TIPS IN EXAM TAKING

REMEMBER: When you take an exam, you are demonstrating your ability to understand course material or perform certain tasks. Successful exam taking avoids carelessness.

- Examples of objective exams are true-false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank.
- Examples of subjective exams are short answer, essay, or oral exams.

Note: If you have any doubts about the fairness of exams, or of the ability of exams to measure your performance, please see your instructor after class or during office hours.

General Exam Taking Strategies:

Exam preparation:

- To do well on exams you must first learn the material, and then review it before the exam. These are techniques to better understand your material:
  - Learning
    - Take good notes in your class lectures and textbooks
    - Review your notes soon after class/lecture
    - Review notes briefly before the next class
    - Schedule some time at the end of the week for a longer review
  - Reviewing:
    - Take good notes as your teacher tells you what will be on the exam
    - Organize your notes, texts, and assignments according to what will be on the exam
    - Estimate the hours you’ll need to review materials
    - Draw up a schedule that blocks units of time and material
    - Test yourself on the material
    - Finish your studying the day before the exam

Anticipating Exam Content:

- Pay particular attention to any study guides that the instructor hands out in class before the exam, or even at the beginning of the course! For example: Key points, particular chapters or parts of chapter, handouts, etc.
- Ask the instructor what to anticipate on the exam if he/she does not volunteer the information
- Pay particular attention – just prior to the exam – to points the instructor brings up during class lectures
- Generate a list of possible questions you would ask if you were making the exam, then see if you can answer the questions
- Review previous exams graded by the instructor
- Confer with other students to predict what will be on the exam

- Pay particular attention to clues that indicate an instructor might test for a particular idea, as when an instructor:
  - Says something more than once
  - Writes material on the board
  - Pauses to review notes
  - Asks questions of the class
  - Says “this will be on the test!”
Preparation Right Before the Exam:

- Arrive early for exams: Bring all the materials you will need such as pencils and pens, a calculator, a dictionary, and a watch. This helps you focus on the task at hand
- Be comfortable but alert: Choose a good spot and make sure you have enough room to work, maintain comfortable posture but don’t “slouch”
- Stay relaxed and confident: Remind yourself that you are well-prepared and are going to do well. If you find yourself anxious, take several slow, deep breaths to relax. Don’t talk about the exam to other students just before it; anxiety is contagious

During the Exam Strategies:

- Read the directions carefully: This may be obvious, but it will help you avoid careless errors. If there is time, quickly look through the exam for an overview. Note key terms, jot down brief notes, formulas, and memory devices
- Read all directions underlining the important information
- Identify and underline clue words in items. These include never, always, usually
- Answer questions in a strategic order:
  1. First easy questions to build confidence, score points and mentally orient yourself to vocabulary, concepts and your studies (it may help you make associations with more difficult questions)
  2. Then difficult questions or those with the most point value. With objective exams, first eliminate those answers you know to be wrong or are likely to be wrong, don’t seem to fit, or where two options are so similar as to be both incorrect. With essay/subjective questions, broadly outline your answer and sequence the order of your points
  3. Review: Resist the urge to leave as soon as you have completed all the items. Review your exam to make sure that you have answered all questions, not mis-marked the answer sheet, or made some other simple mistake. Proofread your writing for spelling, grammar, punctuation, decimal points, etc.
- Do not “second-guess” yourself and change your original answers. Research has indicated that your first hunch is more likely to be correct. You should only change answers to questions if you originally misread them or if you have encountered information elsewhere in the exam that indicates with certainty that your first choice is incorrect
- Review the entire exam before turning it in to make sure that you have not mismarked the answer sheet or made some other simple mistake

After the Exam:

- Analyze your exam results: Each exam can further prepare you for the next exam. Use your exams to review when studying for final exams
- Decide on and adopt study strategies that worked best for you. Identify those that didn’t work well and replace them
**Strategies for Answering True/False Exams:**

- Every part of a true sentence must be “true”. If any one part of the sentence is false, the whole sentence is false despite many other true statements.
- Pay close attention to negatives, qualifiers, absolutes, and long strings of statements.
- Negatives can be confusing. If the question contains negatives, such as “no, not, and cannot” drop the negative and read what remains. Decide whether that sentence is true or false. If it is true, it’s opposite, or negative, is usually false.
- Qualifiers are words that restrict or open up general statements. Words like “sometimes, often, frequently, ordinarily, generally” open up the possibilities of making accurate statements. They make more modest claims, are more likely to reflect reality, and usually indicate “true” answers.
- Absolute words restrict possibilities. “No, never, none, always, every, entirely, only” imply the statement must be true 100% of the time and usually indicate “false” answers.
- Long sentences often include groups of words set off by punctuation. Pay attention to the “truth” of each of these phrases. If one is false, it usually indicates a “false” answer.
- **Guessing:**
  - Often true/false exams contain more true answers than false answers. You have more than a 50% chance of being right with “true”. However, your professor may be the opposite. Review past exams for patterns.

