

Taming Your Test Anxiety: TIPS

A little stress as you're taking the test isn't a terrible thing; it can heighten your focus, and help keep your energy up. It also means that you care about the outcome. But when that stress turns into full blown anxiety, and that anxiety gets in the way of your ability to concentrate on what you're being asked to do and/or produce, it's time to reflect on your current strategies and consider ways to adjust/adapt your test method (meaning how you prepare, what you do right before the test, how you proceed through the test, and what you do once you've completed the test and are looking ahead to whatever may come next in the class).

1 Prepare Prepare Prepare

One of the most important aspects that can contribute to whether or not you experience test anxiety, and to what degree, has to do with how you prepare for your exams.

To help with your preparation, here are some key strategies to use:

- ✔ **Test yourself to help de-stress yourself:** The results are in (and have been for a while now): testing yourself as a part of your practice is one of THE MOST effective ways to learn content and retain it for later retrieval. Your instructor might provide you with a practice test, or you might have to make one on your own/with classmates. However you can, test yourself while it's low-stakes, before the high-stakes test environment. Not only is it a proven strategy for learning, it's apt to help reduce your test anxiety, too. You'll have tried out the process and already identified what might trip you up (and then gone back and practiced more). And, as you test yourself, consider the following self-test strategies:

- ❑ **Sit with it.** If you're using questions in the text to test your knowledge, don't flip immediately to the answers if you're not sure. Sit with it. Take some time. Try to draw it out of your memory.

- ❑ **Explain it.** If you're practicing with formulas and identifying when to use a certain process, be sure that you can explain how you reached your choice, and all the subsequent steps

- ✔ **Spread out your study:** Move away from the marathons and break that time (4 hours, 6 hours, 8 hours) into one- or two-hour sessions happening four to five days a week. This approach feeds into the memory process because you forget and have to learn the pathways back to the information *and* you get to sleep between sessions (which is when memory transfers from short to long term). Also, you're not cramming: cramming can lead to test anxiety, and test anxiety can impair test performance. Instead, break it up, spread it out, and work to learn it from the get-go.

No one feels good when they cram: it's stressful, tends to cut into your sleep cycle, and is ultimately a time-suck because, according to Krishnan (2013), the brain dumps 75% or more of that information within a week's time (Doyle & Zakrajsek, 2019).

Build out your study strategies:

- 📄 summarize lecture
- 📁 combine notes
- ✍️ create a study guide
- 📖 answer reading questions
- 🗣️ teach someone or something
- 🎨 draw/re-draw from memory
- 🔗 create a concept map
- 🔗 name connections
- ⚙️ etc.

- ✔ **Mix up your practice:** Don't get stuck in a study rut. If you like to re-read or go-over your notes, consider adding to your repertoire. Why? When you're feeling nervous about the test, or experiencing anxiety in the moment, it may be difficult to retrieve information. If you've studied in varied ways, you have more pathways through that anxiety and back to that information. Maybe your footbridge washed out, but maybe you still have some stepping stones or another path through the forest to the information. Seriously. Create a few different routes to travel.

- ✔ **Practice the 80/20 rule.** So many of the students we work with really dig this idea. Spend 80% of your time on new material, and 20% of your time reviewing old material. Doing so means you're never 10 weeks away from what you learned at the beginning. As you're going back into the old material, make connections

between it and what you're currently learning, and ask how all the content speaks to itself. If you're prepping for a cumulative exam, this will be an especially helpful approach to use from the start.

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Test Time

Congratulations! While preparation is a key element to your test taking process and experience, there are also techniques and strategies you can learn and then use in the testing environment that have been shown to have small, positive impacts on exam grades (Wark & Flippo, 1991).

AHEAD OF THE EXAM

- ❑ **Gather everything you'll need.** This includes a writing utensil, note card (if it's allowed), calculator, snack, etc.
 - ❑ **Arrive early.** Give yourself time to transition into test-taking mode. You don't want to be in a rush!
 - ❑ **Find your best seat.** If you don't like seeing people leave before you're done, sit where you can't see the exits (maybe in front, facing the wall). If you notice someone's stressed or anxious, create a buffer of distance.
 - ❑ **Write it out.** Take a minute or two to write out your anxiety — what worries you, what the test means to you, etc. GET IT ALL OUT! And then throw it away and don't look back.
- ❑ **Believe in yourself.** This is an opportunity; try to see it as such.

PRO TIP:
If food isn't allowed, try to eat a light snack beforehand. Your brain's energy will become depleted without food. Feed your thinking!

