Test Taking Strategies

**1. Do a memory dump**

A memory dump can be a particularly useful strategy for improving performance certain types of tests.

* As soon as you begin the test, write down information that you will likely need to know for the test and you fear you may forget. (ie., formulas, equations, dates, lists, etc.)

**2. Read the test directions very carefully and watch for details**

* Test questions and directions often contain valuable information. Always read all directions carefully to ensure you understand what is being asked.
* It is not uncommon to have two correct answers on a multiple choice question. Pay attention to details.
* Frequently, test instructions will notify students that they only need to complete two questions, but there will be 5 options.

**3. Plan how you will use the allotted time**

* Take a moment to estimate how must time you'll have for each section of the test and each question. Allow enough time for more difficult sections or sections that are weighted more heavily in the final test grade.
* Pace yourself so you can complete the test in the allotted time frame.
* Complete the questions you know first then come back and tackle the problems you're not sure about after.

**4. Look for cues**

* If two answers are similar, they're usually not the correct answer.
* Pay attention to grammatical matching between the question being asked and answers. If an answer seems right but doesn't match grammatically with the question, it probably isn't the correct answer.
* Look for cues from other questions.

**5. Answer all the questions**

Even if you're running out of time and can answer all the questions fully, it's important to answer all questions. Many professors will give partial credit for partially completed questions or if you're able to show your work. (Note: There are some tests in college where you are docked points for guessing. This is rare and usually be announced by the professor prior to the test.)

**6. Maintain a positive attitude**

* Do not lose confidence or waste time if you encounter confusing or difficult questions. Answer the questions you know first.
* If you have no clue about the correct answer, make an educated guess if it will not count against your score.
* Disregard patterns. It is probably coincidence if a string of multiple choice answers that you know are correct are "a."

**7. Rely on your first impressions**

* The first answer that pops in your mind is usually the correct answer. Don't change answers unless you're sure the answer you've chosen is wrong.
* It may be counterproductive to review answers and make changes – especially if you're struggling to get through the test.

**8. Plan to finish early and have time for review**

* Go back and answer difficult questions after answering easy ones.
* If you are required to complete an essay, review it for spelling and grammatical errors.
* Check to make sure you have completed the entire test. It is not uncommon for questions to be listed on the opposite side of a page.

**9. Consider every test a practice session - analyze your performance**

* It takes time and practice to develop effective test taking skills.
* To determine whether your test taking strategies are working, take time to evaluate your performance after each test.
* Be sure to take note of where you're struggling. Are you struggling with essays or multiple choice questions?
* Arrange to meet with teachers to discuss low test scores to determine what you can do to improve. This is highly recommended if you struggle with essay questions.

**10. Read every question closely**  
Sometimes teachers will write questions that are deliberately reversed from what you might expect in order to challenge you. If you feel that a question is nonsensical, hard to understand, or contains typos, ask your instructor for clarification; misprints and editing accidents can happen.

**11. Prioritize how you will answer questions**  
You don’t have to answer the test questions in order. Start with the easiest questions that you can answer quickly. This will guarantee that you get points for correct answers, and also give you a confidence boost. You can then focus the rest of your time on more challenging questions that require more thought and work.

If you’re working on a tough problem and the answer is not immediately clear, don’t get stuck and waste valuable time. Move on to another problem, and come back to the harder problem later. For multiple-choice questions, rule out as many options as you can, and make an educated guess. For true/false questions, remember that absolute or near-absolute answers, such as those that use “always” or “never,” are often false. No matter how stuck you are, always take an educated guess. You have no chance of getting an answer right if you don’t try.

**12. Look for key words in essay questions**  
Read the question thoroughly and be sure you understand the specific topic, as well as what you are supposed to “do” with your essay. Keywords include “define,” “explain,” and “compare.” Prepare a short outline on scratch paper to organize your thoughts, and consider the time you have. Address the topic with a direct response, and address all aspects of the question with specifics, not just general statements. You should use technical vocabulary from the course correctly, but don’t feel you need to show off. Even if you and your teacher differ in perspective on a course topic, you can write an informed answer that reflects you knowledge of different angles on this topic.

