

PREPARING FOR TESTS

Study yourself.

Begin preparing for a test by taking a close look at yourself as a test taker.

- Do you do better on essay or on objective tests?
- Are there types of questions that you find especially difficult?
- How did you do on the last exam from your instructor?
- Were you especially anxious or nervous during the test?
- Did you change answers and then miss those items? Were you rushed to finish?

Questions like these can lead you to develop better test-taking strategies.

Study your instructor.

Tests returned to you by an instructor give you the opportunity to see the test-taking tendencies of your instructor so that you may be able to predict some likely features on upcoming tests.

You should study the tests returned to you to see where the information you were tested on came from. Your instructor may tell you that the tests cover reading assignments and class notes about equally, but a close analysis might reveal that more of the questions came from one source or the other. An instructor may not be aware of how much emphasis s/he placed on a particular area.

Your instructor also might not be aware of other tendencies. Perhaps most of the true-false items are true, or perhaps your instructor unknowingly places the correct answers in the middle range of multiple-choice items, seldom listing the first or last choices as correct. When taking objective tests, narrow your choices based on any knowledge you have about the questions, but if you don't know the correct answer and are forced to guess, instructor tendencies may help you.

Ask the instructor about the test.

As a student, you should ask about the following four basic things about a test:

- (1) How much does the test count toward your final grade in the class?
- (2) What main sources of information will the test cover?
- (3) How much time will you have to take the test?
- (4) What is the basic format of the test?

Is it objective or essay?

If it is a combination, what is the relative weight of each part?

Most instructors offer this kind of information as a matter of course before the test. As long as your questions are not jeopardizing the security or validity of the test but are aimed at getting a clear impression of how to prepare for it, most instructors will welcome your questions.

Try to predict likely test questions.

Try to study as if you are the test maker rather than the test taker. Based on what you know about the format of the test, try to look at the material the way the instructor will have to.

If the test is predominantly objective, you would look at the material carefully to find details suited to a true-false items or multiple-choice items.

If the test is mostly essay, you would look at the same material quite differently; e. g., what major topics would best support essay questions?

You might anticipate a likely major test question based on the amount of time the instructor spent in covering a topic or because the instructor indicated a special interest or enthusiasm for a topic.

According to research, students who attempt to predict test items will often score a letter grade or more higher than students who never looked at the material from the instructor's perspective.

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Get your whole brain involved in learning.

Many researchers believe that the left side of the brain tends to specialize in activities that are verbal, logical, and analytical, and in details that are arranged in sequential order.

When you read a textbook, listen to the class lecture or discussion, and take notes by traditional methods, you are primarily involved in left-brain activities. In fact, most of the learning activities promoted by the educational system emphasize left-brain activities. The right side of the brain, by contrast, tends to process information that is spatial or visual rather than verbal. It stores data holistically, rather than splitting it up into details, the right brain also tends to specialize in creative or emotional processes.

While there is a danger of generalizing too much about the specialization of the two hemispheres of the brain, most researchers would agree on one point--the majority of learners would benefit by finding ways to tap into nontraditional modes of learning involving visual, spatial, tactile, and oral details. For example, create a concept map from your notes to give you visual details you can recall during a test. This technique is referred to as mapping. You can also tape one of your review sessions before a major test and listen to the recording on your way to school.

Try to translate abstract concepts into models of some kind that you can manipulate--use blocks if you like. If you have a lot of terminology to learn, construct some flash cards that you can pull out of your backpack and review when you have a few minutes of slack time. Be creative--try to discover other avenues of learning that might suit your learning style.

Make a series of appointments with yourself to study before a major test.

We make appointments to get our hair cut and get our teeth cleaned. Why not be just as businesslike about studying for a major exam?

Determine when the test is scheduled and then covering a span of several days, identify several distinct time slots of no more than an hour each for your study time.

Write down these times on your calendar or in your weekly time plan and treat these appointments just as seriously as you would any other formal appointment you might make.

How *Not* to Cram

Concentrate on the big picture. Keep a master calendar for the term. Put all of your scheduled tests on it. Post the calendar in your study area.

Design your test preparation across courses. Plan how you will read, study, and review assigned materials and class notes according to the test demands in all your courses. Whenever possible, minimize interference between courses by distributing your study sessions over time.

Keep up with your reading. If you keep up with your reading, class experiences will reinforce your learning. This should make it easier for you to learn. Avoid trying to do massive catch-up reading the night before the test because they probably will be too much ground to cover, understand, and remember.

Reward yourself for staying on target. An "A" would be a powerful reward for strong test preparation habits. However, that reward may be too far off to help you sustain better test preparation. Reward yourself on a regular basis for sticking to your study plan. For example, after you have studied hard each evening, watch a tape of a favorite TV show or have a pleasant talk with someone.

Schedule a concentrated review session. If you have kept up, a solid review session the night before your test should be adequate.