WHEN YOU RECEIVE THE EXAM

- ❑ **Skim it & plan.** Quickly estimate how long each section/question should take and know the point values. How long do you have, what order will you go in, when will you do a final read-through, etc.?
- ❑ **Do a brain dump.** Get everything you've been holding up in your head out (just a couple minutes on this!): equations, dates, formulas, or other information you don't want to forget.

DURING THE EXAM

- ❑ **Embrace thoroughness!** ALWAYS read each question and its instructions fully. Be sure you know what's being asked so you can accurately deliver.
- ❑ **Cue yourself.** Circle or mark key words/absolute words, or rephrase questions so they're statements.
- ❑ **Answer ALL parts of the questions.** This is where being sure that you've read and you understand the question will pay off.
- ❑ **If you get stuck:**
 - ✦ **Mark the question and return to it later** (you might find helpful clues in subsequent questions).
 - ✦ **Think back:** what did you do to learn this information in the first place? What activities did you use, what did you create, who

were you with, where were you, what is it similar to and different from?...

- ✦ **Write what you know.** Write down anything you can think of that relates to the topic. You might receive partial credit.
- ✦ **Think from the instructor's perspective.** What do they want to know/see? If you put yourself in their position, what content knowledge do they want to know you have?

- ❑ **Develop a system.** From the get-go, pace yourself. Keep an eye on the clock and where you are in the test. At the end, go through the test to be sure you haven't missed anything. Do your best to answer all the questions!
- ❑ **Leave yourself time to double-check answers.** Mistakes happen. In tests, even little mistakes can have big impacts. Make sure you've entered dates correctly, haven't added an extra comma, and have explained everything you've been asked to. If you're doing computations/are being asked to explain computations, reserve time to do a last read-through for anything that might be missing.

IF YOU'RE FEELING ANXIOUS

- ❑ **Consciously relax.** Work to relax muscles in your shoulders, arms, neck, legs, etc. If that doesn't seem to work, try to go back-and-forth between tensing and releasing your muscles. Working to relax your body like this can also help you to relax your mind and help you to approach the test with more calm.
- ❑ **Harness the power of positive self-talk.** Catch yourself if you start a negative inner dialogue about failing the test. Talk that talk down, and in its place, remind yourself "*I can make this happen,*" "*I've already started,*" "*I've been learning this since the start of the term,*" "*No matter what, this is a springboard to what's next.*"
- ❑ **Be confident.** Trust your preparation & your ability to perform well.

PRO TIP:
Breathe & relax! If you feel yourself getting anxious, pause to take 2 to 3 deep breaths, making sure to inhale and exhale so that you're breathing all the way into your stomach. Deep breaths like these can trigger your body's relaxation response, which can help to reduce your anxious feelings.

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After the Test

You did it! You're done with your test! First, take some time to appreciate this accomplishment, and then take some time to consider your experience. Bring your test-taking full-cycle, and learn from what you've done so you can make any needed adjustments moving forward.

- ❑ **Reflect.** What strategies did you use to study, and did they work? How did you feel taking the test? Were you surprised by scores? On what problems? Take time to learn from your experience and adapt/adjust your process as you prep for your next exam.
- ❑ **Get answers.** If you're not sure about your grade, about the answers, or about the content/exam, connect with your instructor ASAP. Get answers! If you're a little nervous about the conversation, write your questions ahead of time and bring them.
- ❑ **Stay positive.** If you get the grade you wanted, keep at it. If you didn't do how you'd hoped, try to learn from the experience. So much of testing has to do with preparation. Don't let an exam stop you in your tracks. Let it inform your next steps.

You don't have to do this alone!

Want to talk about how to prepare for your conversation, or what to do next now that you've got your exam back?

Come and see us at the ASC.

We can help you process, debrief & plan. We're here for you. We've got your back.

Words of Test-Wisdom From Your Peers

"Channel positivity. You can do this & you are more than a grade point average! Just strive to do your best!"

"Do some power poses in the hall before the test."

"Try to avoid talking about the exam negatively."

"Drink water to calm yourself."

"Have something fun planned after the test to de-stress."

"Remember to take time for self-care, both before & after the test."

"Try taking timed practice tests in the classroom; getting used to testing environments helps!"



