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How to Avoid Test Panic

Tests measure students' knowledge of a subject or their ability to perform a skill. Tests are a means for students to show their teachers that they have mastered the course content, and they are a basis for teachers to assign grades. Granted, some tests are better or fairer than others, but like it or not, the grades based on those tests are the measure of each student's success in school. Grades can determine whether students will be promoted or obtain a degree, get into an advanced program, and/or even find the job they want.

Because tests can have all these consequences, it is quite understandable that all students at one time or another will be anxious about tests. A certain amount of anxiety is normal—and even desirable—because it motivates students to try to do their best. Just as runners get themselves psyched up before a race, actors before a performance on stage, football players before a game, lawyers before a trial, and business executives before a meeting with important clients, so students need to get themselves psyched up before a big test.

Too much anxiety, however, can spoil a student's performance. If a student is too tense and too worried about doing well on a test, he or she will find it almost impossible to concentrate (Elliott, DiPerna, Mroch, & Lang, 2004). Check with your students to see if, when they try to read their class notes, the words seem like a meaningless blur. When they sit down to take the test, does their mind go blank? These are the signs of too much anxiety.

In this chapter, teachers will find out how to teach their students to prepare for a test without succumbing to panic. Students will learn how to psych themselves up for a test so they will be *motivated* to do their best; they will learn how to relax and how to organize the course content so they will be *able* to do their best. These are the first steps to becoming prepared.

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PREPARING MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY

Psyching Up

For students to do their best on a test, they need to be psyched up for it. Being psyched up helps one to focus all of one's attention on studying for and taking a test (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002). For most people, neither activity is fun, but when students realize that tests are the way we are evaluated in school and that they have to pass them to succeed, then students can psych up and go!

How do professional athletes and actors and executives psych themselves up? Studies of highly successful people have shown that their ability to keep their ultimate goals in mind is the key to their success (Andriessen, Phalet, & Lens, 2006; Cukras, 2006; Gabriele, 2007; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Goodstein, 1999; Klomegah, 2007).

Teachers can help students psych themselves up for a test by helping them visualize their ultimate goal and think about how the test is connected to it. Here are some questions for teachers to ask their students to help them make that connection. Try posing these questions to your students for their reflection when it is time for them to get ready for their next test.

1. What is my ultimate goal in life?
2. Why am I going to school?
3. What relationship does school have with my ultimate goal?
4. What relationship does this class have with my ultimate goal?
5. Is a good grade in this class important to my success in school?
6. Is a good grade in this class important to my being promoted or getting a degree?
7. Is a good grade in this class necessary to my qualifying for the advanced program of my choice?
8. Is a good grade in this class important to further my professional or career interests?
9. Is a good grade on this test important to my final grade in the class?
10. Will it be worthwhile to invest some time studying to get a good test grade?
11. Why is the information covered by this test important to learn?
12. How can the information learned for this test help me in my future pursuits?
13. Do I believe that if I set my mind to something, I can do it?

14. Do I have the ability to perform well on this test if I am prepared?
15. What do I have to do to get myself as *prepared* as possible for this test?

Relaxing

Once students are psyched up, they are ready to organize a game plan and get to work. But they need to know how to keep themselves from getting too much on edge. Teachers want their students to be psyched up to work but not so strung out that they get nothing accomplished. Remember, it is normal to feel anxious about tests, and anxiety can help students work harder and concentrate better—as long as they keep it under control. Prepared students are aiming for high productivity—*consistently* high. To do their best, they need to be highly motivated but not panicked.

In this section, students will discover that the best way to do this is to plan their schedules several days before a test so they will be able to get enough sleep, some physical exercise, and some quiet leisure time—and have enough time to study as well. Students will also learn some relaxation techniques and other ways to stay calm on the day of the test. Students who anticipate getting too anxious preparing for a test might want to review the material on relaxation.

Getting in Shape for a Test

Sleep is important. Staying up all night to study is usually not wise. It is more beneficial for students to get their normal eight (or six or ten) hours of sleep each night than to try to make up for an all-nighter by sleeping late the next day. Students need to be alert to study for a test as well as to take one. Regular sleep habits increase their chance of a good night's rest, and getting up at about the same time every morning means students won't have to rush to fit everything into the day's schedule.

It should be noted here, however, that once in a while, staying up all night to complete an important paper *is* acceptable. It can be an efficient use of a student's time where it means accomplishing an academic goal. The student will be judged on her performance, which in this case is the paper. Short of missing important class notes or sleeping through a test-preparation day, a student's degree of alertness following a term paper all-nighter is not so crucial. For a *test*, however, the performance takes place in school at the time of the test, and doing one's best requires being alert. This book does not advocate staying up all night for every paper, but if doing an occasional all-nighter is the only way to finish a paper and have prime hours available to study for a test, too, then that is the best use of time.

Apart from regular sleep habits, taking occasional breaks from studying for quiet leisure activities and for physical exercise also helps students to stay alert. Physical activities, such as running, working out, tennis, and handball, are good tension breakers as long as they are part of a normal

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routine. Students who do not normally engage in strenuous forms of exercise shouldn't start when they are studying for a test. Instead, a brisk walk or some moderate stretching will help relieve tension.

Students should allow some quiet relaxation time as well to reduce fatigue and tension (Brown & Schiraldi, 2004; Carlson, Hoffman, Gray, & Thompson, 2004). They can use meal times as breaks from studying and then spend a little more time in conversation, reading for pleasure, watching a movie or television show, or listening to music. Relaxing after a meal not only helps to reduce tension: It also improves digestion, which contributes to better health. Moreover, right after a meal, one is not as alert, so studying then will not be as effective as a half hour or an hour later.

