

How to Study: Preparation for Test Taking and Exams



1. Perform a Self-needs Analysis

The first step to take when preparing to study for an exam is to perform a self-needs analysis to identify your knowledge base in relation to the information provided in the test plan. To do this, follow these steps:

- Look carefully at the areas of practice tests that you have scored well on—and congratulate yourself on a successful review! Now, take a look at the areas where you have scored the lowest. Is the score low enough to jeopardize your chances of passing the test? If so, you will need to spend more time on the content that links to those areas in the textbook.
- Go through your notes and text references. Select what is important and star, underline, or highlight this information.
- Categorize this information in terms of material that you need to spend more time learning or material that you need only to review.

2. Planning for Study

- Look at the period of time available to you for study from now and when you are scheduled to take the exam. Ideally, plan to study material that you don't know very well until four nights before the test. By then, you should know everything well enough to begin the review phase, which lasts three nights. During those three nights, you should work on nothing but reviewing what you already know. Finally, the night before the test, don't do any reviewing or studying at all. Instead, spend that time relaxing. If you have limited time to study, plan your time so that you have at least one night for nothing but review.
- Identify your maximum concentration time for profitable study. It's better to block out short periods of time (45-60 minutes, interspersed with planned breaks) than setting aside three hours of time to study, which may only produce 90 minutes of quality study time.
- When you decide what your maximum time for profitable study is, then that is the block of time you should set aside on a regular basis for study purposes. Within the confines of your allocated study time, make sure you establish a schedule that permits you to completely cover all the material to be learned.

3. How to Study

- To promote maximum concentration, make sure that your study materials are your prime area of focus.
- Study in a room where you are mentally alert and will be free from outside interruptions. If possible, choose a room with no telephone.
- Do not smoke, do not nibble on snacks, and do not answer the telephone. This will allow you to direct your energy to the study activity.
- Proceed with your planned study periods in an organized manner by choosing an approach that will be meaningful to you. Some content lends itself to study using concepts, while other content is best studied using processes or procedures.
- Use methods of memory improvement that will work for you. Concentrate on the information you identified in your self-needs analysis as needing to be learned.
 - Mnemonic devices (where a letter represents the first letter of each item in a sequence) are an effective means of retrieving material.
 - Mental imagery is the technique of forming pictures in your mind to help you remember details of the sequence of events, such as application in a color process.
 - Try practicing self-recitation to improve your study habits. Reciting to yourself the material being learned will promote retention of information being studied.
- The final step of your study program involves organizing the material so that you will be able to learn all the "need to learn" and review all the "need to review" information within the allotted study time period. Your schedule should have allowed you to complete your review so you can close your books and do something relaxing on the night before the examination.

4. Final Preparation for Test Taking

In addition to having studied appropriately to assure yourself of a good knowledge base, there are measures you can take to be in prime physiologic and psychologic shape for writing the examination.

Physiologic Readiness

To prime yourself physiologically, you should meet your own needs for nutrition, sleep, and comfort.

- *You will function best if you are well nourished.*
 1. Plan to eat three well-balanced meals a day for at least three days prior to the examination.
 2. Be careful when choosing the food you consume within 24 hours of the examination.
 - a. Avoid foods that will make you thirsty or cause intestinal distress.
 - b. Minimize the potential of a full bladder midway through the examination by limiting the amount of fluids you drink and by allowing sufficient time at the test site to use the bathroom before entering the room.

- *Assess your sleep needs.*

1. Determine the minimal amount of sleep you need in order to function effectively.
2. Plan to allow sufficient time in your schedule the week before the examination to provide yourself with the minimum sleep you need to function effectively for at least three days prior to the examination.

- *Plan your wardrobe ahead of time.*

1. Shoes and clothes that fit you comfortably will not distract your thought processes during the exam.
2. Include a comfortable sweater.
3. Your clothes for the test day should be ready to wear by the night before the examination.

- *If you wear glasses or contact lenses, take along an extra pair of glasses.*

- *If you are taking medications on a regular basis, continue to do so during this period of time. Introduction of new medications should be avoided until after completion of the examination.*

Reducing Psychologic Stress

While a certain amount of anxiety will stimulate your nervous system to focus keenly on the examination, excess anxiety will interfere with your ability to concentrate on the examination and will hinder your success. You must approach the examination with a positive attitude.

You have graduated from a school or program that has prepared you to provide professional services to your clients in a safe and effective manner. Trust that the curriculum in your school was designed to include all the important concepts and principles necessary for success at this. Keeping these points in mind will enable you to approach the examination with a positive frame of reference for success. Minimize the anxiety-producing situations related to writing the examination by carefully planning your pre-examination activities. Make a list of the important things you need to accomplish.

