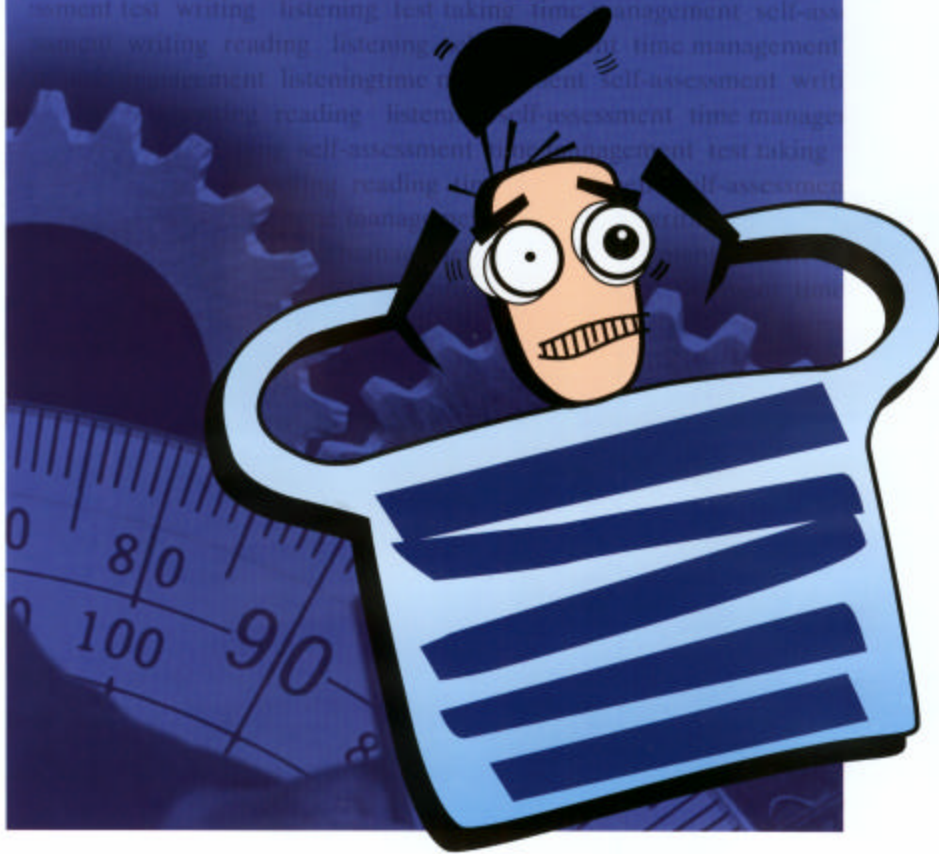


CHAPTER 7

Test-Taking Strategies



TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

It is 7:17 p.m. on Sunday evening. Arthur's favourite TV show comes on at 8:00 p.m. He has a math test set for second period on the very next day. He has not taken class notes in more than two weeks. He has not done the homework assigned for this chapter. He finds his math textbook and at exactly 7:21 p.m. he starts to skim through the chapter. Ten minutes later, Arthur feels he has read enough and decides to look over a problem or two. He gets a pencil and paper, and at 7:33 p.m. he attacks one of the problems at the end of the chapter and then another. These first two are relatively easy and with the help of the textbook examples he solves them. The third one is not so easy. Just as he starts to break down the problem into the steps suggested by an example, he notices that the time is now 7:59 p.m. He drops everything and rushes to the TV so that he will not miss the opening scenes of his show. At 9:15 p.m. Arthur returns to the unsolved problems. After ten minutes, he slams the book closed, furious, because he is no closer to the answer than he was an hour and sixteen minutes before. "The rest of the problems are nothing like the examples in the book," he grumbles. "How can I be expected to solve any of these problems when they give such lousy examples?"

Elsewhere, Rachel stares at the questions at the end of chapter thirteen in her history textbook and feels reasonably confident she knows the answers. She reviews corrected homework and confirms that she does know the answers. Her test, on the five chapters she has just finished reading for the second time, is tomorrow. She is pretty sure she can get another "B." Even so, she is after an "A" this time so she can boost her history course average for the semester. Her study strategy is to read the five chapters again, but this time read only the parts she has underlined. She starts over with chapter eight, but the problem is that she has underlined almost everything in the book. "Oh well, read it all again," she mumbles, "and maybe this time I will get an 'A' just like Michelle usually gets." About halfway into chapter 10, at 11:48 p.m., Rachel falls into a peaceful sleep on top of her textbook, which now lies open on top of her desk. At 1:18 a.m. Rachel's left arm slips off her desk and she wakes with a start. "No problem," she thinks looking at the clock. "I'll finish the rest of my reading in bed." Five minutes later Rachel is asleep but this time she does not wake up until her mother calls her at 7:33 a.m. She is already running late.

