3.4: Test Taking and Preparation

Students need to develop a mindset that every time they attend class or complete a reading assignment they are preparing for the next exam, because oftentimes so much of their grade rides on those exams. In college, it is not uncommon for your entire course grade to be based on two or three exams with no options for a retake or extra credit. Instead of an exam being over one or two chapters, exams are more likely to be over 5+ chapters of material, and in the case of a comprehensive exam, an entire semester’s worth of material. Intentionally working through the process of preparing for, taking, and learning from the testing process will facilitate successful outcomes.

Table 5-4. Effective Technique for Test Preparation and Taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before the Test</th>
<th>During the Test</th>
<th>After the Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Go to all of your classes and take</td>
<td>Mark your exam with the necessary</td>
<td>Conduct an error analysis for items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for an exam should begin the first day of class. Repeated exposure to material over a longer period of time</td>
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<tr>
<td>lecture notes and read all of your assigned reading using techniques described in this chapter.</td>
<td>identification. Read all instructions on the exam. Scan the exam for question types, point values, etc.</td>
<td>missed on the test. Look up the correct answers. Determine the nature of the errors you made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a study plan and schedule the time to review for an exam over several days. Refer to “Create a Five-Day Study Plan for Exams.”</td>
<td>Develop a plan for how you will use your time to complete all questions on the exam.</td>
<td>Talk with your professor about items you missed on the exam. Discuss adjustments in your test preparation methods if necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule study sessions with classmates in advance of the night before the exam.</td>
<td>Read each item carefully and fully before marking an answer. You might find clues to the answer and will be less likely to make a preventable mistake.</td>
<td>Analyze the test questions to see if patterns arise, such as,”Were most of the questions from the lecture, the book, or both?” “What types of questions were asked?” “What levels of thinking were being tested based on Bloom’s Taxonomy?” etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be sure you have materials you need for the exam ready at least the night before the exam, such as multiple writing utensils, scantrons, blue books, notebook paper, etc.</td>
<td>Skip difficult questions and come back to them if you are pressed for time. Caution: if using a scantron to record answers be very careful that you do not incorrectly record your answers on the wrong line and get off track.</td>
<td>Review the methods that you used to study for the exam and determine what adjustments you need to make in preparing for the next exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get a good night’s rest the night before the exam.</td>
<td>If time is available at the end of the exam, review questions you marked as “difficult” in order to check for errors.</td>
<td>Determine your overall grade in the course based on the new information that this grade has provided you. Talk with your professor and academic advisor if you have concerns about your overall grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat a good breakfast prior to the exam. Avoid caffeine prior to the exam.</td>
<td>If you have an essay question to write, take the time to briefly outline an answer to ensure that you are answering all aspects of the question and that you provide a well-organized answer for your faculty member to read.</td>
<td>Archive your exam for future reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To ensure that you are on time to your exam, set two alarm clocks or arrange to have a friend call you to make sure you are awake.</td>
<td>Try not to leave any answers blank. You might be awarded partial credit or even make a correct guess.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take a moment to take some deep cleansing breaths (or any other quick relaxation techniques) if you feel stressed by a question or the exam as a whole.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Baddeley, 1982; Bahrick & Hall, 1991) optimizes the recall of information when it is needed. Every assigned reading, every opportunity to take notes and engage in class activities, and a routine of reviewing notes should be considered activities toward exam preparation. The volume of information that students are responsible for on each exam is much larger than experienced in high school. Careful review of the material prior to each exam is required for optimal performance, and student reports tell us that the habit of “cramming” the night before the exam is not going to lead to positive, long-term results. Research of the brain supports this typical finding. Physical and neurochemical changes in the synapses of the brain occur when information is learned, a process called long-term potentiation (Kandel & Schwartz, 1982). Without proper time and repeated stimulation of the neural circuits, long-term learning of this information will not occur efficiently and may not be accessible when needed for a test. Planning for a review period over five days prior to the exam and healthy eating and sleep habits cannot be overemphasized.

**Activity 5-4**

Identify when your next substantial exam will be given in a class. Create a five-day study plan using the formula described in “Create a Five-Day Study Plan for Exams” and the “Five-Day Study Plan Worksheet” at the end of this chapter. Once you have created this plan, incorporate the schedule into your time management calendar for implementation.

Oftentimes, students jump right in to taking an exam feeling stressed and rushed with a need to regurgitate information immediately. However, approaching a test in a careful and methodical way can help ensure the best results. You can best utilize your exam time by taking the time to survey the exam directions and point values and planning how to approach sections of the test. Strategy is particularly important for tests with mixed types of questions (i.e., multiple choice and essay) or tests with multiple essay questions. For example, if you were to spend too much time on the multiple choice questions and not allocate enough time to complete an essay question, you may have answered the majority of the total number of questions but still do poorly on the exam if the essay question was worth a larger portion of the exam’s total points. Plan your time carefully and manage your stress.

**Create a Five-Day Study Plan for Exams**

Making a plan that will allow for the careful review of all of the assigned and presented material leads to less stress the day of an exam and the best conditions for recall and performance on an exam. Here is a simple method for creating a study plan:

1. **Break the material for the exam into four manageable “chunks.”** If material can be logically divided by chapters, use that method. If not, make up your own chunks based on the content of the material. Note: It is not a good idea to break up information by the method of delivery (i.e., one chunk equals notes, one chunk equals readings, etc.). You want to include all information on specific topics together in one chunk (e.g., information about the topic of osmosis from the lecture notes and the textbook in a chunk).

