

Test Prep & Test Taking

Test Preparation

Study Strategies

1. Consider how your understanding will be assessed, and set a SMART goal for studying based on assessment type: Do you need to be able to explain key concepts from memory for a quiz or exam? Do you need a thorough but not memorized understanding of the material for discussion, writing assignments, or open-note exams? Do you need to practice writing short-answer or essay responses? Different types of assessment will require differing study strategies.
2. Create a study schedule as soon as you know about a test or quiz. Set up multiple study times that are evenly distributed across the time you have before the assessment.
3. Study for short sessions more often, rather than longer but fewer sessions, to transfer information from short-term to long-term storage.
4. Adapt study strategies according to course content, format, level of difficulty, and level of familiarity. Also consider your learning styles and preferences.
5. Review new material as soon as possible. Remember that short-term memories need to be converted to long-term storage within 24 hours to avoid losing most of the information!
6. Spend most of study time in active review, not passive reading, to better engage the brain and improve learning. Study strategically to learn material efficiently...study smarter, not harder!
7. Recruit classmates to support your study efforts. Create a review group or organize study sessions before an exam.
8. Create your own practice exam using your reading notes, class notes, study guides, and other course materials. Try to answer each question without referring back to your notes. Continue studying any material that you did not know adequately.

Study Strategies by Class Type

Skill-Based Courses: Math, Foreign Language, English Composition, Computer Skills

- Goal: Learn how to perform certain actions, like solving algebra problems, speaking in Spanish, writing a research paper, or using Excel.
- Strategy: Practice, practice, practice! Make a list of the specific types of tasks or problems you need to know how to do, then practice each kind of task repeatedly to ensure competence.

Lecture & Reading-Based Courses: Humanities, Social Sciences, and most college courses

- Goal: Learn key information from lecture notes, reading assignments, and course materials
- Strategy: Focus on key ideas and terms! Make a list of major topics that will be covered on the test. Then make a list of all major terms and definitions, key events, and significant people. Look for the relationships among this key information to help you remember them.

Laboratory Classes: Physical and Life Science courses with lab

- Goal: Perform hands-on work and practical experiments to better understand the material
- Strategy: Understand what you did & the ideas behind the experiments! Make a list of each experiment performed, as well as each experiment's goal, procedure, and results. Make sure you understand how the experiment produced the results.

Strategies for Peak Test Performance

Preparation Strategies to Improve Outcomes:	Explanation of Strategies' Benefits:
1. Sleep 7-8 hours the night before the exam.	Fatigue and exhaustion reduce efficiency and cause poor memory recall. If you didn't get enough sleep, 20 minutes of relaxation can help.
2. To help you sleep the night before, or anytime you need to calm down, eat high carbohydrate foods: popcorn, breads, rice, pasta, baked potatoes.	Carbohydrates increase the level of serotonin in the brain, which has a calming effect on the mind. It reduces feelings of stress and tension, and increases your ability to concentrate.
3. Exercise moderately for 15-20 minutes shortly before the test.	Exercise reduces stress and helps prevent a panic attack or "blinking out" on a test. It increases alertness, clear thinking, and energy level.
4. Practice slow, deep breathing for 5 minutes each day. Then do a minute or two of deep breathing right before the test. Also, stop during the test if you feel your anxiety building and do a minute of deep breathing. Deep breathe, roll your shoulders, and relax.	When test anxiety hits, you breathe more quickly and shallowly, which causes hyperventilation. Symptoms include confusion, inability to concentrate, shaking, and dizziness. Slow, deep breathing will calm you and prevent panic.
5. Eat a small, high-energy meal about two hours before. Protein! Not high-fat foods.	Just 3-4 ounces of protein increases the amount of tyrosine in the brain. This chemical improves alertness, accuracy, and motivation. High fat foods dull your mind and slow the brain.
6. Before the test, go easy on caffeinated beverages, candy bars, or other sugary food.	Extra caffeine can make you jittery, and shaky for the test. Too much sugar can cause negative emotional reactions in some people.
7. Drink plenty of water.	Research suggests staying hydrated improves the electrochemical communications in your brain.
8. Give your brain time to learn the material.	Cramming doesn't work. Study every day to help the brain remember what it has learned.
9. When taking a test, chew the same kind of gum, or eat the same candy that you do when you study for the test.	Sense of smell is one of the best memory enhancers. It will help you remember what you were working on when you were studying.
10. Be positive! Tell yourself you can do it. Visualize yourself succeeding to reinforce your self-efficacy.	When you imagine yourself failing, you usually do. When you have put the effort in to succeed, imagine yourself acing the test. You usually do!

Adapted from Lial and Hestwood, *Prealgebra: An Integrated Approach*.

