

TAKING TESTS¹

Tips for answering ANY type of question

1. **Read the entire question.** Make sure you *understand everything* that is being asked for. **MAKE SURE YOU ANSWER THE QUESTION.** If you don't understand it, or if it seems vague to you, ask your instructor for clarification.
2. **Be on the lookout for key concepts that the instructor has emphasized.** For example, in this class, if you see the words "correlate" or "correlation" and "cause" in the same question, remember that a lot of emphasis was placed on "Correlation does not imply causation." The question may be looking for you to figure out whether "cause" is incorrectly inferred. Another example from this class – you may notice in the class and notes on Chapter 8 (Learning) that "Punishment is not the same as negative reinforcement," was emphasized. Do you think it's likely that you will see a question that asks you to distinguish between punishment and negative reinforcement?
3. **Manage your time.**
 - Read through the entire exam and quickly allocate the allotted time for answering the questions (e.g., 30 min. for short answer questions; 30 min. for essay questions, 10 min each).
 - Don't get stuck on difficult questions; come back to them later. Answer the short, easy questions first.
 - Watch the time as you work on the test; move on if you're stuck.
4. **Look for answers in other questions.** A word, a date, a definition, an example that you can't think of may appear elsewhere in the test; or another question may stimulate your memory.

Tips for answering short answer questions (multiple choice, matching, fill in the blank, T/F)

Multiple Choice:

1. **Answer each question mentally before looking at the alternatives;** if your answer matches one of the alternatives, that helps you to eliminate some of the choices.
2. **Read all of the alternatives before answering;** sometimes two will be similar, or an earlier one won't be as good an answer as a later one.
3. **If you don't know the answer and if there is no penalty for guessing, then guess:**
 - If two answers are similar, choose one of these two answers
 - If two answers have similar-sounding or similar-looking words (authoritarian, authoritative), choose one of these.
 - If the answer calls for sentence completion, eliminate alternatives that would not form grammatically correct sentences.
 - If two quantities are almost the same, choose one of them.
 - If the answers cover a wide range (2, 70, 450, 1000), pick an answer from the middle of the range.
 - You can often eliminate answers that include the words "always" or "never."
 - If there's no penalty for guessing and none of these techniques helps, try eenie meenie miney moe – you'll still have (typically) a 1 in 3 or 1 in 4 chance of being correct.

Matching:

Similar to Multiple choice – answer each question mentally before looking at the choices, and read all of the choices before answering. Guess if you don't know the answer (if there is no penalty for guessing).

True/False:

1. **Read carefully.** If any part of the statement is false, the entire statement is false.
2. **Look out for qualifiers;** often, most, rarely, few are sometimes the keys to the question. Absolute qualifiers like all, none, always, never are often clues to false statements.
3. **Guess** if you don't know the answer, and if there is no penalty for guessing.

¹ Some of these tips were paraphrased from Ellis, Dave (2004). *Becoming a Master Student, 10e (Concise)*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Open Book Exams:

Caution: these are often more difficult than in-class exams. Don't make the mistake of not studying before an open-book exam; you will need to know where and how to find the information, and the answers may be more likely to require you to integrate or interpret information than merely look up answers.

Short-answer and Fill-in-the-Blank:

1. **Be brief.** Provide key words and facts.
2. If you've **overlearned the material**, you will be able to recall the answers quickly.
3. **Brainstorm on associations** surrounding the question if you can't recall the answer immediately.

Tips for answering essay questions

1. **Look for key words and phrases.** Underline them in the question. Some of these are:
 - **list at least [three]...** - list at least [**THREE**] of the items asked for. You'll lose points if you only list one.
 - **list and define** - provide definitions for each item.
list and give examples - include examples for the items. (Sounds obvious? You'd be surprised how often the definitions or examples are omitted.)
 - **compare, contrast** – point out similarities and differences; set differences in opposition to each other.
 - **explain** – clarify an idea, give reasons for an event.
 - **relate** – describe how two events, concepts, ideas are connected, or how one explains the other. You also need to summarize the concepts or ideas, unless they are summarized in the question.
 - **summarize** – be brief, mention the main points and conclusions, avoid details.
 - **describe** – give a detailed account; list parts, characteristics, qualities
 - **analyze** – identify the components, examine them, discuss them, interpret them
 - **criticize** – make judgments about comparative worth; may involve analysis
 - **define** – give a definition in the context of the course material
 - **distinguish between** – usually requires you both to define the concepts **and** to point out their differences
2. **Outline your answer**, and jot down notes or keywords to help you remember information that you intend to include. If you're taking a test in class, the outline may get you partial credit if you don't have time to complete your answer.
3. **Don't pad your answer with verbal fluff**, such as, "This is a very important concept, which is necessary to understand." Avoid general introductions. Get to the point quickly, and keep your answer concise. Start with the most solid and critical points first – don't save the best for last.
4. **Keep your answers tied closely to the subject matter of the class.** If you are asked for examples of research on punishment, for example, give examples of research on punishment. Don't launch into a description of how your parents punished you as a child.
5. **Manage your time.** Don't spend all of your time answering one essay question if the test consists of six. No matter how well you answer the first question, you won't get credit for the other five. Short, complete answers (or even partially complete answers) on all questions will probably get you more credit than leaving some questions blank.
6. **Some tips on presentation (Note: "easy to read" is a common theme!):**
 - **Write legibly** (if it's a take-home essay, type it or at least print it clearly).
 - **Write on one side of the paper.** Writing on the second side often "bleeds" through and makes both sides harder to read.
 - **Use pen or a dark pencil.** A light pencil is difficult to read. Some professors don't allow pencil. Don't use red ink, and don't use "fashion colors" like pink, orange, lavender, pale green – they're hard to read.
 - **Review your answer** for clarity, spelling, grammar and legibility. Errors here detract from your otherwise brilliant answers.
 - **Leave space between lines, between paragraphs and between answers.** This gives you room to add more material if there is time.