STRATEGIC TEST-TAKING: BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE EXAM

Getting A’s on exams is rarely due to luck. Achieving good grades takes long-term planning, preparation, discipline, and practice. Here are some basic strategies for better test performance. Try them out!

BEFORE THE EXAM
- Know what the exam will cover. Collect study materials, such as class notes, old exams, the study guide.
- Allow enough time, preferably a week, to review your study materials and to create study tools. Spaced review increases retention significantly more effectively than cramming.
- Try studying in different places to vary the context you study in and maximize retrieval cues.
- In general, students perform better on exams if they prepare as if it were an essay exam.
- Test yourself as often as possible. Not only does this tell you what you know and don't know, but retrieving information by self-testing is one of the best ways to increase retention.
- For better memory recall, get a good night's rest the night before; avoid marathon or all-night study sessions.
- Don’t forget to eat! Include proteins and avoid excessive amounts of sugar and caffeine.
- Be confident in your ability to do well! Use positive self-talk.
- Practice relaxation techniques in advance (such as deep breathing or guided imagery) if you are prone to test anxiety.

DURING THE EXAM
- Ignore or avoid other test-takers; their anxiety might be contagious.
- Sit in your usual seat, if possible, but sit where you can avoid distractions, such as people leaving.
- Bring all necessary materials, i.e., pencils, pens, a watch, calculator, scratch paper, blue book, etc.
- Know exactly how long you have to complete the exam.
- Listen carefully to any verbal instructions.
- When you are given the test, take a deep breath, RELAX and read the directions carefully.
- Review the entire test before starting to answer any questions.
- Set up a schedule and budget your time. Be aware of how many points each answer is worth.
- Answer the easiest questions first.
- Change your answer only if you’re absolutely sure that your second choice is correct.

AFTER THE EXAM
- Review the exam and count the points. Could the TA or grader have made a calculating error?
- Identify if you missed questions because you couldn’t remember it during the test, if it was something you had never studied, or if it was a careless error such as a misplaced decimal.
- Analyze the test-taking strategies you used. What worked? What did not? Did you start preparing early enough, or could you have started studying for the exam earlier?
Use this information to decide how you’ll approach your next exam.
Be gentle with yourself and give yourself credit for what you did right!