

STRATEGIES FOR TEST TAKING!

EFFECTIVE STUDY HABITS

It is not enough just to schedule lots of study time. You also need to make sure that you use effective study techniques. Some smart study tips are to:

- ◆ **Create a quiet, neat study area.** Distractions and clutter interfere with studying. Select a quiet spot where you are unlikely to be interrupted and organize it so that you can study efficiently. If space is cramped at home use a corner of the local library or other suitable spot as your 'study haven.'
- ◆ **Study from good notes.** Your study sessions will be productive only if you are studying from a legible and complete set of notes. If your notes are incomplete, see if your teacher has a loaner set of master class notes that you can review to get the missing information. Or ask a classmate who takes thorough notes if you can borrow them.
- ◆ **Use bits of unexpected free time to study.** Carry 'pocket work' with you to review whenever you have a few minutes of free time. For example, have a set of index cards with important facts that need to be remembered and understood clearly. Perhaps write the word on the front of the card and the definition on the back. These index cards can be pulled out and studied during spare moments—like waiting in a doctor's office or riding the bus.
- ◆ **Make a study schedule to avoid 'time-drains.'** People often don't realize how much time they spend on activities such as watching TV, texting, surfing the internet, talking with friends on the phone, and so on. If we aren't careful we may discover that our leisure activities 'drain away' time that could have been better used for study. Create a general study schedule, with time set aside for fun activities. Then be sure to limit those fun activities to the time allotted.
- ◆ **Take advantage of your peak energy levels.** Pick the time of day when you tend to have the most energy and try to schedule your study sessions at that time. Also, study your most difficult or challenging material first, when you are still fresh. When you study at the same time each day, you will also find that studying becomes a habit!
- ◆ **Create a study group.** Gather together classmates to form a study group. Groups can make studying more fun. Another advantage of a group is that its members can consult multiple sets of notes whenever a course concept is unclear. (Just be sure that your group takes studying seriously and doesn't spend too much time socializing!)
- ◆ **Teach content as a 'learning check.'** A very effective way to check whether you have learned course content is to try to teach that information to another person (e.g. a study partner). The challenge of having to put key concepts into your own words and make them understandable to others will quickly reveal whether you have truly mastered that information.
- ◆ **Recite information aloud.** One study trick is to recite important information aloud. As you say the information, you also *hear* yourself saying it. These two channels for language, *speaking* and *hearing*, help to embed the information in your memory. The more senses we use, the more we will retain information.

- ◆ **Pose difficult questions.** When studying, stop every so often and ask yourself, “*What question(s) or problem type(s) am I most afraid will be on the test?*” Your answer will give you a valuable hint about what parts of the course content you still find difficult and should spend the most time studying.
- ◆ **Don’t forget to review previously learned material.** As you study, you start to learn the material. But a single pass through your notes is usually not enough to cement learning. During each study period set aside time (e. g. at the start of the session) to review previously learned information or concepts. Remember... review, review, and review!
- ◆ **Avoid cram sessions.** Pulling all-night study sessions only tires you out and leaves you exhausted on the day of the test. (And people seldom think clearly when they are tired) Rather than cramming your review into one or two marathon sessions, break your study up into short periods and study more frequently. Also, start studying early in the course, well before the test, to give yourself a head start in learning the material.
- ◆ **Reward yourself.** Select an activity that you find rewarding (e.g. playing a favorite computer game for 30 minutes, going for a walk, calling a friend). Set a contract with yourself to complete a set amount of studying (i.e. study Med Term for 40 minutes). If you have met your short-term goal, at the end of the study period give yourself the reward.

