

Test-Taking Tips



Before the Exam

- **Remain positive.** Envision yourself succeeding. Develop some mantras that you can use later to encourage yourself during the exam.
- **Be prepared.** Preparation happens in the days and weeks leading up to the test, not the night before. This includes reviewing your course material regularly and doing practice exams and essay questions. Consult our “Smart Studying Strategies” sheet for helpful tips well in advance of the test.
- **Familiarize yourself with task words.** Know the differences between “discuss,” “compare,” and “analyze.” Get a copy of our “Assignment Task Words” tip sheet.
- **Be wise with your time the night before.** Don’t cram. By now, you should be doing nothing more than a quick review. A good night’s sleep will go a long way in making you sharp for the test, and cramming will only heighten anxiety.
- **Start the morning right.** While you may be tempted to skip breakfast, particularly if you are nervous, try to fuel yourself with something nutritious. Plan to arrive early to campus to avoid a stressful commute and leave a margin for traffic and transit delays.
- **Bring the necessary tools**—pencils, pens, a ruler, calculator, formula sheet, and any other approved materials.
- **Take a walk.** Shortly before the test, take a short walk (outdoors, if possible) to calm yourself and increase the blood flow to your brain.

In the Exam Room

- **Arrive early and get in the zone.** Take a few minutes to settle yourself, focus, and think positive thoughts.
- **Choose your seat carefully.** Try to select a seat that will minimize distractions for you, perhaps away from the door, in the back or near the front of the room.
- **Take time to understand the test.** Read the instructions carefully, and when in doubt, ask for clarification. How is the test scored? Will you lose points for wrong answers, or is it okay to make guesses?
- **Strategize and manage your time.** Before you begin to answer questions, skim the test and designate time for each part. Allocate more time for questions that are weighted more heavily.
- **Keep it neat.** Ensure that your writing is legible. If instructors are unable to read your work, they may be less sympathetic and may lower your score because they can’t decipher your work.
- **Underline and pay attention to key terms, verbs, and phrases.**
- **Answer the easy questions first.** Get these questions out of the way and you will likely guarantee yourself some points, boost your confidence, and save more time for the challenging work later on.
- **Jot down important facts and formulas.** While they are fresh in your mind, write down (in the margins or on scrap paper) any critical facts, formulas, or mnemonics you’ve used to recall details that you’ll need later.

- **Keep working.** Work on a question until you get stumped, take a deep breath and think about it for a minute. If you are still stuck, mark it and move onto the next question. Don't allow yourself to get paralyzed. The answer may come to you later, and you can return to it then.
- **Stay calm.** If you feel yourself tensing up, close your eyes for a moment, take some deep breaths, and relax your muscles. Rehearse some positive thoughts.
- **Remember to review.** Reserve time to review your answers at the end and double-check that you have not made careless errors.

Tips for Essay Responses

- **Plan your responses.** Take some time (briefly) to create informal outlines to ensure that your essay responses are well-organized. Also, in the event that you do not finish an essay, your professor might grant partial marks for rough work (though this is not guaranteed, so please verify this.)
- **Double-space** your responses to make your work more legible and also to allow room for additions if necessary.
- **Paraphrase the question to formulate your main argument.** You may want to use some of the key vocabulary from the question and place it in your thesis and/or introductory statement. (E.g., "Discuss the role of courage in both Little Women (Louisa May Alcott) and Treasure Island (Robert Louis Stevenson)."
Your thesis statement should include the underlined words.)
- **Get to the point and stay on point.** Your paragraphs in an exam essay will likely be shorter than they would be under other circumstances.
- **Ensure paragraphs are complete.** Every paragraph should have an introductory sentence that expresses an idea which is connected to the main question and argument. It should be followed by supporting sentences that provide explanations, examples, or evidence of that first statement.
- Remember to **include an introduction and conclusion**, however brief.

Tips for Multiple Choice Questions

- **Come up with your own answer** before reading the choices.
- **Strike out unlikely answers** and try to reduce possibilities to at least 50/50.
- **Consider similar answers**—one of them is likely to be true.
- **Check longer, more detailed answers**—these tend also to be true.
- **Watch out for extreme modifiers** (words like always, never, no one, everyone, none, only). Statements with these modifiers are often false. On the other hand, true statements tend to be those which contain non-extreme modifiers (words like sometimes, often, many, probably, might, most, a few).

