Guide to Taking Examinations

STUDENT'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE STUDY #5

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Taking mid-term and final examinations is often the downfall of many capable students. Since course grades are assigned largely on the basis of these exams, students often get very nervous and do poorly on a big test because they forget material they could previously recall without much trouble. Why? For most, the basic cause is test anxiety due to a lack of self-confidence. They either feel that they are inadequately prepared for the exam or they lack confidence in their test-taking techniques. Thus, the two keys to conquering such anxiety are to study the subject matter thoroughly and to develop effective test-taking skills.

In high school, the typical pattern is to give many little tests, with each test covering perhaps two chapters of your textbook. Once you were tested on a topic you were rarely, if ever, quizzed over that material again. Thus, in high school, you probably practiced the memorization-regurgitation-forgetting cycle of learning. That is you waited until the test was announced, then proceeded to quickly memorize the information, needed to pass the exam. You disgorged this memorized material onto your test paper and, afterwards, quickly proceeded to forget most of it because the exam was now behind you. Furthermore, it was not at all unusual for your teachers to aid and abet this process by providing you with practice exercises and study questions that were carefully gone over in class before being asked, in slightly revised form, on your tests. Well, let's get one thing clear right now: College exams will typically be much tougher and much more comprehensive than anything you have experienced in high school.

No one, of course, looks forward with uncontrollable joy to taking a half dozen final examinations within a four or five day period. Collectively, these finals will cover approximately 3,000 pages of textbook reading, another 1,500 pages of other outside reading assignments and about 250 clock hours of lab activities and lectures. Each final examination will be three hours long and each will be comprehensive. So that's what you're up against in college. Needless to say, you simply cannot get by in college by using the same test-taking techniques that you used in high school.

College examinations are generally of three-types — essay, objective, and problem. Essay-type questions may ask you to "list the causes," "compare the outcomes," or "trace the developments" in regard to a given topic. In answering such questions, stick to the point and stop writing when you have exhausted your knowledge.
Objective-type questions may vary considerably in structure and method of scoring. The more common types are: statements to be checked true or false, multiple-choice items in which there is a statement followed by four or five alternate choices from which you are to select the most appropriate answer, statements with one or more key words missing which must be written in by you, and matching-type items where you are given, for example, a list of important names and a series of historical events which you are to match with the names.

Problem-type questions may consist of mathematical or scientific problems to be worked by using a formula or applying a rule, often in a step-by-step process. Here, it is most important that you minimize careless mistakes by rechecking all computations and the placement of all decimal points.

Examinations, like death and taxes, are inevitable. However, you will soon learn to take them in stride. You will also discover that, although college examinations are tough, they are fair, too. Here are a few general and specific rules which, if carefully followed, should help you to rapidly improve your test-taking skills.

General Suggestions for All Tests

Rule #1: Arrive early instead of barely on time so as to be organized and ready instead of in a panic. Try to go into the test alert and calm instead of tense and anxious.

Rule #2: Regard a lapse of memory as perfectly normal and do not let it throw you into a panic. If you block on answering one question, leave it for a while and return to it later.

Rule #3: Make certain that you fully understand the test directions before attempting to solve any problems or answer any questions. Do not make a mistake and lower your grade because you did not listen or read carefully.

Rule #4: Plan how you will use your time during the exam. Quickly look over the entire test and divide your available time as appropriate to the number and type of question that you find. Then be careful not to mismanage your time or you will have insufficient time to answer all of the questions.

Rule #5: Read each test question carefully and completely before marking or writing your answer. Reread again if you are confused.

Rule #6: Ask your instructor for help in interpreting a test question that is unclear or ambiguous to you. He/She will probably want to clear up the misunderstanding for everyone if the question really is misleading or confusing.
Rule #7: Be careful not to give any impression of cheating. Do your own work and do not give any help to others. Avoid all temptation — you simply cannot afford the risk of being caught.

Rule #8: Do not be disturbed by other students finishing before you do. Take your time; don’t panic, and you will do much better on the test.

Rule #9: Don’t try to be the first one to leave - you don’t win a prize for being the first one finished. If you have any time left over, edit, check and proof-read your answers. Use all the time available to eliminate careless errors and to improve your answers as much as possible.

Special Suggestions for Essay Tests

Rule #1: Read all of the questions through rapidly jotting down beside each question any pertinent facts or ideas which occur to you. The best way to ensure that your answers do not overlap each other is to survey the entire test before answering any of the questions.

Rule #2: Estimate the time that you will have for each question according to the relative difficulty and importance of all questions. Then keep track of your time so that you don’t spend too much time on any one question.

Rule #3: Answer the easiest question first and concentrate on answering one question at a time. Working on something you can handle is the surest way to reduce your test anxiety.