TIPS TO MEMORIZE CONTENT

The best way to remember information from your notes or reading is to set aside enough time to study it well. Some tips for memorizing information are to:

- ◆ **Intend to Remember.** Remembering well requires that you want to remember. If you have not made a decision to remember what you are reading/studying, you will forget almost immediately.
- ◆ **Don’t overload the memory.** Seven items is the most our memories can comfortably handle in one bit, but even seven is too much for most people. Your memory prefers to have only three, four, or five things at one time. Therefore, if you need to remember something that has more than four or five items in a group, break the group into smaller bites.
- ◆ **Select the most interesting points.** You can’t expect to remember everything you read - almost no one can. Select the most important points by looking for answers to questions you have formed. If you try to remember every idea, you will probably not remember much of anything.
- ◆ **Organize the material to be learned.** Your memory works best when the information is organized. Organize first. Try mentally ‘filing’ things according to type, etc. You may understand something when you see it, but if your mental filing system isn’t working, you may not be able to find the right information when you need it.
- ◆ **Relate ideas to what you already know.** Your memory will store new ideas if you relate them to old ideas. Make an association, create a mental picture, or use mnemonic devices to relate unknown information to information you already know.
- ◆ **Read and review using SQ3R.** Some people find this method helpful; others don’t. The SQ3R approach

is a structured, thorough method for learning the content of a book chapter or section: (1.) **Survey** the chapter, to get an overview of what it contains. Read the chapter summary and all headings. Also, briefly pay attention to figures, tables, and illustrations. (2.) **Create Questions** based on each of the chapter headings. The questions should be similar to those that you might find on a test. (3.) **Read through the chapter**. As you read, do your best to answer the questions that you developed. (4.) **Recite the questions**. From memory, verbally answer each question. (Hint: You can learn even more effectively if you write down your answers. Your responses can be written as single words or short phrase so long as they capture the main content of the answer.) (5.) **Review your answers**. Compare your responses to the information in the test to make sure your answers are complete and accurate.

♦ **Use mnemonic devices.** These memory devices aid memory, but should be simple, clear, and vivid.

You remember the unusual, the funny, or both.

- **Rhymes:** This method uses rhyming words to help you remember: EX: “I before E, except after C, or when sounding like A, as in neighbor and weigh.”
- **Acronyms:** A word made from the first letters of other words aids memory. EX: “Roy G Biv” — the colors of the rainbow: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet.
- **Sentences or acrostics:** Memory sentences are made where the first letter of words in the sentence are the same as the first letters of words that need to be recalled. EX: “Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally” - the order of operations in a math problem (parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, subtraction).

Mnemonic devices are handy when studying for tests, but they should NOT be used as a substitute for understanding.

♦ **Use visualization tricks.** Because we often think in pictures, we can use our ‘mind’s eye’ to help us memorize information as mental images. (Hint: Silly images can often make the information even easier to recall!) Here are a couple ideas for memorizing a list of words or key terms:

- **Chaining:** First, think of an object to represent each word or term that you must commit to memory. Then construct a mental ‘chain’ that connects the objects in a short sequence. If, for example, you wanted to memorize the first four planets (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars), you might visualize a winged god (*Mercury*) planting a *Venus flytrap* in a pile of *Earth* while eating a *Mars* bar.
- **Familiar places:** Select a location that is quite familiar to you (e.g. your house or apartment). Next, think of an object to represent each word or term that you must commit to memory. Then mentally ‘place’ the objects in various places in the location. If you wished to remember the first four planets, for example, you might pick your kitchen as the familiar location. Then you might imagine that a statue of *Mercury* that was sitting on the window sill fell over on the *Venus Flytrap* on the kitchen table, and spilled a pile of *Earth* on the floor, where the candy wrapper from the *Mars* bar you ate last night was lying next to it.

♦ **Test yourself repeatedly.** Memorize the material through repeated self-testing. Look at the first item in your notes; then look away and try to repeat it to yourself. After you learn each new item, go back and test yourself on all the previous items.

♦ **Over learn the material.** Once you believe you know something, go back to it at intervals and re-learn it. This way you will be sure to remember it.

