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How to Do Your Best on Any Kind of Test

Testwise students use most of the following general test-taking strategies without thinking. With a bit of thinking, you can make them part of *your* bag of test tricks.

STRATEGY 1: GET THE MOST CREDIT IN THE LEAST TIME

Time isn't always a problem in taking tests. But you should find out at the beginning whether or not it might be. If it is, then you need a plan to make the best use of your time.

Tactic 1: Decide whether to speed or not to speed

Take a minute to skim the test. Decide whether it's a speed test or an accuracy test. Most standardized tests are speed tests; only the very few top performers are expected to be able to finish the test. On the other hand, most course tests

are accuracy tests; the tester expects that everyone who is a C student or above will be able to finish the test without rushing.

Tactic 2: Budget your time

Right at the beginning, allocate your time. And stick to your allocations! Standardized tests often do this for you by giving you fifteen or twenty minutes for each section, after which you're supposed to go on to the next section. You will actually answer the most questions, and get a higher score if you follow those instructions. Since speed-test preparers **don't** expect most people to get to every question, don't be thrown if you don't complete each section.

For course tests, divide up your time according to how many points each item is worth. For example, if one question or one section is worth 50 percent of your score, plan to spend half your time on it. (Of course, if you don't use the entire time allotted for any particular question, move on to the next one right away.)

Tactic 3: Take the easy questions first

If you don't have to answer questions in order, and there are relatively few questions on the test, pick out the easy ones. Get them out of the way first. This will calm your anxiety and, at the same time, get your memory working smoothly. But don't waste time trying to sort out the difficult questions from the easy ones; allow yourself no more than a few minutes.

Tactic 4: Read all the essay questions in advance

On essay tests in which you can choose, say, three out of

five questions, read all the choices first. Then make your selection based on which ones you can answer best within the allotted time. If you have to choose four, for example, but only know answers for three of them, go ahead and write those three. Then review the remaining possibilities. Writing the three essays may have triggered enough of your memory to allow you to do a good job on one other topic.

Tactic 5: Leave the time-wasters for last

If you seem to be taking too much time on one particular question, stop working on it. Mark it so that you'll be able to find it easily after you've tackled the other questions. Then move on. If you have time left over at the end of the test, you can go back to the marked question; by that time another question or answer may have sparked your memory on the earlier problem. If you don't have leftover time, you will have scored more points for correctly answering twelve questions that came easily to you than only nine that you sweated over.

Avoid skipping too many questions, because rereading them will also waste time. We suggest that you try not to skip more than one out of every ten questions.

Tactic 6: Check your watch

Look at your watch at sensible intervals to make sure you aren't falling behind. One workable plan is to check the time after every test section, another to look after every quarter of the test is finished. If you know from past tests that you tend to be slow, start by checking the time more frequently; that can help you develop a quicker rhythm. But don't let worry about time distract you from concentrating on the answers.

Tactic 7: Use all the time

Students who walk out of the test room early are often cheating themselves out of time they could use to good advantage. Reread the questions as well as your answers. Check for accuracy, legible writing, and questions you may have missed. Erase stray marks on machine-scored tests. On standardized tests, even if the directions say otherwise, test-wise students often go back to earlier sections.

STRATEGY 2: GIVE THEM WHAT THEY ASK FOR

A University of Chicago study showed that one thing most clearly separates testwise students from the rest: how accurately they read the directions and the questions. It's not that the testwise students are better readers; they just know what to look for. Here's how you too can understand what the directions and questions really ask for.

Tactic 1: Read critically

Read all directions and all questions as slowly and carefully as necessary. Don't jump to the conclusion that they're the same old instructions or questions you've seen in class or on earlier tests. Be especially alert for words that may slightly change what is being asked this time from what you have seen before. Watch for punctuation that can change the meaning of phrases in the instructions. Be sure you don't read "and" where the instructions say "or," or read "have to" where instructions say "may." Be careful not to read your own meanings into questions or instructions.

Tactic 2: Flag tricky directions

If some of the test instructions look tricky, circle or underline their key words. For example, if the directions say

“blacken in the correct square” and you circle the words *blacken in*, you won’t turn in a paper that is answered with check marks. On machine-scored tests, blacked-in spaces always register; with checks, you can never be sure that you will get credit for correct answers.

If your test includes an answer booklet or work paper, actually jot down important instructions such as “answer three essay questions out of five,” “show all calculations,” “two from Part A, one from Part B,” and “copy the question.” If the directions are complicated, number each step you have to take. Then remember to look back occasionally at the key phrases and steps. (On the other hand, don’t keep rereading questions or directions needlessly; if your underlines or clue words are adequate, you can check yourself in just a few seconds.)

Tactic 3: Flag complicated questions

If questions are complicated, break them down into manageable parts. Number each part so you can check quickly to be sure that you have answered all the parts.

Tactic 4: Use all the help you can get

If directions say that you can use aids such as calculator, scrap paper, or even textbooks, don’t play hero. Use them. You can be sure that testwise people are using them.

Tactic 5: Don’t skip sample questions and answers

If sample questions and answers are given, as they often are in standardized tests, work them through. They will tell you whether the tester expects you to answer the questions with obvious answers or with thoughtful ones. They will also demonstrate how you’re expected to *mark* your answers.

STRATEGY 3: WATCH OUT FOR CARELESS ERRORS

It's disheartening to work out a problem just right and get no credit for it because of some silly mistake you made in writing down the answer. Here's a quick checklist to use during every exam.

Tactic 1: Double-check when the pressure is off

Save time at the end of the exam to look for careless errors. Under tension, we all make slips. At the end of the test, when the pressure's off, we can usually find most of them.