**13. Don’t get distracted during the test**  
If other students are being disruptive, ask them to be quiet or inform the instructor. Avoid looking toward their papers. Don’t feel pressured if other students complete the test quickly and leave early; some students take tests very quickly, and this has little bearing on their actual performance on those tests. If you find yourself racing to finish and “get it over with,” be sure to review your answers and check your work to spot mistakes or questions you overlooked.

**14.** **Read the entire question.**  
Read a multi-choice question in its entirety before glancing over the answer options. Students often think they know what a question is asking before reading it and jump straight to the most logical answer. This is a big mistake and can cost you dearly on multiple-choice exams. Read each question thoroughly before reviewing answer options.

**15. Answer it in your mind first.**  
After reading a question, answer it in your mind before reviewing the answer options. This will help prevent you from talking yourself out of the correct answer.

**16. Eliminate wrong answers.**  
Eliminate answer options which you're 100 percent sure are incorrect before selecting the answer you believe is correct. Even when you believe you know the right answer, first eliminating those answers you know are incorrect will ensure your answer choice is the correct choice.

**17. Use the process of elimination.**  
Using the process of elimination, cross out all the answers you know are incorrect, then focus on the remaining answers. Not only does this strategy save time, it greatly increases your likelihood of selecting the correct answer.

**18. Select the best answer.**  
It's important to select the *best* answer to the question being asked, not just an answer the seems correct. Often many answers will seem correct, but there is typically a best answer to the question that your professors is looking for.

**19. Read every answer option.**  
Read every answer option prior to choosing a final answer. This may seem like a no brainer to some, but it is a common mistake students make. As we pointed out in the previous section, there is usually a *best* answer to every multiple-choice question. If you quickly assume you know the correct answer, without first reading every answer option, you may end up not selecting the *best* answer.

**20. Answer the questions you know first.**  
If you're having difficulty answering a question, move on and come back to tackle it once you've answered all the questions you know. Sometimes answer easier question first can offer you insight into answering more challenging questions.

**21. Make an educated guess.**  
If it will not count against your score, make an educated guess for any question you're unsure about. (Note: On some standardized tests incorrect answers are penalized. For example, a correct answer may be worth 2 points, an unanswered question 0 points, and an incorrect answer -1 points. On these tests, you can still make an educated guess, but only when you're able to eliminate at least one or two incorrect answers.)

**22. Pay attention to these words...**  
Pay particularly close attention to the words *not*, *sometimes*, *always*, and *never*. An answer that includes *always* must be irrefutable. If you can find a single counterexample, then the answer is not correct. The same holds true for the word *never*. If an answer option includes *never* a single counterexample will indicate the answer is not the correct.

**23. It's usually best to stick with your first choice--but not always.**  
It is best to stick with the answer you first chose after reading the question. It is usually counterproductive to constantly second guess yourself and change your answer. However, this doesn't mean your first answer choice is necessarily the correct answer choice. While multiple choice tests aren't usually intentionally designed to trick or confuse students, they are designed test students' knowledge and ability. To this end, the answer options provided will often include the *the most common wrong answer* among the choices or answers that seem logical but are ultimately incorrect, or the *best* answer.

**24. "All of the above" and "None of the above"**  
When you encounter "All of the above" and "None of the above" answer choices, do not select "All of the above" if you are pretty sure any one of the answers provided is incorrect. The same applies for "None of the above" if you are confident that at least one of the answer choices is true.

**25. When there are seemingly two correct answers.**  
When two answers are correct in a multiple choice question with an "All of the above" option, then it's probably the correct choice.

**26. Place your bet on the positive option.**  
In most cases, a positive option is probably true if there is also a negative one.

**27. The more information... the better.**  
More often than not, the correct answer usually contains more information than the other options. This is good to know if you must guess.