Can you guess at how Arthur and Rachel did on their tests?

Can you guess at how Arthur and Rachel did on their tests? Read on to find out.

Tomorrow is the exam, the test, or the quiz! Well if not tomorrow, then the next day, or if not then, then possibly the day after that, or... Rest assured there will always be exams, tests and quizzes in your future. How will you deal with them?

If you have developed solid study skills and practise them consistently throughout the school term, you should have little trouble with tests, no matter when they occur. Even so, there are test-taking strategies which can give you more than an equal chance to score well. In this section, we will explore ways to improve your test performance.

Your goal: Having armed yourself with decent study skills, having taken good class notes, having done all class assignments, having reviewed those notes and assignments, and by using the test-taking strategies listed below, you should finish any course with an above average grade.

You, as student, should assume your teacher wants all her students to do well because it is through the success of the student that she measures her own success.

WHY FOREVER AND ALWAYS TESTS?

The job of the teacher is to teach the subject matter. The job of the student is to learn what is being taught about the subject matter. Thus there exists an understood agreement between teacher and student. The results of quizzes, tests, or exams can provide both teacher and student with a reliable way to measure the success of their joint effort. Said another way, this understood student-teacher agreement should mean both participants want to see the other do well. You, as student, should assume your teacher wants all her students to do well because it is through the success of the students that she measures her own success.

In addition, tests should provide both teacher and student with a fair and impartial way to judge the learning progress of the student. Everyone, even teachers, wants and expects to be judged fairly. Because everyone will take the same test, at the same time, for the same material, and under the same conditions, it should be safe to assume the results for everyone will be fair. Remember, the teacher will want you to succeed and will be fair in the process. To assume otherwise would be unfair on your part. So why is it, that all things being equal and fair, some folks do much better on tests than others? Could it be some students do not prepare properly? Is it possible some students develop an unnecessary fear of tests?

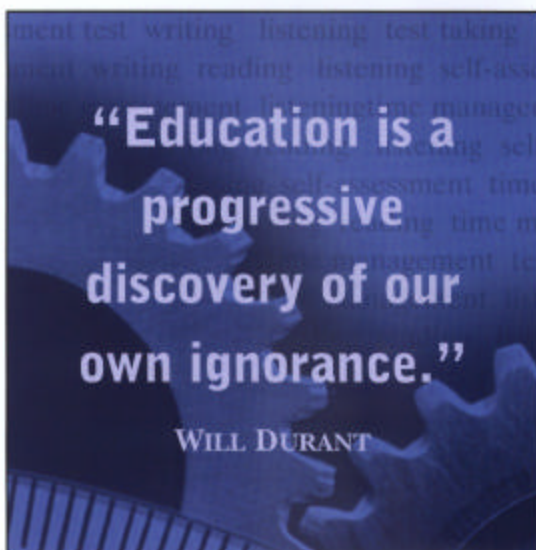
AVOID TEST PANIC

In the time leading up to a test, a small dose of test anxiety is to be expected and will probably serve to make you more alert. However, at times you may develop an even stronger case of nerves. This type of nervousness may be something closer to panic than simple anxiety. Why? There may be many reasons, but the larger cause will likely have to do with time. Perhaps an already tight schedule means you will not have enough time to study. Or maybe you have put off studying until it is too late. Such conditions can lead to excessive worry or even panic. When this happens, a couple of scenarios are the likely result:

A. If you resort to cramming, you are likely not to have enough time to become comfortable with the material. Cramming often leads to a state of information overload. This, in turn, may lead to a momentary panic during the test when you may *block* or *blank out* material you would otherwise be able to recall.

B. If you decide to rely upon a good memory, and study very little or not at all, you are likely to be unable to recall the right bit of information for the question being asked. That may be because you have not taken time to organize the information in your memory in such a way that it relates well and in the proper context to everything else you must remember.

In the time leading up to a test, a small dose of test anxiety is to be expected and will probably serve to make you more alert.