Rule #4: Before you start writing, make a brief, logical outline for your answer to insure good organization and prevent careless omissions. It’s not how much you say but what you say and how well you say it that counts.

Rule #5: Decide what kind of answer the question requires before you begin writing. Action verbs such as “illustrate,” “define,” and “compare,” “trace,” “explain” and “identify” require different approaches to answering.

Rule #6: Get down to business in your first paragraph and avoid long-winded introductions. Your aim in answering most essay questions is to get down the maximum amount of point-earning information in the shortest possible time.

Rule #7: Where appropriate, include factual details to support your answer. These impress your instructor by giving evidence that you know what you are talking about.
Rule #8: Take time to write legibly and make your corrections, if any, as neat as possible. Most instructors react subjectively to the appearance of papers to be graded, so let neatness work for you rather than against you.

Rule #9: Leave ample space between your answers. You may need it for new ideas or additional details when you return later to reread what you have written.

Rule #10: If you encounter a question that you think you can’t answer, leave it to be answered last, but don’t leave it unanswered. You may get partial credit for even a poor answer, especially if everyone else also had trouble answering the same question.

Rule #11: Take time to recheck all your answers for content accuracy, careless omissions, and mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. We all make mistakes when writing under pressure and you can often raise your grade by simply correcting an error or inserting an omitted fact.

Special Suggestions for Objective Tests

Rule #1: Answer all questions in order without skipping or jumping around. Identify doubtful answers by marks in the margin and recheck these as time permits after all questions have been answered.

Rule #2: Do not linger too long on any one question. Mark your best guess and move on, returning later if you have sufficient time.

Rule #3: Reread all questions containing negative wording such as “not” or “least”. Be especially alert for the use of double or even triple negatives within a sentence as these must be read very carefully to assure full understanding.

Rule #4: Check for qualifying words such as “all-most-some-none,” “always-usually-seldom-never,” “best-worst,” “highest-lowest,” or “small-largest”. When you see one of these qualifiers, test for truth by substituting the other members of the series. If your substitution makes a better statement, the question is false; if your substitution does not make a better statement, the question is true.

Rule #5: Watch for modifying or limiting phrases inserted into true-false questions. Instructors often use inserted names, dates, places or other details to make a statement inaccurate.

Rule #6: Be alert for multiple ideas or concepts within the same true-false statement. All parts of the statement must be true or the entire statement is false.
Rule #7: Be alert for grammatical inconsistencies between the question stem and
the answer choices on multiple-choice questions. A choice is almost always wrong if it
and the stem do not make a grammatically correct sentence.

Rule #8: Be cautious about changing your answer to a true-false or multiple-choice
question without a good reason. Your first "guess" is more likely to be correct than are
subsequent "guesses", so be sure to have a sound reason for changing your answer.

Rule #9: Apply the same approach to answering both true-false and multiple-
choice questions. The same techniques will work equally well for both, since multiple-
choice questions are basically true-false questions arranged in groups.

Rule #10: On matching exercises, work with only one column at a time. Match each
item in that column against all items in the second column until you find a proper
match, marking through matches about which you are certain so that it will be easier to
match out the rest about which you are unsure.

Special Suggestions for Problem Tests

Rule #1: Write down hard-to-remember formulas, equations and rules before you
actually begin working on the test problems.

Rule #2: If you are unable to work a problem, go on to the next one and come back
to it later if time permits.

Rule #3: Even if you know that your answer is wrong, turn in your work because
you may get partial credit for using the right process.

Rule #4: Show all of the steps in your work and clearly identify or label your
answer so that it can be quickly found.

Rule #5: Whenever possible, recheck all answers in a different way from that
employed when you did the work. For example, add down a column of figures when
rechecking if you added up the column when you first solved the problem.

When your instructor first announces an examination, make certain that you know
what materials will be covered on the exam and what type of test it will be. Find out as
much as possible about the scope and scoring of the test and the nature and form of the
questions. Orient your studying to the type of test that has been announced. For an
objective test, you will need to concentrate on memorizing factual details such as
names, dates and formulas; for an essay exam, you will want to concentrate on
understanding general concepts, principles and theories. Study for problem-solving
tests by working examples of each type of problem that might appear on the exam. In
reviewing, spend most of your time on the material that is least familiar, but also review briefly the material that is most familiar.

On the night before a big test, quietly re-think the materials by making a comprehensive final review and then go to bed early so as to be mentally and physically alert when time comes to take the exam. Remember, your mind and body will not be fully alert if you have spent most of the previous night drinking coffee and taking pills in a desperate effort to stay awake while you frantically scramble for last-minute facts.