

# Test-Taking Strategies: Different Test Formats

Academic Success Center  
Iowa State University

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- When you are finished, check your work. If you substitute your answer back into the equation, do you have an equality (assuming that an equality was your goal)? In some cases, inserting the answer back into your work isn't helpful (as when the result is infinity, zero or one). In this situation, ask yourself simply "does the answer make sense?" Is it reasonable?
- Lastly, always check your units and be certain your answer is in the proper form.

## Short Answer

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- Use your initial survey of the test to determine how much time to spend on each response. Also consider how much space is provided and how many points the question is worth.
- Short answer responses require no introduction and should be brief and to the point.
- Do not fall into the trap of elaborating on a short answer question because you feel confident of your response. Answer succinctly and continue onward.

## Essays

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- Underline or circle the important words in the essay question. Be careful to note when more than one question is asked and which particular points must be addressed.
- Consider what the question is asking *exactly*. Are you asked to *analyze*, *interpret* or *describe* in your reply? Although these words might be used interchangeably in conversation, as part of an essay response they have very specific meanings. Be certain that your response is framed appropriately.
- Think before you write. Take a moment to construct a brief outline of your response. This will save you time in the long run and help you to keep your essay on task.
- If the essay asks you to answer multiple questions, number them on the sheet and be certain to address each systematically. Weigh your responses evenly unless the question specifically requests otherwise. If you answer one half of the essay in three pages and the other half in one paragraph, you might only receive 60% credit for the entire essay.
- Get to the point. Avoid wordy, rambling sentences by using brief transition words: for example, accordingly, similarly, finally.
- Avoid personal opinions. Your answers should be factual and cite supporting evidence unless otherwise requested.
- If you are running out of time and not done so already, outline the remaining points you wish to make in your essay. You might get partial credit for these concepts even if they are not presented in essay form.
- Check your spelling and grammar when you are done.
- As you proofread your essay, ask yourself whether you have answered the question(s)? If you have not, what points might you briefly insert or elaborate upon to bring the essay into focus?

## Open Book Exams

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- Open book exams are sometimes given when a student needs to refer to charts or other materials in the text. You must prepare for an open book exam as thoroughly as you would for a closed book exam. You won't have time to re-read and look for formulas during the test.
- Number and index your text book so that the parts of it that you need to reference are easy to find.

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## True/False

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- The statement must be 100% true in order to be marked "true," not 50% true or even 99%. This could be the difference of just one word, so read carefully.
- Because of this, false answers tend to be extreme in their wording and true answers moderate.
  - **Usually false key words:** no, never, none, always, every, entirely, only
  - **Usually true key words:** sometimes, often, frequently, ordinarily, generally
- When in doubt, guess "true." You have a 50% chance of being right, and since the purpose of the exam is to impart accurate information, tests tend to be weighted slightly toward true answers.

## Multiple Choice / Objective Tests

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- Read the directions carefully, as you might be asked to select the one incorrect option or to choose more than one answer.
- As with true/false questions, be sensitive to the wording of the question and answers. Is the wording extreme or moderate?
- Eliminate any answers which are obviously wrong first.
- Choose the best answer, which is not necessarily the familiar answer. Try not to second guess yourself.
- If you are stuck, select "all of the above," if that is an option. As with true/false questions, the purpose of the exam is to teach as well as test, so "all of the above" is correct slightly more often than you might expect.

## Math & Science Problems

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- Read through the problem carefully to discern what the question is asking precisely. Be able to state the problem in your own words.
- List the knowns, the implied unknowns and the parameters of the problem using your own notation. What relationship do the assembled facts have to one another? Do any formulae jump to mind? If so, write them down. Even if you do not ultimately use them, having them on the page that is one less thing you have to recall in memory as you try to decide how to proceed.
- Draw any appropriate diagrams or illustrations.
- Does the problem remind you of something from your text or lecture notes? If so, what was the case then? Does it apply to this problem?
- Mentally round the numbers in the problem so that they are friendlier to work with. A relationship between two numbers might suggest itself if you view .00000199 and .00000398 as simply 2 and 4.
- A problem can often be broken down into several smaller problems done in sequence. Rather than thinking "how can I get from A to D in one move," ask yourself what are the steps between A and D. Even if you can only work out how to get from A to B, you have still solved one third of the total problem: A to B, B to C, and C to D.
- Sometimes you can solve a problem by working backwards. Using the previous example, if you have solved for B, but still cannot find C, see if you can solve another part of the problem by working backwards from D to C.
- If you get stuck, move along and come back to the problem after you have attempted the others. Never erase your work. You don't know what might ultimately be useful to you later, and the instructor might consider that work for partial credit.
- If you come back to a problem and still cannot find the answer, circle the work that you want the instructor to grade (assuming you have more than one approach on the page). Cross out the superfluous work, leaving it still readable.