What To Do During The Test

As You Begin
Prepare yourself for the test by arriving early so you have time to do a breathing or relaxation exercise.

Pay particular attention to verbal direction given as the test is distributed. Ask about the general rules of the exam room, such as the procedure for asking questions, materials allowed in the room, etc. Knowing the rules will ensure that you don’t create the impression of cheating.

Scan the whole test immediately. Evaluate the importance of each section. Notice how many points each part of the test is worth and estimate how much time you will need for each section; use its point value as your guide. For example, don’t budget 20% of your time for a section that is worth only 10% of the points. Then jot down a short time plan to keep you on track during the test.

Read the directions slowly. Then reread them. Nothing is more agonizing than to discover you have lost points on a test not because you didn’t know the material, but because you failed to follow directions. If the directions call for short answers, give short answers. Sometimes you will be asked to answer two out three questions. Oh, the frustration of finding that out as you finish your third answer!

Jot down memory aids, formulas, equations, facts, or other material you know you’ll need and might forget. Do this in the margins.

Now you are ready to begin.

IN GENERAL
Answer easiest, shortest questions first. This gives you the experience of success and stimulates associations, thus preparing you mind for more difficult questions.

Next answer multiple-choice, true-false, and fill-in-the-blank questions.

Proceed to short-answer questions and finally the essay questions. Use memory techniques when you’re stuck. If you recall on a certain point is blocked, remember something else that’s related. Start from the general and go to the specific. Use a small mind map in the test margin to stimulate your memory.

Pace yourself. Watch the time; if you are stuck, move on. Follow your time plan. Leave plenty of space between answers. The space makes it easier on the person who grades your test, and you can use the extra space if there’s time for additional information. Look for answers in other test questions. A term, name, date, or other fact that escapes you might appear in the test itself. You can also use other questions to stimulate your memory.

In quick-answer questions (multiple-choice, true-false), your first instinct is usually best. Don’t change your answer unless the second choice is correct. If you think your first answer is wrong because you misread the question, do change your answer.

Multiple-choice questions
Check the directions to see if the questions call for more than one answer.

Answer each question in your head before you look at the possible answers. If you can come up with the answer before you look at the choices, you eliminate the possibility of being confused by those choices. Mark questions you can’t answer immediately and come back to them if you have time. If you have no clue as to what the answer is, and if incorrect answers are not deducted from your score, use the following guidelines to guess:

1. If two answers are similar, except for one or two words, choose one of these answers.
2. If two answers have similar sounding or looking words (intermediate-intermittent), choose one of these answers.
3. If the answer calls for a sentence completion, eliminate the answers that would not form grammatically correct sentences.
4. If two quantities are almost the same, choose one.
5. If answers cover a wide range (4.5, 66.7, 88.7, 90.1, 500.11), choose one in the middle.
6. If there is no penalty for guessing and none of the above techniques work, close your eyes and go for it.

**True-false questions**
Answer true-false questions quickly. Generally, these questions will not be worth many points individually. Don’t invest a lot of time to get two points on a 100-point exam.

If any part of the true-false statement is false, the statement is false.

Look for qualifiers like “all,” “most,” “sometime,” “never,” or “rarely.” These are the key words upon which the question depends. Absolute qualifiers such as “always” or “never” generally indicate a false statement.

**Machine-graded tests**
You must be certain the answer you mark corresponds to the question you are answering. Check the test booklet against the answer sheet whenever you switch sections and again at the top of each column. Watch for stray marks. These can look like answers.

**Open-book tests**
When studying for the test, write down any formulas you will need on a separate sheet. Tape tabs onto important pages of the book (tables, for instance) so you don’t have to waste time flipping through the pages. (You could also use paper clips.)

If you plan to use your notes, number them and write a short table of contents.

Prepare thoroughly for open-book exams. They are almost always the most difficult tests.

**Short-answer/fill-in-the-blank questions**
These questions of ten ask for definitions or short descriptions. Pick you points fast when you work the fill-in-the-blank section of a test. Concentrate on key words and facts. Be brief.

Here’s where over-learning, as discussed in chapter three, really pays off. When you know a subject backwards and forwards, you can answer this type of question almost as fast as you can write.

**Essay questions**
When you set out to answer an essay question, your first task is to find out what the question is asking precisely. If a question asks that you compare Gestalt and Reichian therapies, no matter how eloquently you explain them, you are on a one-way trip to No Credit City.

Standard essay question words are defined in this chapter on page 159. Learn them well. Before you begin to write, make a quick outline. There are three reasons for doing this. First, you will be able to write faster. Second, you will be less likely to leave out important facts. Third, if you don’t have time to finish your answer, your outline might win you some points.

When you start to write, get to the point. Forget introductions. Sentences such as, “there are many interesting facets to this difficult question,” cause acute pain in teachers grading test. One way to get to the point is to include part of the question in your answer. For example, if the question asks, “Discuss how increasing the city police budget may or may not contribute to a decrease in street crime,” your first sentence might read, “An increase in police expenditures will not have a significant effect on street crime for the following reasons.” Your position is clear. You are on your way to the answer.

When you expand your answer with supporting ideas and facts, bring out your big guns immediately. Don’t try for drama by saving the best for last.

**Some final points in regard to style:**
1. Write clearly. Grading essay questions is in large part a subjective process. Sloppy, difficult to read handwriting might actually lower your grade.

2. Be brief. Avoid filler sentences that say nothing. (“The question certainly bears careful deliberation in order to take into account all the many interesting facts pertaining to this important period in the history of our great nation.”) Write as if you expect the person grading your test to be tired, bored, and overworked. This might not be the case; but even a well-rested instructor doesn’t like to wade through a swamp of murky writing in order to trap an occasional lonely fact.

3. Use a pen. Many instructors will require this because pencil is difficult to read.

4. When possible, write on one side of the page only. Writing will show through and obscure writing on the other side. If necessary, you can use the blank to add points you missed. Leave a generous left-hand margin with plenty of space between your answers, in case you need to add to them later.

5. Finally, if you have time, review your answers for grammatical errors, clarity, and legibility.

Excerpts from Becoming a Master Student, Dave Ellis. 1985