Either way, such cases of "brain fade" can lead to test panic. Once you have been seized by test panic, your overall confidence level can fall significantly.

Fortunately there is a cure for test panic. As the person responsible for your learning, you can avoid panic by continuously practising good study habits and by properly preparing for tests.

OVERALL TEST STRATEGIES

Use good study habits and practise these test strategies for above average results. They will work for you with most any type of test.

1. Attend classes regularly.
2. Read all materials when they are assigned. Do not fall behind. Read until you understand the material.
3. Take good notes using your favourite note-taking method.
4. Do all exercises when they are assigned.
5. Work towards building your confidence level with the material to be tested. Think about the test with a positive attitude. Say to yourself, "I will do well on this test!"
6. When a test is announced, make sure to get all the facts about the test. Know the rules. Question your teacher when you are not sure about:
 - a. Where, when, and how long the test will be. Write down this information in your Personal Information Manager (PIM).
 - b. The grading system and type of test. Multiple choice? True or false? Fill in the blank? Matching? Essay questions? Open book? Some combination of different types of questions?
 - c. What material will be covered on the test. Will the questions come from what the teacher has said in class, the textbook, other assigned material, or some combination of these?
 - d. What school supplies you will need for the test. Will you need a calculator, batteries, paper, pencils, pens etc.?

Eliminate test panic. Start your test preparation using a five-days-before method.

Five Days Before

Get organized. Prepare a list of all topics that will likely be on the test. Reorganize this list by order of importance. Now, review the list carefully to identify topics which will require additional study on your part. Get your teacher's help for those areas you are unsure of or simply do not understand. Doing it now can save you a lot of anxiety later.

Four Days Before

Take time to review. Study your class notes as well as any reading notes you created until you can recall the key facts. Any notes you have already made using the Cornell method will be particularly helpful at this stage. (See The Whole Note -Taking Process.) Work at methods that help you to remember information which may seem difficult. Remember, if you are having difficulty understanding some of the material, seek your teacher's help now.

Three Days Before

Use your list of topics and notes to once more review key information. This time, however, practise forming possible answers or explanations in your own words. Writing out answers or explanations in your own words will help you to recall important information the teacher presented, or complex information from your textbook.

Two Days Before

Make up your own test. Make a list of questions or problems that might be on the test. Use earlier quizzes or in-class assignments as a resource. Summary exercises or review questions at the end of text chapters are an excellent resource. Be sure to include all the material. Now rehearse answers for these questions using as much detailed information as you can. Refine your practice answers and explanations from the day before.

One Day Before

Take a final review. Look over all the notes and lists you prepared in the previous four days. There should be no surprises if you have been thorough. Skim your text and notes one last time to make sure you have identified all possible topics. During this crucial review, you may find it helpful to recite aloud your practice answers and explanations from the previous two days. Now relax.

Test Day

Before going into the test, take a few minutes to review any memory devices you will use to help you recall difficult material. If you are worried you will forget some key fact or memory device, write the information down on the back of the test as soon as you get it. Then you can come back to it when needed.

Before going into the test, take a few minutes to review any memory devices you will use to help you recall difficult material.

Short-Term Test Preparation Tips and Confidence Builders

1. Prior to the test:

- a. Be sure to get a good night's sleep.
- b. Eat a healthy breakfast. Keep your energy up.

WARNING: Avoid eating sweets either before or during a test. Sweets, including gum, raise your blood sugar level to a higher than normal degree. Sugar in your system burns up at a fast rate and soon you will be feeling drowsy and dull. If you must munch, eat sugar-free foods only.

- c. Come early to the test.
- d. Avoid comparing notes with other students just before the test. If their preparation is not the same as yours, you could find yourself questioning your own good work.

