



## Test Taking Hints

There are several things students can do to refine skills for taking tests. Below is a listing of techniques which successful college students have used and found to increase test scores.

***Being prepared by knowing the material*** is the number 1 test taking technique.

The test taking technique proven most successful in helping students earn better grades is called **being prepared**. Very few test taking techniques help without an adequate understanding of the subject matter.

One of the most effective test preparation techniques is the use of a self-test. For example, main ideas can be placed on one side of a note card and the relevant details placed on the other. Some students prefer to make *questions* out of main ideas and *answers* out of relevant details to be placed on note cards. Either way, students can then self-test by looking at main ideas of questions and reciting relevant details or answers **aloud**, without looking. The details or answers on the card can be used as a check for accuracy.

By going through note cards in this manner, students can quickly see what is known and what is not known BEFORE an exam is taken when something can still be done about it. Review can then be concentrated on the unknown material through additional recitation of notecards.

## Eat Well

Good nutrition is essential for the mind to work at its peak. This is especially true in the case of concentration and recall for tests. While good nutrition is important all of the time, it has additional importance for college students.

College is a time when most students face the greatest challenge of their lives but for many, the diet's healthfulness reaches an all time low. This results in reduced capacity for thinking, reasoning, analyzing, organizing, concentrating, and recall. Students need to be particularly conscious of foods consumed immediately before a test. Heavy, fatty meals should be avoided. It takes energy to digest a meal. This energy is needed for mental tasks during a test. Levels of sugar and fats in your diet should be low.

High fat intake can cause drowsiness and poor concentration. High sugar foods can cause rapid fluctuations in blood sugar levels thus negatively affecting recall. Some students have discovered that they have better recall on exams happens when they eat an apple 30 to 60 minutes before a test. Try it and see how it works for you.

## Avoid Cramming

Most students who cram regularly for college tests are no longer in college. There are a few individuals who seem to pass or even do well on exams by cramming but most cramblers have difficulty recalling material days, weeks, or months later. This is because material crammed into short-term memory doesn't stay for long. As new material is crammed into short-term memory, old material is pushed out and forgotten.

Students who begin studying on a regular basis for a test as soon as the first assignment is made, are better able to recall on exams because information is more likely to become stored in long term memory. Cramming material just before an exam is a good way to create undue anxiety that interferes with recall of what has been learned.

## Relax Just Before a Test

Memory and concentration are more acute in a relaxed person. An overly anxious person has a greater tendency to become confused and make mistakes. Deep breathing, meditating, or other relaxing activities just before a test can go a long way towards better concentration and recall on exams. The thing that can help the most is **knowing that you know the material**.

## Arrive Early

Another important test taking hint is getting to the classroom early. This should be done in order to find a seat, get necessary pens, pencils and paper ready, ask the instructor last minute questions, and receive any last minute information about the test. Arriving late is a good way to increase anxiety that can reduce interfere with recall and concentration.

## Follow Directions Carefully

A big reason students do not receive higher grades on exams is not because the material isn't known. It is because directions are not followed. College instructors are looking for specific information in answers written in a clear, legible format. Many instructors provide specific key words in questions in order to help students identify, recall, and organize correct answers. So when students don't use these key words, answers are confusing, disorganized, contain wrong information, or don't answer what the question asks which results in lower test grades and scores.

Read the directions carefully. Circle key words or underline important instructions and use them as checks for completed answers. Most of all, do what the question asks.

## Skim over All Questions before Starting

Students do better on exam answers if they know what is coming. Skimming over questions can motivate the sub-conscious to begin organizing answers. Confidence will build as known answers are written. By the time students encounter a tough question, the sub-conscious has had a chance to work on an answer.

Answer the easy questions first. Many times there are clues in easier questions and answers which help in answering harder questions. Confidence is built as correct answers are completed, and confidence improves memory.

## Circle Key Words in Question

Every test question contains key words that give directions on how to answer. Learning the meanings to these key words will make writing essay answers easier and faster. Some of the most common key words are:

**Define, Contrast, Compare, Summarize, Analyze, Examples  
Review, Trace, Where, Who, How, When  
Explain, Discuss, Justify, List**

Circle key words in essay questions and use them as guides while writing answers. Key words communicate how to answer a test question and what to include. Too many students believe that more writing equals higher grades. This is called the "BS" Syndrome and most instructors see through that approach. Instructors are looking for certain key points in test answers. Wading through paragraphs of "BS" is annoying. It's wise not to annoy the person grading the exam. When attention is paid to key words, students find they are able to write less, know when enough has been written, and communicate more precisely what is known.

## Use Memory Devices

There are many kinds of memory devices to help students with exams. Three of these devices are visualizations, mnemonics, and idea maps.

VISUALIZATION is an essential element of good memory because we think in pictures. For example, almost no one has trouble identifying the country of Italy on a map because it looks like a boot. Ask someone the shape of Italy and they will say "boot." What is the shape of Belize? Unless its shape has been associated with the shape of a familiar object, it is harder to remember and locate. In other words, without using visualization, recall is much more difficult.

Students can put visualizations to work for them in order to learn and increase recall on exams. Using 5 principles of memory, an example of visualization follows.

**HINT:** The more vivid or ridiculous the visualization the easier it is to remember.

One memory principle is **meaningful organization**.

The memory principle of **meaningful organization** may be visualized as a club, fraternity, or sorority where the organization of people has meaning for you.

A second principle of memory is **distributed practice**.

Picture your **meaningful organization** as **distributing practice** softballs. This ties the principles of meaningful organization and the second memory principle of distributed practice together in a visualization.

A third principle is **consolidation**.

To tie these images to the third principle of visualization, you might picture your **meaningful organization** after **distributing practice** softballs **consolidating** in a huddle.

A fourth memory principle is **visualization**.

The last principle of memory is recitation. You could picture your **meaningful organization** after **distributing practice** softballs **consolidating** in a huddle, then with a **visualization** of a 1st place trophy floating over the group.

The last principle for memory is **recitation**.

You could picture your **meaningful organization** after **distributing practice** softballs **consolidating** in a huddle, then with a **visualization** of a 1st place trophy floating over the group **reciting** "we are #1!"

Go over your visualizations regularly until you can recall them accurately along with the items to be remembered. Studying in this manner can make learning more enjoyable and entertaining.

A second memory device is called a **MNEMONIC**. Mnemonics use words, names, phrases, sentences, or rhymes to aid in recalling larger pieces of information. For example, the number of days in each month are often recalled by using the rhyme,

"30 Days has September  
April, June, and November  
All the rest have 31.....etc.



Another example of a mnemonic involves making a name by using the 1<sup>st</sup> letters in a list of items. Again, using the 5 memory techniques above, the first letters are m-d-c-i-r. Two mnemonics called **NAME MNEMONICS** could be made. They are Ric, M. D. or MR. CID.

A sentence mnemonic may also be made using the first letter of each memory principle, "**Memory Devices Consistently Increase Recall.**" Remembering larger pieces of information is easier using mnemonics.

## On Objective Exams...

On objective exams, look for the BEST answer if there are several correct options. Absolute words such as always, never, all, etc. **usually** indicate an incorrect answer or option. If you must guess, go with your first impression. Don't change answers unless you are **absolutely certain** you have marked the wrong one.

## Recheck All Answers

Make time to check all answers for accuracy and clarity. With essay questions, be sure all parts of the question are answered completely. Use the key words in each question to check completeness of answers.

Remember that the **#1 test taking technique** is:

***Be prepared by knowing the material!***

Concentrate the greatest effort in this area. Only then, can the benefits of other test taking skills be maximized.