

TEST TAKING HINTS

One of the things students fear most is failure. Failure signifies that things are not going well, and alerts us to the possibility that we may not achieve our goals. Unfortunately, many students see tests and exams as opportunities to fail. They prepare by becoming anxious and fearful, and trying to cram as much as possible as near as possible to the exam itself. These students rarely do well on the exam. They often fail, thus accomplishing just what they feared. Perhaps they should learn to fear success?

Taking tests requires some strategy and planning. First, it is helpful to know what type of tests you will have. Your instructor probably told you during the first class meeting, or perhaps is waiting for you to ask. If you do not know, ask and find out.

If you are going to be taking essay exams, the best way to prepare is by writing essays. Before you do this, it is a good idea to find out what types of questions the instructor asks, and what is expected in a response. Again, it is helpful to ask the instructor for this material. Perhaps you can even see some examples of essay questions from previous years. By finding out what is expected, you can formulate a model against which you can evaluate your answers.

Now, using the learning objectives, or some essay questions you wrote, actually sit down and write out the answers. HINT: If you usually feel more anxious during a test, it may help you to practice writing your essays in the room in which the test will be given. Simply find a time when the room is vacant, and make yourself at home. If your instructor gives multiple choice tests, then you should practice taking multiple choice tests. For each chapter, either use questions provided in the student study guide, or make up your own. You may find it helpful to work out an arrangement to pool questions with other students, thereby reducing the amount of work you have to do, and developing a network of friends. Good for you!

Whichever way you do it, the important thing is to prepare for tests and exams. Preparation is about 95 percent of the secret to getting a good grade. (Yes, there is some actual luck or chance involved in tests scores, as even your instructor will admit!) Preparation is not only good study and review technique, but also helps to reduce anxiety.

Dealing with Test Anxiety

Some students find that the prospect of a test or an examination produces a set of responses which leave them feeling helpless, very anxious, and certain of failure. They find it hard to read the questions, often leave the examination incomplete, have stomach pains and other somatic problems, and contemplate drastic measures, such as dropping out.

Other students are less severely affected. For some, a little anxiety gives them the "edge" they need to do well. In fact, anxiety can be a helpful drive, when it occurs in low levels. In 1908, Yerkes and Dodson showed that the amount of anxiety with which could benefit performance was a function of the difficulty and complexity of the task. As the difficulty of the task rose, anxiety became less helpful and more likely to interfere with performance.

If you have ever been so anxious in a test situation that you were unable to do well, even though you knew the information you have test anxiety. If you get your exams back, and are surprised that you marked wrong answers when you knew the correct answers after you leave the examination room, you too may have test anxiety. Short of dropping out of college, or seeing a professional counselor, what can you do? In fact, you can do three things:

Strategy Number One: Effective Study

Using study habits that promote learning and make the best use of time is a sure help. Such study strategies as we discussed above, including scheduling your time, and using the SQ3R system, reduce anxiety by increasing confidence. As you come to realize that you know the material, your confidence rises and anxiety retreats.

Strategy Number Two: Relaxation

Each of us develops a unique pattern of relaxation. Some people relax by going to a specific place, either in person or mentally. Others relax by playing music, or being with friends, or by using autogenic relaxation phrases, or by meditating. Whatever you do, be aware of it, and try to practice relaxation techniques. If you are good at relaxing, try thinking about those situations that make you anxious, and relax while you think of them. To do this, allow yourself to think only briefly (15 to 30 seconds at a time) of the situation which makes you anxious. At this point, you may be surprised to find that the situation itself also no longer produces anxiety. You may find that it is helpful to think about these anxiety-provoking situations in a sequence from those that produce very little anxiety to those which are more anxiety-evoking. Such a list, from low to high anxiety, might look something like this:

1. Your instructor announces that there will be a test in four weeks.
2. Your instructor reminds you of the test next week.
3. As you study, you see on the course outline the word test, and remember next week's test.
4. One of your friends asks you if you want to study together for the test which is the day after tomorrow.
5. You choose not to go out with your friends because of the test tomorrow.
6. As you get up in the morning, you remember that today is the day of the test.
7. You are walking down the hall toward the classroom, thinking about what questions might be on the test.
8. The instructor enters the classroom, carrying a sheaf of papers in hand.
9. The instructor distributes the papers, and you see the word "test" or "exam" at the top.
10. After reading the first five questions, you have not been able to think of the answer to any of them.

If you work at it gradually and consistently, pairing these types of thoughts (briefly) with relaxation and remembering to let go and relax after each one will dispel test anxiety and make test taking a more productive and successful experience.

Strategy Number Three: Thinking Clearly

Most students who have test anxiety think in unclear and unproductive ways. They say to themselves things like: "I can't get these answers correct....I don't know this stuff....I don't know anything at all....I'm going to fail this test....I'm probably going to flunk out of school....I'm just a dumb schmuck." These thoughts share two unfortunate characteristics: they are negative and they are absolute. They should be replaced. When we tell ourselves absolute and negative thoughts, we find it impossible to focus on the test material. The result is that we miss questions even when we know the answers. Our thinking prevents us from doing well.

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