

## **How to Prepare for a Test**

**Ken Petress**

### **Introduction**

Tests are vitally important. No matter who claims otherwise or how often or varied such claims are, test scores, in the U.S., always seem to be one of the measures of success or worth. This is not the best of situations, but it is the current reality with which we have to live. If tests are so important, it seems only logical and appropriate that some instruction and guidance be provided to students allowing them to improve their test-taking abilities.

Tests, for some students, are frightening experiences. Some test apprehension stems from: (1) a fear of the evaluation process; (2) confusing, and thus exaggerating, the meaning of test evaluations; (3) an unawareness of test format, scope, and purpose; and (4) students enter tests unprepared; this lack of preparation sets the student up for predetermined failure and embarrassment. Some test anxiety comes from qualms over competition. I grade based on a criteria based scale rather than a normative based scale. That is, my students are graded on how well they measure up to a standard rather than how well they do or do not compete with classmates. Too often students improperly equate grades with self worth. Grades are measures of performance on specific and limited tasks, not measures of you, as a person. Some of the nicest people have received less than wonderful grades and some of the least wonderful people have done well in terms of grades. Grades are temporal and spacial; that is, they only reflect performance on given tasks at given times. It is an imperfect evaluation system, one that you, as students, and I, as a professor, are, for now, stuck with. We need to do the best with the system in place, so this essay offers some ways to improve test preparing skills.

Tests come in varied styles. These styles sometimes reflect personal teacher preference or a desire to ease the burden of grading; however, there are more legitimate reasons why test items differ in format that I employ in my tests. Some paper and pencil test items are designed to measure: (1) student memory and recognition -- have students retained needed material they have been exposed to and can that material be readily retrieved? (2) Application -- can students apply, in useful ways, what they know to real or hypothetical situations? (3) Analysis -- can students render useful inquiry into matters under study and can they determine hierarchies, nomenclatures, and sequences out of the material at hand? (4) Discrimination -- can students detect, name, and recognize subtle differences between variables, causes, effects, antecedents, and components? (5) Synthesis and Integration -- can

students pull together components, effects, and by-products of what they know, both internally and from without? (6) Differentiation -- can students see differences among constituents; can interrelatedness, dependency, and independence among things we know be detected? (7) Evaluation -- can students form and defend judgments based on what they know? and (8) Expression -- Examinations not only measure what you know, but also how skillfully you can report to others, orally or in writing, [or by demonstration] your acquired knowledge. You must be able to report what you know for your ability to be acknowledged and evaluated. Different types of test items better accomplish these goals. A student is wise to ascertain what teachers are trying to accomplish with their tests. Just asking "What are you looking for ..." is insufficient, vague, and unlikely to provide more than an equally obtuse answer. Asking which of the list of goals above are being sought may well provide a more functional and satisfying response.

Too often, students enter to college unskilled in test preparation strategies. This essay (1) defines and discusses three key terms: preparation (study), measurement (testing), and evaluation (grading); (2) discusses test question sources: textbooks, readings, discussions, and activities; (3) suggests ways students can prioritize their resource materials; (4) promotes the use of study groups; and (5) offers hints on how to take effective class notes.

It is important to point out that examinations are not the sole nor ultimate means of establishing students' skill or knowledge. Other avenues of evaluation are open for your expertise to be judged; these include: your success in more advanced courses; your participation in intelligent discussion using what you have learned with peers and mentors; and publications, speeches, or practical uses of your knowledge. Tests should be thought of as part of the education process, not as separate from or the termination of that process.

This paper, then, is a guide not just to improve your test-taking skills, but also to enhance your studying skills. If you follow the guidelines provided here, your course work mastery will likely be enhanced; thus, it is predicted that your examination evaluations will improve as well. This essay provides you with techniques and strategies intended to increase your mastery over any subject. Once we are good at something, it is natural that we enjoy it more. I hope these suggestions assist you in enjoying your education.

### **Some Key Terms Defined**

Studying is a process, not an event. True study is planned, methodical, purposeful, and time consuming. A student's primary objective is to acquire knowledge, not to do well on tests. If you truly have a firm grasp of the material, tests will pose few problems; however, just doing well on exams does not equate with knowledge.

Tests are instruments that measure representative learning; that is, exams do not attempt to assay all of one's knowledge, but weighs a sample of what you know. Sometimes students ponder why all learning is not tested. If all course content were in fact tested, half the course would be a test!