FAQs

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1. **When I studied I knew it all! Then I got in the test and nothing looked familiar. What happened?!** First, you're not the only one. When we chat with students about this in the ASC, we always ask *how* you study throughout the week(s) leading up to the exam — how often and frequent your sessions are, and what strategies you're using. One or two marathon sessions can give us a false sense of security because things become familiar when we've been looking at them for hours straight. To avoid this, do shorter, more frequent study sessions and make sure you test yourself; not just until you get it right once but until you can't get it wrong.
2. **I thought I'd done well and then I didn't get the grade I wanted. What do I do now?** Learn from your test. Were there particular types of questions that stumped you, or are you noticing that certain types of questions are where you lost the most points? Take this into consideration, and then think about the strategies you're using to prepare with. Make sure that you're practicing with the types of questions you'll be tested on, and visit your instructor in office hours. Take your reflection and thinking with you, and chat about next steps (their recommended study strategies, clarification on questions, additional practice problems, etc.).
3. **I have an exam from 7 to 11 one night, and 8 to 10 the next morning. How do I prepare?** Prioritize sleep the night before EACH of them. If you want to study in between exams, try to wake up early to do so, rather than staying up late and running the risk of oversleeping. Also, put a breakfast break between your morning study and the exam — give your rad brain a rest! And, practice the pairing of the content: as you study throughout the weeks, try to study your night exam content before your morning exam content, to get into that rhythm.



Take Good Care of Yourself

As we prepare for tests, and as we move through the term and towards finals, it's important to create healthy routines and to consider and manage our wellness. Often, as we get stressed and experience anxiety, our wellness routines are some of the first to be sacrificed in favor of more intense study. Be sure to make plans for the following:



1. **Sleep.** Getting enough sleep will support your ability to concentrate and focus, as well as your ability to remain alert throughout the day/during your learning/study sessions. It's also the time when information is transferring from the hippocampus to the neocortex, from short-term to long-term memory. If you're not getting the sleep you need as you study and prepare for your tests, you won't be allowing your brain to engage in that important memory transfer process.



2. **Food.** Be sure you're not dropping meals as you prep for your test, and that you give yourself a meal/snack before you enter your test. You'll be asking your brain to think a lot, and this is hard work. It will need energy to be able to best focus, and to best retrieve the information you're looking for on all of your questions. Often, when we're feeling pinched for time, it's our self-care that gets sacrificed first, and meals are a part of that care. Be sure that you feed yourself to keep up your energy levels and help your brain do its best work.



3. **Movement:** Engaging in regular exercise/movement contributes to your ability to learn and retain information. "The neurochemicals serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, which are released in greater amounts during exercise, improve your ability to pay attention, focus, and concentrate, while also enhancing motivation, mood, and self-discipline" (Doyle & Zakrajsek, 2019, p. 62). Bottom line? Be sure to engage in regular physical activity; it's going to help you learn and retain information that you'll retrieve for the test. It's another area of self-care that gets sacrificed first when things get stressful, but it's one of the most important activities to support your brain and its memory.



4. **Help:** Build your study schedule with enough time to get help when you need it. And don't wait to ask — as soon as you recognize that you're not clear on a concept or sure about a process, or if you're hearing about connections but still not seeing them completely, get help. Meet your instructor during office hours, or make an additional appointment. Chat with your TA or GTA. Ask your peers. Visit tutoring centers. Get that help. It's a part of the learning process and demonstrates a commitment to learning on your part.



5. **Breaks:** When we're preparing for an exam, or for multiple exams at once, it can feel like we have no time to spare — no time to eat, no time to sleep, no time to do anything but study and practice. Don't be fooled. Taking breaks is incredibly important to your process! To make the most of these break times, know how long you're taking, what you're going to do to relax/recharge/refresh, and when you're going to get back to work. Do your best to get up and stretch/find a drink of water/eat a snack to re-energize yourself/take a quick walk/sketch/talk to a person face-to-face/etc. Try to avoid getting onto your phone or continuing to look at a screen if you've been using a screen for your study. Your eyes need a break, too!



6. **Connection:** Support is key, and can mean a lot of different things for everyone. Who can you meet up with, or call, even for a few minutes, and chat about how you're feeling? When you're stressed, or when you're working through stressful days, it's even more important to know who you can connect with, and to remember that you have a web of support. These can be friends, classmates, instructors, advisors, people who are here on campus with you and people who live a distance away. Sometimes, even taking a few minutes to just say hi and share what's happening and get a hug or a high five or make a plan to meet after your test can help set our minds at ease. If you're in between classes and can't connect with someone, you can always come into the ASC. We can listen, offer positive vibes, help you think about what you might do next, and chat about alternative study/prep options.

More questions? Come @ talk with us at the ASC in Waldo Hall 125. We're open Monday through Friday, from 9 AM to 5 PM. You don't need an appointment — you can just swing by!

Our ASC Strategists can help you think through these strategies @ can help you identify other tools @ strategies to use, too. And, our Academic Coaches can sit down with you for 45 minutes one-on-one to think aloud with you about your experiences @ to help you make a test-taking plan: bit.ly/getcoachedOSU.com. **Come @ see us, we're here to help!**