- Rehearse the route or means of transportation you plan to take to the test location, preferably at the same time of the day on which you actually will be going. Check your local resources for road conditions that might necessitate altering your planned route. In your time assessment, include parking your car, locating where you will report for registration, and locating the bathrooms. To ensure adequate travel time and to minimize stress related to getting to the test site on time the morning of the test, add an extra 30 minutes to the total time needed for the rehearsal run.
- Have your admission materials readily available.



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- If you are staying overnight near the test site, be sure you pack everything you will need. Before retiring for the night, make your rehearsal run to the test location in preparation for the next day.
 - Plan to use relaxation exercises to control your anxiety level. If you have been using a specific method of relaxation successfully, then continue using it during this period of time. If you have not, consider trying one of the following:
 - Active progressive relaxation (Flynn, 1980): requires a quiet environment, a comfortable sitting position, and progressive tension and relaxation of individual muscle groups.
 - Guided imagery: requires using your imagination to create a relaxing sensory scene on which to concentrate.
 - Breathing exercises.
 - Relaxation response (Benson, 1975): requires a quiet environment, a mental device, a passive attitude, and a comfortable position.

For any of the methods to achieve the desired results, you must be willing to commit the time necessary to implement their prescribed protocols.

5. Taking the Test

While having a good knowledge base is important for success in test-taking situations, the following strategies can be used to maximize your skill in choosing the correct answers.

- Take your seat and give yourself an opportunity to implement the method of relaxation you have been practicing.
- Read the directions carefully and then be sure to follow them carefully.
- Plan to manage your time effectively. While taking the test, work steadily. Don't let a question about which you're unsure take up too much of your time.
- Read the stem of the question carefully. This is the part of the question that describes what is being asked.
- Read the stem a second time to be clear about what the question is asking.

For Multiple Choice Questions:

- Move to the four answer choices. One will be correct and three incorrect. Incorrect answers are called distractors.
- Carefully evaluate the answer choices for key words. Be sure to appreciate the universality of words such as each, all, never, and none; the limitations of words such as rarely, most, and least; and the latitude offered by words such as usually, frequently, and often.

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- Read each option twice.

Answer it by saying to yourself

1. Yes, it answers what is being asked.
2. No, it does not answer what is being asked.
3. Maybe it answers what is being asked.

Use this procedure for all four answer choices. When you first read the question, if an obvious answer comes to mind, restrain your desire to look for it in the answer choices. Read all four choices to make sure your thought was indeed the only yes answer. If you are fortunate enough to have only one yes answer, then you have eliminated the three distractors.

If you identified more than one yes option, then evaluate those in terms of which is more yes than maybe. If you have no yes answer, then evaluate the maybe choices for one that leans more toward yes.

Always choose the answer that has the highest likelihood for being yes (correct). Look critically at the answer choices for clues. If you see choices that are opposites, frequently one is the correct answer.

- If you have an answer that contains more than one option, all of the options must be correct for that choice to be correct. If you can eliminate one of the options in an answer, you can automatically eliminate the other answer choices with that option.

- Look for options that do not meet the requirements of the stem.

For example: Rather than using bar soaps, which can grow bacteria, you should provide a) baby cleanser b) pump-type antibacterial soap c) alcohol wipes d) a wash cloth.

Choices a, b, and c are all products used to clean. Choice d is an implement used for cleaning rather than something that you would use instead of bar soap, and therefore it does not meet the requirements for the stem and must be eliminated as a possibility. Now choose among the remaining options. The correct answer is c.

- If the stem asks for the exception or which choice is not the answer, you are looking for the no answer rather than the yes answer.

For example: All of the following are primary colors EXCEPT a) red b) green c) blue d) yellow.

Choices a, c, and d are all primary colors and, therefore, yes responses. Choice b is the no response and, therefore, the correct answer.

- Be careful to avoid reading elements into the question that are not specifically included in the stem and answer choices.

References and Suggested Readings

Benson, (1975). The relaxation response. New York: Morrow. Benson, & Proctor, W. (1985). Beyond the relaxation response. New York: Berkley. Bloom, et al. (Eds.) (1956). Taxonomy of educational objections. Handbook I, The cognitive domain. New York: Longmans, Green. Bowie, MD: Brady. Levy, (1989). The fine arts of relaxation and meditation. New York: Wisdom Publications.