- ◆ **Study before going to bed**, but not ON your bed! Thoroughly study the material to be learned. Then go right to sleep without watching TV or allowing other activities to interfere with your new learning. Your mind will work to absorb much of the material during the night. In the morning, spend a few minutes reviewing to solidly fix the material in your memory.

TIPS TO REDUCE ANXIETY ABOUT TESTS

Do you sometimes flub questions when you know the answer? Freeze during tests? Have difficulty sleeping as exams approach? If so, you might be suffering from test anxiety.

A little nervousness before a test is good. That tingly, butterflies-in-the-stomach feeling you get from extra adrenaline can sharpen your awareness and keep you alert. It motivates us to work hard and put forth our best effort on the exam. However, when we become too anxious that anxiety can undermine our confidence and interfere with our ability to focus or solve problems. Some tips to reduce test anxiety are to:

- ◆ **Be sure test anxiety is not an excuse.** Many students say they have test anxiety when actually they have not studied and/or reviewed carefully and thoroughly. If you are unprepared, you have every reason to be anxious!
- ◆ **Remember to take care of yourself first.** You should be sure to eat healthy foods and to get enough sleep before an exam. After all, people who are tired and hungry are not in the best frame of mind to perform well on tests! You may also want to engage in moderate physical activity or exercise and/or do some deep breathing exercises prior to taking the test to release and reduce body tension. A student who gets a full night's sleep, goes for a jog, and eats a balanced breakfast prior to taking the test will improve the odds of doing his or her best on an examination and avoiding the 'test jitters.'
- ◆ **Take practice exams.** People are less likely to become anxious when doing something familiar. If your instructor gives you the opportunity to take practice exams, take advantage of this and become familiar with their format and style. During a study period, take the practice exam under the same conditions that you would take the real exam (i.e. if notes are not allowed, don't use yours). If instructors don't provide practice exams, use chapter review questions at the end of each chapter, or write your own test questions from class notes.
- ◆ **Come early and come prepared.** Arrive early so you can do some deep breathing and feel relaxed when beginning the exam. In addition, you want to arrive early to ensure that you hear the instructor's comments and explanations before the test. Make a special effort to bring all the materials needed, including extra pens, pencils, paper, etc. By showing up on time and prepared, you will not have to waste valuable energy worry about small details and become distracted from the real goal: doing your best!
- ◆ **Make an effort to relax periodically during the test.** During a test, you may feel yourself becoming tense or nervous. Whenever you feel the tension building up, take a brief relaxation break, using whatever method works for you. Here are some relaxation ideas:
 - Take several deep breaths, exhaling slowly after each one. Visualize the tension draining from your body as you breathe out.
 - Tense your muscles and hold for 5 seconds, then relax. Repeat 3 times.
 - Think of a peaceful, quiet setting. Imagine yourself calm and relaxed in that setting.

- ♦ ***Pace yourself — Don't rush through the test.*** And don't be intimidated by students who finish early. Research shows that there is no correlation between high scores and the time students take to finish an exam. Fast students do not necessarily work more accurately. Remember, there is no reward for being the first one done.
- ♦ ***Engage in positive self-talk.*** Replace irrational negative thinking with positive self-talk when you have studied hard for a test, your confidence will be shaken if you think negative thoughts such as "I don't have a chance of passing this exam!" Instead, adopt an upbeat but realistic attitude: "I prepared carefully for this exam. If I relax and do my best, I have a good chance of passing it." One more tip: if your friends are nervous about the test, try to avoid talking with them about it. You don't want their anxiety to rub off on you!