**Strategies for Answering Multiple Choice Exams:**

- Multiple choice questions usually include a phrase or stem followed by three to five options.
- **Test strategies:**
  - Read the directions carefully.
  - Know if each question has one or more correct option.
  - Know if you are penalized for guessing.
  - Answer easy questions first.
- **Answering options. Improve your odds, think critically:**
  - Cover the options, read the stem, and try to answer. Select the option that most closely matches your answer.
  - Read the stem with each option. Treat each option as a true-false question, and choose the “most true”.
  - Underline or circle key words in both the question stem and the response choices.
  - Read all of the choices, even when the first or second choice looks correct.
- **Strategies to answer difficult questions:**
  - Eliminate options you know to be incorrect.
  - Question options that grammatically don’t fit with the stem.
  - Question options that are totally unfamiliar to you.
  - Question options that contain negative or absolutely words. Try substituting a qualified term for the absolute one, like *frequently* for *always;* or *typical* for *every* to see if you can eliminate it.
  - If one response choice is all of the above and you know at least two response choices seem correct, then all of the above is probably correct.
  - Number answers: toss out the high and low and consider the middle range numbers.
  - “Look-alike options:” probably one is correct; choose the best but eliminate choices that mean basically the same thing, and thus cancel each other out.
- If two response choices are opposite in meaning to each other, one of them is probably correct.
  - Favor options that contain qualifiers. The result is longer, more inclusive items that better fill the role of the answer.
If two alternatives seem correct, compare them for differences, then refer to the stem to find your best answer

Guessing:
- Always guess when there is no penalty for guessing or you can eliminate options
- Don’t guess if you are penalized for guessing and if you have no basis for your choice
- Don’t change your original answers unless you misread the question or if other information in the exam indicates with certainty that your first choice is wrong
- Use hints from questions you know to answer questions you do not

Not enough time: Outline your answers

**Strategies for Answering Matching Questions:**

1. Read the question carefully before you begin matching items together. Make sure you understand what you are being asked to match
2. Read each entry in the left column and try to think of the answer before reading the choices
3. Read the column with longer choices first, because you will be able to scan the shorter choices quicker as you go through the questions
4. Ask if you can use alternatives more than once
5. Complete the answers you know are correct to narrow down the field
6. Cross out each answer as you match it; this will help make it easier to see what choices you have left

**Strategies for Answering Completion Questions:**

1. Underline the key words in the sentence
2. Choose words carefully; the answer is often a technical word or important detail
3. Read the entire item. If you think of more than one answer, write both answers in the margin, and when you go over the exam later, choose the answer that seems most correct to you
4. Check to make sure your answer fits logically and grammatically into the slot in the sentence
5. Remember that not all completion answers are one word. If you can, consult with your teacher to see if he or she will tell you if the answer contains more than one word. If he or she will not tell you, use all the words that you think are necessary to complete the statement

**Strategies for Answering Essay Questions:**

1. Set up a time schedule to answer each question and to review and edit all questions. If some questions are worth more points, take that into account when setting up your schedule. When the time is up for one question, stop writing, leave space, and begin the next question. The incomplete answers can be completed during the review time
2. Pay attention to how the question is phrased, that is, the words that are used. These include compare, contrast, and criticize, and so on
3. Outline your answer and sequence the order of your points
4. State your main point in the first sentence and use your first paragraph to provide an overview of your essay. Discuss these main points in more detail in the rest of your essay
5. Avoid definite statements
6. Summarize in your last paragraph by restating your central idea and indicate why it is important
7. Beef up your answers if you have time
Strategies for Answering Open Book Exams:

