

R TEST-TAKING SKILLS

Test-taking Skills: A Definition

Test-taking skills are those skills not related to subject matter and include your attitude and how you approach the taking of a test.

When you gain skills required to take a test, you will receive a higher score than you might have otherwise.

Not doing well on a test can be caused by nervousness, not being sure what the directions are, not finishing in the allotted time, and other such reasons.

Knowing how to take a test can reduce fear and create a much better situation for you. Knowing the content is the most important step in preparing for a test. However, you may know the content but still be unprepared because you really don't know how to take an exam. You may not even realize that scoring well on a test requires more than just knowledge of content.

This document is designed to help you build test-taking skills. These ideas will help you, not only in school, but also beyond school. You will take some very important tests at Ranken and knowing how to take these tests will be a great help.

The Big Five

There are five major areas for developing test-taking skills:

1. Establishing a good attitude when taking a test
2. Knowing the different kinds of test items and how the test will be graded
3. Following directions
4. Moving from item to item without wasting time
5. Attacking difficult questions/guessing

1. Establishing a Good Attitude

Learn how to control nervousness. Take one step at a time. A little nervousness and anxiety are natural. Don't worry about things you don't know. Learn how to relax when you take a test, and practice relaxing. If you are anxious while testing, occasionally pause and take 10 deep breaths, exhaling slowly while thinking positively, "I'm going to do the best I can," rather than thinking something negative like, "I'll never make it through this test." Doing so will help to calm you and provide an opportunity to clear and refocus your thoughts.

Be physically fit. To perform well on a test requires that you be alert. A good night's rest, a good breakfast, not drinking an excess of fluids, and not eating too much are good steps to take.

Know your personal strengths and weaknesses when you take a test. All students have weaknesses of one kind or another. Establish a plan for improving your weaknesses. For example, if short answer questions are challenging for you, practice writing the answers to possible short answer questions prior to testing. Doing so will help to improve your writing skills and to bolster your confidence.

2. Knowing the Different Kinds of Test Items and How the Test Will Be Graded

Become very familiar with the five most common kinds of items that are given on tests: multiple-choice, true-false, short answer or fill-in-the-blank, open book, and essay questions. Learn the steps to deal with each of the five. (See the Ranken handout [Strategies for Answering Different Types of Test Questions](#).)

Know which of the five kinds of test items will be included on any particular test. Ask the instructor what kinds of test items there will be and study accordingly.

Know how important each test is. Often, students believe that the results of a test are far more important (or less) than they really are. It is, of course, best to do well on all tests, but some tests will affect your grade far more than others. Refer to your course syllabus and gradebook on Inside Ranken to see what percent of your final grade each assignment is worth. Keep in mind, though, that some instructors might list the point value. To calculate the percentage, divide the total points possible in the course by the points possible on the individual assignment or test.

Know how the test will be graded. Ask questions before you take the test. How many points will be given for each question? Know whether guessing is a good idea. For example, the scoring method of some tests penalizes you for not attempting each question. You would want to guess on these tests to avoid penalties for leaving questions blank. On the other hand, some tests are scored using a ratio of correct answers to the total number of questions answered. You would not want to guess blindly on these types of tests because a guess would increase the number of questions scored while unlikely to increase the number of correct answers. Most tests are scored by calculating the number of correct answers out of the number of test questions that appear on the test. In other words, the question is going to count, so you might as well take a shot at getting it right—go ahead and guess.

Know what will count and what won't count when a test is graded. For example, will spelling count on a sociology test? Do you have to show your work on a math test? Will capitalization and punctuation count on an oral communication exam? Ask your instructor these questions before you take the test.

3. Following Directions

Understanding and following directions are important to your success on a test – and in everything, really. Often, when students do not understand the directions they fail to ask the instructor for clarification. When you take an exam, you must understand all directions.

Listen carefully to, or carefully read, the directions, and ask questions about any you do not understand. Know exactly what each word in the directions means. Sometimes words used in directions can be confusing. Be sure to ask the instructor the meanings of any words in the directions that you are not sure about.

Know exactly how to mark machine-scored answer sheets. You can receive a lower score if you do not fill in the bubbles completely or if you leave stray marks on a machine scorable answer sheet. The computer will pick up these marks as errors.

Machine scorable answer sheets usually require the use of a #2 pencil. If this kind of pencil is not used, the answers may not be read by the computer, and you will receive a lower score. Remember, free pencils are available in the Student Success Center.

4. Moving from Item to Item Without Wasting Time

Have you ever become panicked when you are running out of time on a test and think you may not get through it? This issue is very common. Usually, this problem is caused by spending too much time on difficult questions.

Managing your time when taking an exam is a very important skill to develop.

Learn to skip difficult questions. Quickly look over the whole test before beginning. Learn to pick out the easy and hard questions without trying to answer them right away. Do the easy items first. Do not necessarily do #1, then #2, and so on.

The decision to skip an item should be made very quickly, not after several minutes of attempting to answer the question. When moving through a test, this process is probably the most important idea to remember.

If you are using an answer sheet and skip an item on the test, be sure to mark the skipped item on the answer sheet. This technique will keep you from answering the next item in the wrong answer space.

When taking a multiple-choice test, be sure to read each possible answer before marking your choice. Many students read choices "A" or "B," think one is correct, and immediately mark it without reading all choices. Doing so is a serious mistake.

5. Attacking Difficult Questions/Guessing

When you see that a question is difficult, you should have a plan to deal with it. Guessing on an exam will occur, but educated guessing is what will assist you in getting higher scores. In order to make an educated guess, you have to have some knowledge about the content on the test.

Learn to approach a difficult item on a test the same way that you approach a difficult problem when you do your homework. When doing homework, ask the instructor for hints as to how to go about solving difficult problems. Those hints will carry through on the test. And, if you are unsure of how to approach a difficult question while taking the test, ask your instructor for assistance.

Tricks to Getting a Higher Score When You Have No Idea of the Correct Answer

When you have no idea what the answer to a question is and guessing is recommended, some of these hints may help in getting a few more items correct. Please understand that the credit you get by using these techniques is not related to the knowledge tested, and carefully prepared tests will avoid making some of the mistakes identified below.

- In a multiple-choice test, the correct answer is often more carefully stated than the incorrect choices.
- In a multiple-choice test, a positive statement is more likely to be correct than a negative statement.
- In a five-choice multiple-choice test, there are usually more "C" answers than "A," "B," "D," or "E" answers.
- A true-false test usually has more "true" than "false" answers.
- On true-false questions, the words "always" and "never" are usually false. Words like "sometimes" and "usually" in a statement will more often produce true answers.

For more assistance with your test-taking strategies, visit Ranken's Student Success Center.