2. **Plan to spend about two hours studying on each of the five days.**

3. **You should work with the material on the exam in two ways, by preparing that material for review and by reviewing that material. Preparation of material incorporates study techniques discussed earlier in this chapter such as combining and clarifying lecture and textbook notes, creating visual organizers for topics, developing cram cards, solving practice problems, creating self-testing questions using multiple levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, etc. Once you get the hang of preparing material for review, you could do some of that along the way (for instance creating
cram cards for readings and notes) to reduce the amount of time needed for preparation at this time, leaving more time for review.

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**Example of the Schedule for a Five-Day Study Plan**

**Day One**
Prepare 1st Chunk – 2 hours

**Day Two**
Prepare 2nd Chunk – 2 hours
Review 1st Chunk – 30 minutes

**Day Three**
Prepare 3rd Chunk – 1.5 hours
Review 2nd Chunk – 30 minutes
Review 1st Chunk – 15 minutes

**Day Four**
Prepare 4th Chunk – 1 hour
Review 3rd Chunk – 30 minutes
Review 2nd Chunk – 15 minutes
Review 1st Chunk – 10 minutes

**Day Five**
Review 4th Chunk – 1 hour
Review 3rd Chunk – 30 minutes
Review 2nd Chunk – 30 minutes
Review 1st Chunk – 30 minutes

Taking some time to plan out what material will go into each chunk will ensure that you do not miss anything. Use the “Five-Day Study Plan Worksheet” at the end of this chapter as a guide for your planning.

This method typically works very well for courses that offer two or three tests throughout the semester; however, a similar method could be modified by the number of days or the amount of time spent each day if a course offers more exams with less material on each exam.

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**Tips for Better Test Taking**

The types of test items on a test are as different as the professors who created the tests. “Objective” test questions refer to items in which students have to recognize the correct answer from a list of provided options (e.g., multiple choice, true-false, matching). In most cases there is one best answer, though it is important to note that a professor could indicate in the
directions that you can select more than one answer. “Subjective” test items are the fill-in-the-blank, short answer, or essay questions in which students must recall and produce the answer.

## Multiple Choice Questions

- Read the question and all of the answer options first.
- Mark out any answers that you know are not correct.
- Once you have selected an answer, do not change it unless you misread the question and know the new answer is correct. Usually, your first answer is the correct one if you are making an educated guess.
- Many times, the correct answer has more information in it.
- If there is no penalty for guessing, do not leave any items blank—make an educated guess.
- If there is an “All of the Above” option and there are two options that are correct, select “All of the Above.”
- In a question with “All of the Above” and “None of the Above,” if you are certain that one of the answers is true, do not select “None of the Above” and, likewise, if one of the answers is false, then do not select “All of the Above.”

## True-False Questions

- Read the statement carefully, but do not read too much into the statement. Base your answer on the information provided.
- With statements that have multiple facts, if any one of the facts is false the entire statement is false.
- Qualifying words like “always,” “never,” and “every” indicate that this would have to be true all of the time. If it is not true all of the time, then you should answer false.
- Qualifying words like “usually,” “sometimes,” and “generally” indicate that it could be true or false depending on the situation. Oftentimes the answer is true.

## Essay Questions

- Most Important Rule: Make sure you understand what the question is asking you to do. An essay question is not an opportunity to simply regurgitate everything you know about a particular topic. Revisit Question Cues listed in the Table 5-1: “Bloom’s Taxonomy: Cognitive Domain” and be sure you know what you are supposed to accomplish when you see those cues. Underline key words and let those words help guide you. If you are not sure, ask your professor for clarification on what he or she wants you to accomplish in your answer.
- Take a minute or so to plan out your answer and jot down a brief outline of key points to guide your writing before you start. A well-organized answer tends to score more points when graded.
- Formula for Essay Questions:
  - Introductory statements that define terms and describe what you will accomplish in your essay. This section should be brief.
  - State your first main idea, and then give supporting facts, examples, statistics, or details. Follow with your next main idea and continue the pattern until complete. The bulk of your time should be spent developing this section of the essay as it would likely include the details your professor wants to see in grading. Typically, each main idea would have its own paragraph. Use transitional works like “first, second, third…,” “next,” “also,” “however,” etc., to aid your reader.
End with a summary or final conclusion. This section is also likely to be brief.

- Budget time to proofread and revise if needed.
- Write legibly. Neater papers tend to receive higher marks.


Once the exam has been completed, the learning experience is not over. Look over the test after you get it back from your professor and continue your review of the material that may be important for a comprehensive final or information that serves as a foundation for material to be learned in other courses. Even if only a scantron answer sheet is returned to you, professors are willing to give students access to review the test results during their office hours. Comprehensive post-test review not only includes reviewing your correct and incorrect answers to the question but also looking at where questions came from (i.e., lecture notes, readings, or both). Also, consider the study strategies you used and how they worked for you in order to help you prepare for future exams. Overall, it is important to emphasize the benefit of talking with your professor after each exam to gain insights into the information presented in the class as well as your learning and test strategies.