- Introduction: In an open book exam you are evaluated on understanding rather than recall and memorization.
- You will be expected to:
  - Apply material to new situations
  - Analyze elements and relationships
  - Synthesize, or structure
  - Evaluate using your material as evidence
- Access to content (books, notes, etc.) varies by instructor. The exam can be take-home or in the classroom with questions seen or unseen before exam time.
- Do not underestimate the preparation needed for an open book exam: Your time will be limited, so the key is proper organization in order to quickly find data, quotes, examples, and/or arguments you use in your answers.
- Preparation:
  - Keep current on readings and assignments in class
  - Prepare brief, concise notes on ideas and concepts being tested
  - Carefully select what you intend to bring with you to the exam, and note anything significant about what you do not
  - Include your own commentary on the information that will provide fuel for your arguments, and demonstrate that you have thought this through
  - Anticipate with model questions, but not model answers. Challenge yourself instead with how you would answer questions, and what options and resources you may need to consider
- Organize your reference materials, your “open book:” make your reference materials as user-friendly as possible so that you don’t lose time locating what you need
  - Familiarize yourself with the format, layout and structure of your textbooks and source materials
  - Organize these with your class notes for speedy retrieval, and index ideas and concepts with pointers and/or page numbers in the source material (develop a system of tabs/sticky notes, color coding, concept maps, etc. to mark important summaries, headings, sections)
  - Write short, manageable summaries of content for each grouping
  - List out data and formulas separately for easy access
- Test taking:
  - Read the questions carefully to understand what is expected
  - Make good use of time
    - Quickly review the number of questions and note how much time each could take
    - First answer the questions that you are confident of and/or for which you will not need much time checking out the resources
    - Leave more complex and difficult questions for later
    - Don’t over-answer. Aim for concise, accurate, thoughtful answers that are based in evidence
- Use quotations:
  - To illustrate a point, or act as a discussion point
  - To draw on the authority of the source
  - Because you could not say it better
  - Quotations can be short. Three or four words can be extremely effective when they are worked into the structure of your sentence
  - A reference to a quote may be as effective as the quote itself
  - Guard against over-quoting. It is your words and your argument; extensive quoting may detract from your point or argument
Strategies for Answering Oral Exams:

• The oral exam is an opportunity for you to demonstrate your knowledge, your presentation/speaking skills, as well as your ability to communicate. They can also be good practice for job interviews!
• The exam can be formal, or informal, but you should consider all exams formal exchanges in order to make a good impression. For both types, you must listen carefully to the question, and answer directly
  o Formal exams follow a list of questions in a prepared format. The criteria for evaluation are usually set in a right/wrong format, and can be competitive. For this type of exam, if you wish to add “related” or qualified information, ask permission first as a courtesy
  o Informal exams are more open, your responses are usually longer, and evaluations can be more subjective. Answers are often less exact (right/wrong) and value is added for problem solving analysis and method, as well as interpersonal communication and presentation
• There are three components to a successful oral exam:
  1. Preparation:
     ▪ Ask your teacher what will be on the exam
     ▪ Study. If you do not study, you will not do well
     ▪ Write out questions you expect to be asked, then
       • Discuss answering techniques with people in the field or who have had the exam
       • Practice answering with classmates
       • Practice in a similar setting, in front of a mirror, to evaluate your “manner”
     ▪ Verify the date, time and location: Confirm these with your instructor
     ▪ If you use computing, projection or media systems, practice with the equipment the day before, and verify an hour or so before the exam if possible
  2. The exam
     ▪ Look and act professional! Create a good impression. Dress well and appropriately, turn off cell phones and pagers
     ▪ Arrive at the location early to collect yourself and check out the situation, but wait until your scheduled time to keep the appointment. This is a time for relaxed focus, not cramming or review
     ▪ The exam begins the minute you walk in:
       • Introduce yourself immediately
       • Give the instructor all of your attention; look interested and smile!
       • Keep good posture and eye contact; if there are distractions (noise outside, etc.) you may mention your distraction and/or nervousness
     ▪ Stay focused through the interview. Be an intelligent listener as well as talker
     ▪ Do not ramble if you do not know an answer. State directly that you do not know the answer but ask if you could outline how you would find the answer, solve the problem, or the method you would employ
     ▪ Maintain your self-confidence and composure if you feel the interview is not going well. The interviewer may be testing you
     ▪ Answer questions with more than “yes” or “no”. Stress the positive and not the negative. Use two or three key points or examples to demonstrate your knowledge
     ▪ Watch for signs that the exam is over (i.e., the interviewer looks at the clock, moves the chair back, or completes a set of questions)
     ▪ Ask if there is anything you could answer that would add to your evaluation
     ▪ Thank the instructor
3. Follow-up
   ▪ Summarize your performance by considering where you did well or poorly. Keep a written record
   ▪ Note how you could do better for the next time
   ▪ Note if there was a significant “event” during the interview
   ▪ If you have questions or comments on either the material or your performance, do not hesitate to speak with the instructor. Do not challenge the teacher, but seek to understand your performance
   ▪ If you have concerns about an inappropriate evaluation after raising concerns with your instructor, discuss them with that department or your school’s academic counseling center or a higher authority