General Test Taking Strategies

Before you begin:

1. Preview the test before you answer anything. This gets you thinking about the material. Make sure to note the point value of each question. This will give you some ideas on budgeting your time.
2. Quickly calculate how much time you should allow for each section according to the point value. (You don’t want to spend 30 minutes on an essay question that counts only 5 points).
3. Do a “mind dump”. Using what you saw in the preview, make notes of anything you think you might forget. Write down things that you used in learning the material that might help you remember. Outline your answers to discussion questions.

Taking a Test:

1. Read the directions. (Can more than one answer be correct? Are you penalized for guessing? Etc.) Never assume that you know what the directions say.
2. Answer the easy questions first. This will give you the confidence and momentum to get through the rest of the test. You are sure these answers are correct. Try not to spend too much time on one question.
3. Go back to the difficult questions. While looking over the test and doing the easy questions, your subconscious mind will have been working on the answers to the hardest ones. Also, later items on the test might give you useful or needed information for earlier items.
4. Answer all questions (unless you are penalized for wrong answers).
5. Ask the instructor to explain any items that are not clear. Do not ask for the answer, but phrase your question in a way that shows the instructor that you have the information, but are not sure of what the question is asking.
6. Try to answer the questions from the instructor’s point of view. Try to remember what the instructor emphasized and felt was important.
7. Use the margin to help you figure out if the question does not seem clear or if the answer seems ambiguous.
8. Circle key words in difficult situations. This will force you to focus on the central point.
9. Express difficult questions in your own words. Rephrasing can make it clear to you, but be sure you don’t change the meaning of the question.

10. Use all of the time allotted for the test. If you have extra time, cover up your answers and actually rework the question.

What to do during the Exam?

1. Memory Data Dump: Turn your test over and immediately write down all of the information that you may forget.

2. Second Memory Data Dump: Write down anything else that you may forget. Your preview may have triggered some more ideas.

3. Quickly review the whole exam, before you answer any of the questions.

4. Take time to read the instructions carefully, twice if you need to. Remember this is time well spent.

5. Begin by answering the easiest questions first, to build up your sense of confidence.

6. If you blank out on a question, or can’t answer it, skip it and go on to another.

7. When you are unsure about an answer, mark the question (i.e. star it) and go back to it if you have time at the end of the exam.

8. If you get overwhelmed with anxiety use some of the relaxation techniques you have learned to relax your mind and your body.

9. Keep track of the time so that you can pace yourself appropriately. How much time you spend on a question should depend on how much the question is worth.

10. If you are unsure about what is being asked in a question, ask the instructor or proctor for clarification.

11. Eliminate any negative self-talk and replace it with more helpful statements to yourself.

12. Use other distraction skills to reduce your anxiety, such as: sharpening your pencil, having a drink, eating a snack or going to the washroom.

13. Avoid focusing on what other students are doing during the exam, this is an unhealthy distraction.

14. Don’t panic when you aren’t the first to hand in your exam, you don’t get extra marks for finishing early.

15. Answer Difficult Questions: Read each difficult question twice and set a time limit for solving it. Make yourself stop when your time limit is up. Return when you reach the end of the exam.

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16. Review Skipped Questions: Return to skipped questions at the end and recall any related information that you can.

17. Guess at Remaining Questions: Do not leave any questions blank. You may be able to earn at least partial credit if you have attempted to answer the question.


19. Use any extra time to review your answers, but don’t change your answers unless you are sure they are correct.