Test Taking

Strategies by Exam Type

Multiple Choice

- Try to come up with the answer in your head before you look at the answer choices.
- Read all the answer choices. Do not be tempted to mark the first one that sounds good or looks right, especially in math multiple-choice exams. Double-check signs, exponents, and variables.
- If you are not sure of an answer, cross out choices that you know are incorrect, and make an educated guess. You might want to mark the question and come back to it. Another question might jog your memory to help you answer this question. If you can mark more than one choice, treat each answer as a true-false choice.

- If two of the choices are similar or opposite, one of them is probably correct.
- Do not go back and second-guess yourself. Generally, your first choice is more accurate. Change the answer only if you are certain your first answer was incorrect.
- If an alternative answer does not grammatically follow the question, it is probably wrong. For example, if the question asks for a singular answer, be sure to pick a singular answer.
- Sometimes it can help to pick an answer and work backwards to see if it fits the question.
- Stay until the end. At times the teacher may clarify something as an afterthought that may help.
- Tactfully ask the teacher for clarification.

Problem- Solving Tests

- Brain dump! When you first get the test, write down any formulas, dates, details, processes, timelines, acronyms, or other concepts that you might forget.
- Look the test over before you begin. If anything comes to mind, jot notes down in the margin.
- Make sure you understand what each problem is asking.
- Make sure your answer makes sense. Use your answer to work the problem backward.
- Watch for simple mistakes like signs, variables, labels, decimals, etc.
- Draw pictures or diagrams to help make clear to the instructor what you know.
- Watch for problems that are worth more points and start with these. Be sure to put something down, even it is an outline, formula, or something that applies to that problem.
- Watch the time! Plan to use all allowed time, and budget carefully. Allow extra time for problems worth more points. Allot a small cushion of extra time. If you are running out of time, be sure you put something down like formulas, outlines, etc. as you may get partial credit.
- Sometimes it helps to break the problem into smaller parts.
- Let it sit. Come back to it. Be sure to start the test with a 'friendly' problem, one that you know how to do, to build confidence and get you going.

Essay Tests

- Read the directions very carefully. Underline key words or directions.
- Be sure you understand what is meant by directions like identify, discuss, compare, describe, analyze, etc. Be sure to fulfill these directions in your essay's structure and contents.
- Watch the time! Budget enough time for each question. Divide the total time by the number of questions and stay on track to avoid running out of time.
- Make a short outline for each question.
- Start with a question you understand.
- Focus on the important things.
- Turn the question around into the first sentence of your essay for an effective topic sentence.
- Start with a clear thesis statement. Think of the thesis statement as the trunk of a tree and your examples, facts, arguments, and details as the branches and roots.
- Provide specific, relevant, and clearly explained support and evidence. It's fine to use examples provided in your textbook or lectures.
- Write neatly. You may want to write on every other line so that as you proofread, you can add ideas. It also makes your essay more legible.
- Make sure you have a conclusion. Even if you are running short of time, write a sentence or two to tie the key points together and restate the main idea.
- Proofread your essays.

True/False Tests

- Statements with 'all, always, every, every, and none' in them are usually false.
- Statements with 'usually, often, sometimes, most, and many' in them are usually true.
- It is crucial to read each statement very carefully. One word will often change the meaning.

Open Book Tests

- During an open book test, you will need to locate information quickly.
- Review your text and notes so you are familiar enough to know where to look for information.
- Prepare by using sticky notes, tabs, or bookmarks in your text.
- Annotate the text so that important information is easy to find.
- Highlight the most important information in your notes.
- Write down all the information you will need on one sheet of paper.

After a Test Is Returned

- Go through all tests and correct the questions you missed. You may see these or similar questions on the final exam – these tests will be a good study guide for the midterm or final.
- Take your test into your instructor's office hours and ask questions to support continued learning. This will impress your instructor and cement your knowledge. Try this strategy especially if you can expect to see the material again on a cumulative final or certification exam.
- Keep your tests as a record of your grades to make sure the instructor enters grades accurately.
- Analyze the test's makeup: what types of questions were asked? What answers did the instructor want? Is there information covered that you missed during studying? Use this information to adjust your study strategies for that instructor's next exam.

Strategies by Subject Matter

Math

- Ask whether you will need to memorize formulae and theorems, or if they will be provided. Do a brain dump if you must memorize them.
- Ask whether calculators, scratch paper, or other materials will be allowed.
- Work lots of practice problems to study.
- Try working backwards to find the answer.

Science, Social Science, & Concept-Heavy Subjects

- Ask what the test format will be and choose study strategies accordingly.
- If memorization is required, use mnemonic devices, a "memory palace," and other strategies.
- Ensure you can put definitions and explanations into your own words.

History

- Focus on sequence of events, trends over time, and cause and effect.
- Memorize important dates and names of key figures and locations.

Humanities

- Review texts and reading notes to ensure familiarity with literature or other reading assignments.
- Review lecture notes, supplemental articles, and the text's chapter introductions to understand historical and cultural contexts.