing. Have each group member explain the difference between preparing for one type of test or the other.
2. In a discussion with fellow students, see if you can agree upon the common characteristics of an “easy” test versus a “hard” test. Then discuss whether it is the characteristics of the test or what students do to prepare for it, such as their listening, note taking, and exam preparation strategies as well as the instructors’ teaching styles, that makes a test “hard” or “easy.”
3. “How to Be a Great Test Taker” contains a number of memorable quotes, among them:

“A test score is not a measure of the worth of a person.”

“Tests are a part of life.”

“Good writing skills can help you do better on tests.”

Divide your small group into three groups, with each one discussing the meaning behind each of these quotes. You are free to disagree with the quote as long as you can justify your argument.

4. Which tests do you perform best on? What seem to be the key variables: your attitude toward the course, how you prepare for it, the characteristics of the tests, or some combination of these?
5. In the interview on “How to Ace College,” Richard J. Light summarizes a number of intriguing suggestions for college success. In a group, discuss which of the suggestions would be easiest for each group member to follow and why. Exchange ideas for using as many of the suggestions as you can.