- Reread questions to make sure that you read them accurately.
- Reread answers to make sure that you wrote what you meant to write.
- Be sure that all your numbers are legible.
- Double-check your calculations, using an alternate calculating method if possible.

Tactic 2: Fill in the right blanks

Make sure that you have put your name on the test—on all separate parts of the test. And be sure that you have placed all the answers in the proper spots. This is especially important to check when questions are on one sheet and answers on another.

Tactic 3: On essays, don't waste space

Don't skip lines, or cover only one side of a page (unless so directed), or use ornate handwriting on essays. First of all, you just might run out of space. Getting another test

booklet takes up valuable time. Besides, test-graders might look on space-wasting as your way of trying to cover up for not knowing the material—and *that* can cost you points.

STRATEGY 4: TRY TO REASON OUT ANSWERS TO TOUGH QUESTIONS

Testwise students know that there's a large gray area between *knowing* and *not knowing* an answer. They don't give up if they're stumped at first; they try to reason through the question systematically. Here's how you can do the same.

Tactic 1: Look for clues in the question

Don't ever assume that you can't answer a question simply because the contents seem unfamiliar at first. Try to substitute more concrete words or numbers for abstract ones. For example, if you encounter the term *production isoquant* on an exam and draw a blank, notice how *isoquant* divides into two possible stem words. *Quant* generally has something to do with *quantity*, doesn't it? Now, what about *iso*? *Isotherms* on a weather map are lines connecting points of *equal* temperatures. *Isosceles* triangles have two *equal* sides. So *isoquant* might mean equal quantities. See if this definition helps you answer the test question.

Tactic 2: Look for clues in the answer choices

When several answer choices are given, you can often reason out which answer is best. (In Chapter 5, on multiple-choice test strategies, we discuss this reasoning tactic in great detail.)

Tactic 3: Keep your eyes open for memory joggers

If one question stumps you, keep it filed away in the back

of your mind as you go through the rest of the exam. Very often a question or answer that you haven't reached yet will trigger your memory on the earlier question. If you encounter enough related questions, maybe you can figure out in which chapter or lecture the stumper was given, and that can jog your memory.

Tactic 4: Save tough questions for last

Sometimes you don't need clever clues to figure out answers to questions that stumped you the first time through. Very often, it was tension that made your mind go blank; the relaxation that comes from getting through the entire test can frequently resurrect the right answer for you.

Tactic 5: If all else fails, guess

Except on exams that deduct a lot of points for incorrect answers, smart test-takers make educated guesses until they have filled in all the blanks. As a general rule:

- guessing *always* pays off when no points are deducted for it;
- guessing *nearly always* pays off in a course test for which you have studied, because when you have studied, you will rarely encounter a question about which you know absolutely nothing;
- guessing *definitely* pays off, even if points are subtracted for wrong answers, when you're given choices from which to select your answers.

How can you tell whether points are deducted for guesses? If the test directions tell you to answer all the questions, you can assume there will be no penalty for guessing. On stan-

dardized and other tests that give you a score sheet to work on, see if there is a space for the grader to list the number of wrong answers. If so, you should limit guessing to the questions for which the odds seem to be in your favor. (In later chapters we'll talk about how to make educated guesses on specific kinds of tests.)

STRATEGY 5: GET SPECIAL CLUES FROM STANDARDIZED TESTS

Standardized tests are generally designed in standard ways. Testwise students learn how they are designed and use that information to get better scores. They all apply the following tactics.

Tactic 1: Remember that questions proceed from easy to difficult

Questions within particular sections usually progress in difficulty. So if you meet a difficult question at the beginning, you're probably reading too much into it or missing something obvious. On the other hand, if an easy question seems to be near the end, you're probably missing a subtlety or falling for a trick; reread the question more carefully.

Tactic 2: Fill in all the blanks

Standardized tests are usually time tests. (See Strategy 1 in Chapter 1.) That means that very few people will finish all the questions. If you deliberately save a bit of time for the end of the test, you can go back and fill in *all* the blanks quickly. Since an unanswered answer is sure to be wrong, *any* answer can only help you get a better score.

Tactic 3: Remember the odds

Even on tests that subtract quarter-points for wrong answers, with educated guessing you may be able to play the odds and come out ahead. For example, many tests with four-part multiple-choice questions have two choices that are usually obviously wrong; even a flip of the coin on the remaining two choices results in the right answer two out of four times. And if you let your instincts and other clues help pick out the right choice among the two possibilities, the percentages climb way above three out of four.

STRATEGY 6: GET SPECIAL CLUES FROM INSTRUCTOR-PREPARED TESTS

Instructors who prepare tests generally have distinctive styles and particular patterns in mind. Here's how to find them and let them guide you to making educated guesses.

Tactic 1: Don't look too hard for hidden meanings in questions

Instructors tend to mix up easy and difficult questions, but they aim the questions at the level of understanding of average students. So don't read *extra* meaning into ordinary questions.

If two answers look correct, give the most obvious answer. (If there is room on the answer sheet, point out the question's ambiguity or indicate how the other answer might also be correct. If there is no room or no time to do this, take it up with the teacher *before* you get your graded test paper back.)

If no answer seems correct, choose the one that is most nearly correct. (Again, if you have time as well as room on the answer sheet, point out the discrepancy. If not, take it up with your teacher before the test grades are given back.)

Tactic 2: Look for clues within the questions

Instructor-prepared exams are usually full of valuable clues. Learn where to look for them.

Teachers try to use good grammar in the correct answers but often aren't as careful with the incorrect ones. If the question is in the past tense, but three of the four multiple-choice answers are in the present tense, the one in the past tense is likely to be the correct answer. (But if you've got a trickster for a teacher, watch out!)

Very often, the answer to one problem is contained in a later question. Keep your eyes open for this.