EFFECTIVE TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

Become familiar with the test that you are about to take and have a mental plan for how you will spend your time most productively during the examination. If you follow a positive plan of action as you take the test, you will be less likely to feel helpless or to be preoccupied with anxious thoughts. Here are some useful test-taking strategies:

- ♦ ***Listen carefully to directions.*** Make a point to listen closely to any test directions that are read aloud. Read through written directions at least twice before starting on a test section to ensure that you do not misinterpret them. Hint: if you are confused or unsure of the test directions, ask the teacher to explain or clarify them. It is better to seek help to clear up any confusion that you may have than to run the risk of misunderstanding and completing test items incorrectly.
- ♦ ***Perform a 'memory dump.'*** At the start of the test, write down on a sheet of scrap paper any facts or key information that you are afraid you might forget. This 'brain dump' will help you feel less anxious about forgetting important content. Plus, you can consult this sheet as a convenient reference during the test.
- ♦ ***Preview the test.*** Look over the sections of the test. Think about the total amount of time that you have to complete the test. Look at the point values that you can earn on each section of the examination (if stated). Budget your total time wisely so that you don't spend too much time on test sections that contribute few points to your score or too much time on one section, leaving little or no time for others.

GENERAL HINTS:

- ♦ ***Avoid answers with 100 percent words.*** All and never mean 100% of the time, without exception. Often choices that include 100% (absolute) words are wrong. Other 100% words to avoid are: no, none, only, every, always, and must.
- ♦ ***If two options mean the same, eliminate both.*** If *both* is not a possible answer and two items say basically the same thing, then neither can be correct.
- ♦ ***Validate true responses on "All of the following except."*** In this type of question, you must recognize several responses as correct and find the one that is incorrect.
- ♦ ***Cross out the answers that you know are incorrect.*** This helps focus your attention on the most

reasonable options.

- ♦ **When in doubt...guess!** If the test does not penalize guessing, be sure that you write in a response for each test item, even if you don't know the answer.
- ♦ **Skip difficult items until last.** On timed tests, you should avoid getting bogged down on difficult items that can cause you to use up all of your time. Instead, when you find yourself stumped on a tough test item, skip it and go on to other questions. After you have finished all of the easiest test items, you can return to any skipped questions to answer them. AND, questions that follow the skipped 'tough' items might provide information that will help you answer the ones you skipped.
- ♦ **Use leftover time to check answers.** If you finish a test early, use the remaining time to check your answers. On multiple-choice items, check to see that you answered all the questions. Re-read each written response to make sure that it makes sense, uses correct grammar, and fully answers the question.
- ♦ **On Scantron exams, stop often to be sure you are placing your answer in the correct number.** Often students hurry through exams and make silly errors — like marking a Scantron sheet incorrectly. Using a ruler or blank paper to follow the numbers can be helpful in not making such an error.

SPECIFIC HINTS FOR ANSWERING TRUE-FALSE QUESTIONS:

- ☐ Answers with absolute words such as all, always, everyone, never, and only are **usually** false
- ☐ Answers with qualifiers such as generally, probably, most, often, sometimes, and **usually** are frequently true
- ☐ Simplify questions with double negatives by crossing out both negatives and then determining the correct answer
- ☐ Mark the statement false if it is **partly** false.

SPECIFIC HINTS FOR ANSWERING MATCHING QUESTIONS:

- ☐ Read both columns carefully before matching any items
- ☐ Match the items you are sure of first
- ☐ Cross out choices once they have been used (unless answers can be used more than once)
- ☐ Use all the matching items if each column has the same number of items

SPECIFIC HINTS FOR ANSWERING FILL-IN THE BLANK QUESTIONS:

- ♦ **Read the questions to yourself so you can actually hear what is being said.** If more than one response comes to mind, write them both lightly in the margin. Then when you review your answers later, choose the answer that feels most right to you.
- ♦ **Make sure that each answer you provide fits logically and grammatically into its slot in the sentence.** E.g. An _____ lists ideas in a sequence. (The correct answer is enumeration.) Note that the word an signals that the correct answer begins with a vowel.
- ♦ **Remember that not all fill-in answers require only one word.** If you think several words are needed to complete the answer, write in all the words unless the instructor or the directions indicate that only single-word response will be accepted.

