



Test Taking Strategies *Staley (2009)*

Use the following strategies to improve your test taking skills and to help you do your best on your exams.

General Test-Taking Strategies

Jot down what you don't want to forget right away.

When you first receive your exam, turn it over and jot down everything you want to make sure to remember—mnemonic devices, charts you've created, acronyms—assuming that writing on the test is allowed. Circle key words and strike through answers you want to eliminate.

Preview the exam.

Just going through all the questions may help you review terms you know. And you'll notice which questions are easier and which are harder right away. It's also likely that reading sample questions will trigger your memory and help you come up with information you need.

Start with what you know.

Make sure you get credit for answers you know; don't waste time early on struggling with the more difficult questions. This strategy will also boost your confidence and help you relax a bit, and answers will come to you more easily.

Weigh your answers.

Allocate your time based on the relative weight of the questions. Don't wrestle with one question for ten minutes that's only usually worth one point. Go on to a more heavily weighted one.

Read directions thoroughly.

Misreading or skipping the directions altogether can be a lethal mistake. Remember that your instructor can't read your mind. Slow down and make sure you understand what you're being asked to do.

Read questions carefully.

Sometimes skipping over a word in the sentence will cause you to jump to a false conclusion. Don't let your eyes (or your brain) play tricks on you!

Open-Book Exam Strategies

The key to an open-book test is to prepare. Put markers in your book to indicate important areas. Write formulas, definitions, key words, sample questions, and main points on note cards. The key is to be able to find information quickly. Open-book exams can be harder than close-book/note exams.

Change your answers if you know you're wrong.

Despite advice you've probably always received from teachers and classmates alike, changing answers when you're sure you've made a mistake is usually a good idea, not a bad one. In one study, less than 10% of student made changes that decreased their scores, while 74% made changes that increased their scores.

Ask your instructor for clarification.

If the exam appears to have a typo or something seems askew, ask your instructor to clarify for you. Of course, if you ask for the definition of a word that is a clue, you probably won't get an answer, but if you have a technical question or a question about the test-taking process, don't be afraid to ask.

Pay attention to "aha" moments.

Don't let your "aha" moments turn into "oh, no" moments. If you remember something you couldn't think of earlier, go back to that question and finish it right away.

Don't give in to peer pressure.

If, while you're working away, you look around and see that many students are leaving because they're already finished, don't panic. Take as much of the allotted time as you need. Everyone works at a different rate.

Save time for review.

When you're finished, go back over all of your answers. Make sure you've circled the right letter or filled in the correct bubble. Be certain you've made all the points you intended to make in your essay. Look at your work critically, as if you were the instructor. Careless errors can be costly.

Matching Exam Strategies

Read carefully. Read both lists carefully and look for clues.

Eliminate. As you match the items you know, cross them out unless the directions mention an item can be used more than once.

Look at sentence structure. Often, verbs are matched to verbs. Read the entire sentence, does it make sense?

Multiple Choice Exam Strategies

Be prepared. The best way to do well on a multiple choice exam is to study as if the exam is going to be a fill in the blank or essay exam.

Read the directions carefully.

Try to answer the question/statement without looking at the choices first. Then find your answer amongst the choices given.

Read all choices before making a selection. Do not stop at the first possible selection. Read all choices before making a selection so you can be sure it is the best option.

Eliminate or cross out choices that you know are wrong. This will help you narrow down your choices.

Choices with absolute or universal qualifiers (all, never, every, in no case, in every case) are usually wrong.

Pay attention to the entire test. Sometimes the answer to one question is given away in another question. Tests contain a lot of information – use it!

When answering an “all of the above” question, if more than one of your choices is true, then it’s a strong possibility that “all of the above” is the correct answer.

If two answers seem extreme, they should be eliminated, and a guess made as to the remaining choices. As an example, if a number answer is desired and your choices are 3, 79, 97, and 287, you should eliminate 3 and 987 and take a guess at one of the remaining choices (if you cannot otherwise narrow down the answer).

If there is no penalty for guessing and you aren’t sure of the answer, try to eliminate as many of the choices you can and then make an educated guess.

Look for grammatical clues to help you answer the question/statement. If the question/statement ends with an indefinite article “an,” for example, then the correct response probably begins with a vowel.

If you cannot answer a question within a minute or less, skip it and plan to come back to it later.

Take the time to check your answer sheet (or Scantron) before you hand it in.

Fill-in-the-Blank Exam Strategies

Watch for clues. If the word before the blank is *an*, the word in the blank generally begins with a vowel.

Count the number of blanks. This often indicates the number of words in the answer.

Answer the questions you know first.

Answer all of the questions.

True/False Exam Strategies

Read the entire question carefully before you answer it. For the statement/question to be true, the entire question must be true. If any part of the statement is false, the entire statement is false.

Pay attention to details. Read dates, names and places carefully. Sometimes the numbers in the dates are changed around (1494 instead of 1449) or the wording is changed slightly. Any such changes can change the meaning of the statement.

Watch for words such as *always*, *all*, *never*, and *every*. The question is often false because there are exceptions. If you can think of an exception, then the statement is false.

Watch for faulty cause and effect. Two true statements may be connected by a word that implies cause and effect, and this word may make the statement false – for example “*Temperature is measured on the centigrade scale because water freezes at zero degrees centigrade.*”

Unless there is a penalty for wrong answers, answer every question. You have a 50% chance of being right.

Trust your instincts. Don’t change an answer unless you are certain it is wrong.

Essay Exam Strategies

Quickly jot information that you want to write about on the back of the exam.

Read directions carefully.

Before writing anything, read all of the questions.

Jot notes or create an outline alongside each question.

Decide how much time to devote to each question.

Start with the easiest question.

Include factual details (examples) to support your answer.

Don’t save the best points for last.

Use transitions to connect your thoughts.

Write legibly.

Answer all necessary questions.

Check over your completed test.

Use all of the available time.