Different types of test questions measure a variety of skills. I discussed this earlier, but some review is germane here. Among the skills measured on tests are: memory, recognition, the ability to compare/contrast; being able to explain/ report terminology, concepts, processes, results, or predictions fully, logically, thoroughly, and expressively; and facility with analysis, application, differentiation, discrimination, evaluation, generalization, interaction, prediction, and synthesis. Students are wise to inquire about what variety of reporting skills will be expected of them. The "type of question" is not as important as what these questions ask the student to do. For example: some multiple choice questions may stress recognition; others may require a refined discrimination skill; while another may focus on application prowess. While it is intellectually desirable to be competent in all skills, it is, in practice, essential to be facile in those skills expected of you.

Grades are evaluations of your performances. Grades are not based on what you could do or on what you have done in the past; but they are based on limited performances on tests, papers, homework, class tasks, or reports.

Not all grading scales are the same. The three most widely used evaluation schema are: the normative-based method, the criterion-based method, and a hybrid of these two. Normative-based grading is premised on comparison and rank-ordering of student performance. The very grading system (ie: A, B, C,...) that we use at the university is normative-based. Normative grading produces results that are intra-group specific; that is, normative grades tend not to be generalizable across time or instructor. Criterion-based grading focuses on achievement or non-achievement compared to an external standard (criterion). Students do or do not equal or surpass the stated standard. Criterion grading produces results that are inter-group specific; that is, criterion grades are usually generalizable across time or instructor. The "pass-fail" system is criterion-based. The hybrid system assumes the

name "curve" in student vernacular. The curve employs some normative elements and some criterion features. The "curve" does not imply that no matter how high the lowest score is, it will merit a 'D' or 'F' assignment; nor does it imply that no matter how low the highest score is, it will merit an 'A' assignment. This is where the criterion becomes relevant. Most teachers utilize some version of the hybrid grading system.

### **Test Question Sources**

With these key terms agreed upon, I now turn to the test it-self. Where do test questions originate? Examinations are com-posed from: textbook material, professor and guest lectures, student questions and discussions, outside readings, field trips, films, and class work exercises. This list does not imply that these sources are independent from each other, for many of these sources clarify, expand, or refine what is contained in other information resource materials. The main virtue in such information variety lies in its ability to address varied learning styles, including; visual, aural, experiential, exemplar, and interactive.

Textbook materials offer a variety of test question sources. Chapter previews and goals often give teachers test question ideas. Chapter summaries frequently help teachers focus on test-able concepts and terms. Highlighted items in text readings pro-vide convenient exam oriented features; highlighting techniques include: bold face terms; colored or boxed items; italicized passages; and in some texts, margin notes.

Class lectures also provide fertile ground for examination material. Information duplicated in lecture and text material clearly indicate a priority of that data. Lectures that contradict material found in the text usually signals relative importance. Lecture materials that go beyond the text are frequently found on tests. Professors often provide comparisons/contrasts, hierarchies, definitions, and causes relevant to course material; these provide rich test material.

Student involvement through questions/answers and discussions often stimulate test question. When answers to student questions go beyond addressing one student's needs and instead resembles a mini-lecture, assume this to be important as a potential test item. If student discussions are allowed to go on at length; if points within such discussions are highlighted, exemplified, or contradicted; or if such student discussions spawn further teacher interaction, give that material serious attention.

Non-text readings are assigned for a variety of reasons: to establish varying vantage points; to provide more in-depth and up-to-date examples than found in texts; and to inject more thorough or more narrowly focused examples than the text provides. When reading non-text material, students should ascertain why that material has been assigned. Students are advised to note similarities, contradictions, refinements, and priorities in relation to text and lecture materials. Frequently, readings are not directly addressed in class unless students ask about them. This does not suggest unimportance, but instead assumes student understanding of the material and its purpose.

Field trips, guest lectures, and films also provide varied source material for learning and testing. Students should treat these sources as seriously as the text. These sources provide specific expertise, focus, and vantage points. Students should afford themselves the opportunity to reinforce, challenge, probe, and question what they learn from these varied sources. Don't treat these sources as fillers, as unimportant, or as having low relative priority; they are important!

You can clearly see: there is a wide potential for class material, and that variety often is reflected in test questions. Students need to discover the underlying purpose for each assigned information source; such insight commonly discloses up-coming test strategies tied to that source. Tests are not mysterious; they directly stem from course materials and professor preference.

Professors will usually freely disclose their testing intentions either via the course syllabus or in introductory class sessions. If such a disclosure is omitted, student inquiry into this matter is appropriate. Remember to ask what skills are expected not just the type of questions asked. Different professors choose various testing strategies. The choices may be based upon: a professor's taste, class size, class level, and the type of educational material employed in the class.