- e. Avoid any last minute distractions such as scrambling around for a pen or pencil. Determine what supplies or test materials will be needed and take them with you. The idea is to go into the test calm and focused.
 - f. Check out the room where you will take the test. Pick out a seat where you will have good lighting and no distractions.
 - g. Get a seat where you can view the clock, or wear a watch.
- 2. Once you enter the test room RELAX! This may seem difficult at first but it can be done. Work at a routine for calming any nervousness as follows:**
- a. Start by sitting up straight, but not rigid. Take in slow, deep breaths.
 - b. Focus your attention on your breathing. If your breathing is too fast, concentrate on slowing it down.
 - c. Close your eyes if it will help.
 - d. If you notice your shoulder or neck muscles are tense, concentrate on relaxing the tenseness as you continue breathing deeply. Massage your neck if it will help those muscles relax.
 - e. Think positively. As your breathing comes under control, your muscles will relax, and you will become focused. You should now picture yourself doing well on the test.
- 3. Once you get the test:**
- a. Look over the entire test before you begin.
 - b. Think about how you will use the time available to complete the test. Take special note of any time suggestions the teacher may provide (i.e. Section A - Twenty Minutes).
 - c. Read all test instructions carefully. Make sure you understand the directions. Ask the teacher for clarification if there is any part of the directions you do not understand.
 - d. Take note of any options or choices you may have with respect to answering questions. For example, "You may answer part 1 or part 2"; "Respond to any five of the ten statements."
 - e. Note how much questions are worth. A five-mark question should include 5 points. A two-mark question should include 2 points. This is a fairly good gauge.
 - f. Ensure that you do not leave questions unanswered that are worth many marks. Spend time on the larger questions first, and leave the ones that are worth one or two marks for later, if you have time to complete them. You do not want to reduce your opportunity to get as many marks as possible.

4. Multiple-Choice Tests

- a. Read the directions carefully. These types of questions can be tricky and if you have doubts about the rules, ask for clarification.
- b. After reading the question, see if you can answer it before looking at the choices given. This will help you to zero in on the correct answer as you consider all the choices.
- c. Be sure to read all the choices, even though you think you know at first glance which answer is correct.
- d. You may not always be provided with the perfect answer. At times you will need to choose an answer that seems closest to a fit.
- e. In the same way, you will want to read each question carefully to see when one answer is considered more correct than another (i.e. D. *both a. and b. above are correct*, or the often used, D. *none of the above* or D. *all of the above*).
- f. If you can narrow your choices using the process of elimination, then you should guess at the answer. When guessing:
 - (1) The most complete answer is likely the correct one.
 - (2) Likely correct answers are those that use qualifiers, such as *generally*, *most likely*, *probably*, *many times*, *sometimes*, *often* and *usually*.
 - (3) Likely incorrect are answers using absolutes, such as *always*, *everyone*, *never*, *no*, *no one*, *nobody*, *none*, or *only*.

5. Essay Tests

Take special note, with essay tests, there is no substitute for adequate preparation and practice. The essay test is a more difficult type of test because there is more to do in developing answers. Here you must take extra time before the test to prepare. As well, refer to the chapter on *Writing Strategies* and the graphic organizer, *Structure of the Five-Paragraph Essay* to refresh your memory of how an essay should be written. The primary study method we recommend is the one listed above **the five-days-before-method**.



During the Test

- a. Take time to plan and organize before you begin writing out your essay. Outline your ideas in the margin or on another piece of paper. You may use point-form notes or a graphic organizer to write down key ideas and words that you will build upon in your response. Do so even if your answer is to be relatively short and to the point.
- b. Take special care to build and use whole sentences and paragraphs in your response.
- c. Be clear and concise. Avoid using larger words with several meanings when a simpler word will do. Keep your writing simple and direct. Come to the point and move on to the next point. Avoid writing more than is necessary just to give your answer bulk.
- d. Make sure your essay flows in a logical order with a clear beginning, middle and end.
- e. Write legibly. Your script or printing must be readable.
- f. Number your pages. If you use loose-leaf notepaper, be sure to put your name on each sheet.
- g. Double-space if possible. This will leave you room to add a word or phrase later.
- h. Proofread your essay and make corrections for spelling and word choice. Make your corrections as neatly as possible.
- i. You may find shorter sentences are easier to compose and write.
- j. If your teacher has been enthusiastic or stressed a particular point related to an essay question, be sure to include it in your answer.
- k. Read the directions for essay questions carefully. Your teacher may give specific directions for the structure of your answer (i.e. *List three reasons why... Compare the effects...*).
- l. With essay questions, your understanding of the question and how it is to be answered is the key. Study the key words below to better understand what is needed when the word(s) appears in an essay question. You will need to understand these terms to do well on essay tests.

KEY WORD

MEANING

Analyze	Break ideas into separate parts. Interpret or discuss each part.
Compare	Discuss, examine, interpret two or more points by identifying <i>similarities</i> more often than differences.
Contrast	Discuss, examine, interpret two or more points. Identify <i>differences</i> more often than similarities.