SPECIFIC HINTS FOR ANSWERING ESSAY QUESTIONS:

- ♦ **Underline key terms.** Before writing your essay, it's a good idea to underline important terms that appear in the test question as a check on your understanding. Words such as *compare*, *contrast*, *discuss*, and *summarize* will give you clear direction on the form that your essay should take and the content that it should include.

Here are some key words used in essay questions and a description of what they mean.

- **Analyze:** Divide something into its parts in order to understand better; show how the parts work together to produce the overall pattern
 - **Compare:** list the similarities between things
 - **Contrast:** note the differences between things
 - **Criticize/Critique:** state your opinion and stress the weaknesses
 - **Define:** state the meaning so that the term is understood and use examples
 - **Describe:** state the characteristics so that the image is vivid
 - **Diagram:** make a drawing that demonstrates relationships
 - **Discuss:** define the issue and elaborate on the advantages and disadvantages
 - **Evaluate:** state positive and negative views and make a judgment
 - **Explain:** show cause and effect and give reasons
 - **Illustrate:** provide examples
 - **Interpret:** explain your own understanding of a topic which includes your opinions
 - **Justify:** give proof or reasons to support an opinion
 - **List:** write a series of numbered items
 - **Outline:** sketch out the main points with their significant supporting details
 - **Prove:** use facts as evidence in support of an opinion
 - **Relate:** connect items and show how one influences another
 - **Review:** give an overview with a summary
 - **Summarize:** retell the main points
 - **Trace:** move sequentially from one event to another
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- ♦ **Read the directions carefully** and do exactly what is asked. If the question requires you to list or enumerate such as "*List the six major types of transportation*," write the numbers 1 through 6 with a type of transportation listed after each number.
 - ♦ **Outline your answer before you write it.** No teacher wants to read a rambling essay that fails to answer the test question. You can improve the quality of your essay by first organizing your thoughts into a brief outline on scrap paper before you write it. Even a few short minutes of planning time can significantly improve the readability and organization of your essays. And don't forget to write neatly!
 - ♦ **Style and Appearance count!** Be respectful; do not use slang. Avoid empty words. Be direct and descriptive in your writing. Write in complete sentences. Research has shown that, on average, essays written in a clear, legible handwriting receive higher grades than essays written somewhat illegibly. Proofread for correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling!
 - ♦ **Write something.** Despite careful preparation, you may forget an answer or find you have little time left. If either of these things happens, do not leave a blank page; write down something. By writing down

something you give the instructor the chance to give you some points for trying!

SPECIFIC HINTS FOR ANSWERING MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS:

- ♦ ***Anticipate the answer and look for something close to it.*** Develop an answer in your mind before you read the options. Then look for a response that comes closest to your anticipated answer.
- ♦ ***Don't get sidetracked looking for patterns of answers.*** Some people claim that students can do better on multiple-choice tests if they look for patterns in the answers. For example, the advice is often given that, on questions with four possible answers, teachers most frequently choose "C" as the correct response. In rare cases, such patterns may actually exist — but it is never a reliable strategy to count on tricks and short cuts to do well on a test. Instead, your best bet is to study hard and rely on your own knowledge of the subject to do well (or at least your best educated guess!).
- ♦ ***Don't rush.*** On multiple-choice items, force yourself to read each possible choice carefully before selecting an answer. Remember, some choices *appear* correct at first glance but turn out to be wrong when you take a closer look.

SPECIFIC HINTS FOR OPEN-BOOK AND OPEN-NOTE TESTS:

- ♦ ***Study the same way as you would for a closed book test!*** Many students are tempted to study less thoroughly, thinking you will have access to all of the information during the test. Open-book and open-note tests are usually harder than other exams, not easier. In addition, most students do not have time to spend looking things up during an open-book exam.
 - As you are studying, develop a list of topics and page numbers where they are covered in your text.
 - Use colored tabs to organize your textbook and notes by different topics.

Sections of this handout were developed by the Office of Counseling and Disability Services at Northwestern College

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