In addition to clues provided by course content, insights as to test question content and style often come from professor-centered cues (mannerisms, nonverbal cues, and histories). I know (because I've been told so often by students) that I amplify and prioritize material through vocal emphasis, gestural focus, repetition, and use of the blackboard, that students take particular notice of specific items. These amplifications and priorities commonly

translate into testable material.

When course material is connected to student exercises; when contemporaneous material is spontaneously inserted into classroom activities (ie: TV shows, newspaper or magazine articles, etc.), such items should be seen as vital; these make ideal test items. Teacher lecture previews and summaries frequently portend test items.

Handouts are costly and time-consuming to prepare. These factors suggest they may well result in test question material. As you can see, not only do class materials hint at testable content and style, but teacher strategies and behaviors also forecast test makeup.

In addition to paying close attention to course materials and to professor styles, two other factors play important roles in positive student progress. These factors are studying in groups and effective note taking.

### **Group Study**

Group study can be beneficial to student mastery of course material in that groups can be supportive to its members and that groups can help students psychologically, too. Group supportiveness includes: (1) helping confirm what you know either from affirmation or through evidence gained from your successfully teaching it to fellow group members; (2) groups can verify individual members' weak areas through questioning, answer evaluation, or material application; and (3) groups may help foster systematic study habits. Psychological benefits in group study for students include: (1) group participation can generate preparation, organization, attendance, and sharing responsibilities; (2) groups can provide social cohesion while studying and can allow each member's skills to be noted and appreciated; and (3) groups can raise members' self concept and bolster member confidence. Groups also enhance cooperation and sharpen the utility of labor division strategies. Students are urged to consider working in groups of 3-5 students. Such study ought to occur at regular, scheduled periods throughout the term not just preceding examinations. This cyclic nature of study produces superior results than does random, spontaneous effort.

### **Note Taking**

Quality note taking takes time, energy, and discipline. Poor note taking habits can produce a virtually

useless product. Your notes should be goal oriented; you need to establish discrete goals such as: recording definitions for terms; showing cause-effect relationships; establishing sequences and priorities; noting exceptions to rules or trends; noting superior/subordinate relationships among concepts, processes, and events; and providing examples. Such notes should be a synthesis of varied course materials. Good class notes need to be concise, clear, neat, and tightly organized. These notes should be usable in days, weeks, or months from now.

Your notes are not transcripts of what you read, heard, or did; each note item should be a key to a larger source of data - a book, an experience, a discussion, or a memory. In some cases, you may want to parenthetically indicate where related material is located (ie: footnotes); however, doing this too pervasively clutters your notes and denies the purpose of note taking. Some students (I was one of them) take separate notes for readings, lectures, and activities and then consolidate these notes into one unified note source on a weekly basis. I used different colored pens to recall data sources. Comparing your notes with others' notes can often be helpful. Memories and priorities can be enhanced by such sharing. Good note taking skills frequently assists in paper writing assignments as well. Quality note taking can point out your learning strengths and weaknesses and thus provide insight for good in class questions.

Reading materials should be reviewed before class lectures or discussions; this makes such lecture or discussion focused, relevant, and prioritized. A second reading following classroom interaction aids in compiling thorough notes. Again, notes should be highlights not transcripts. Each line of notes ought to be capable of generating definitions, relationships, effects, and examples.

### **Conclusion**

Successful test taking is not a trick; it is the product of hard work and comes from methodically doing the things I have pointed out in this essay. While some people in our midst do seem to have an easier time with tests, it is not a product of who they are. These individuals have internalized and routinized the strategies discussed above. It is not too late to revise your test taking study regimen; the suggestions you have just read can improve your test taking. The level of improvement depends on the extent of your willingness to work hard at studying effectively.

Studying for tests is not a linear process; there are several concentric paths that need to be tread to assure

test success. This essay has shown that successful and low anxiety test taking involves: (1) paying detailed, thorough, methodical attention to course materials; (2) discovering what you are expected to report on tests; (3) studying in groups; and (4) taking, revising, and using good class notes. Remember, if you truly have a firm grasp on course material, a test will not cause you great difficulty.

Improvement on test taking will not come spontaneously; it requires time and will gradually emerge as your study habits become routine and natural. Tests can lose much of their terror as we become proficient in preparing for them. In fact, some tests can actually be fun when we know we are fully prepared for what is expected of us.