A study break—whether involving physical activity or quiet relaxation—should be a reward for a student's hard work. The student should stop studying at the first sign of excessive fatigue. This does not mean the moment one feels a little tired but instead pushing oneself a little further by thinking of the reward, then stopping for a break when one has pushed oneself to the limit of one's concentration.

The teacher could ask students to write out a list of the kinds of relaxation breaks they find most appealing. Students could be encouraged to use them as rewards for studying hard.

But a break is only a break, and the teacher can likewise instruct the students that the activities they list must be used only for study *breaks*, not for *distractions* from studying. Anything that competes for their attention while they are preparing for a test should be avoided: radios, headsets, stereos, computers, television, the telephone, and other distractions should be reserved for *relaxation* breaks.

Staying Calm on Exam Day

When students know they are prepared—that they have followed their game plan to study for the test and know all the techniques for taking essay and objective tests—they will naturally feel more confident. But even prepared students can become unduly nervous just before and during a test. If this should happen, students should be able to fall back on some proven ways to offset nervousness before it gets too serious and they lose control.

Relaxation training is often helpful for students who experience frequent test panic. Some school counselors have training materials or programs (usually on cassettes or DVDs) that teach relaxation techniques. The basic concept of all these techniques is that relaxing physically makes it impossible for anyone to feel overly anxious. The training materials teach a person to relax at will, and with a bit of practice, a student can learn to relax while taking exams (Casbarro, 2004; Gates, 2005; Supon, 2004; Viadero, 2004).

Relaxation Techniques

There are a great many relaxation techniques. Here are a few easy ones for teachers to suggest to their students:

- Inhale deeply with your eyes closed, hold your breath, and then exhale slowly. Do this several times if you need to.
- Sit back in your chair and get as comfortable as possible. If your shoes feel uncomfortable, slip them off; no one will notice your feet under the desk or table.
- Try loosening up your entire body:
 - Tighten all your muscles from head to toe and hold them. Then let all your muscles loosen.
 - Tighten your muscles and then systematically (toes to feet to ankles to calves to knees and so on) loosen each part of your body.

The teacher should recommend that students practice these tension-breaking techniques before taking tests so they will be familiar with them at exam time. They can repeat them as often as necessary during the test. A number of other tricks can help students keep anxiety at a minimum just before and during a test:

1. *Get a good night's sleep.* Even though final cramming will be recommended later in the book as a test-preparation technique, it doesn't really call for staying up all night before a test!
2. *Eat some breakfast or lunch before the test,* but avoid greasy foods and foods with high acidity. Having food in the stomach may help calm nervousness and increase energy, but overeating could backfire, causing one to become sluggish and sleepy.
3. *Students should allow themselves the necessary time to get to their classrooms for a test.* If they are already nervous, rushing will only make them more so.
4. *Standing around and talking to others just before going in to take the test is not a good idea,* as it might only serve to confuse or unnerve the student. Instead, those precious moments before the test should be treated as an opportunity to quietly review condensed notes. (Techniques for condensing student notes will be explained in Chapter 3.)
5. A review of Chapter 6 will help students *be ready when they enter the testing room* and know just how to proceed.
6. Caution students *not to panic just because they are not writing busily while the others are.* Thinking and organizing are likelier to have a much bigger payoff than poorly thought out, hasty writing.
7. Similarly, *students should not be upset if other test takers finish sooner.* Prepared students will use as much time as is necessary to do well. Students who leave early may not be prepared and are not always the ones who get the best scores on a test ("Be a Better Test Taker!" 2002; Lester, 1991; Onwuegbuzie, 1994).
8. If it is impossible to avoid feeling very tense during the test, students should *remind themselves that they are players in this game.* Stress is part

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of it; prepared students can hold up well under the stress. They will play the game and play it well; then they can leave and give themselves a deserved reward.

ORGANIZING YOUR COURSE CONTENT

All of the information in this chapter about getting in the proper frame of mind for tests and all the information in the rest of the book about studying for and taking tests will be of little use without a thorough knowledge and understanding of the content of the course that comes from class notes and reading. The rest of this chapter will suggest how to make class notes and do reading assignments in a way that will be useful to your students when it comes to test-study time.

Class Notes

When it comes time to study for a test, a thorough set of notes is essential. (Chapter 3 provides techniques for using notes to study for a test.) Great care in note taking from the very first day of class is crucial for later test-taking preparation (Barbarick & Ippolito, 2003; Cifuentes & Hsieh, 2003; Kobayashi, 2006; Kras, Strand, Abendroth-Smith, & Mathesius, 2002). Here are some tips for teachers to give to students to help them build an orderly and thorough set of notes. Students can start utilizing these tips in middle school and continue to hone note-taking skills throughout high school and into college.

1. *Go to all classes and take notes on everything the teacher emphasizes.* If possible, sit as close to the teacher as you can so you can hear and see everything.
2. *Be a good listener.* Be alert to what the teacher is saying as you take notes. Train yourself to concentrate on what is currently being said while recording ideas that have already been said.
3. *Keep notes for each class separate from notes for other classes.* This is easier if you use a loose-leaf binder or file folder rather than a spiral-bound notebook. You want to be able to reorganize your note pages and add handouts later when you study for tests.
4. *Take notes on the front side of the page only,* and record the name or number of the class and the date on each page.
5. *Use standard-sized notebook paper.* Try to leave spaces between topics as they change. (You'll find an example of class notes in Chapter 3, Figure 3.1.)
6. *Make your notes complete and clear enough so that they will have meaning later.* You should not write in full sentences; phrases are fine. Just be sure that they make sense to you and that you have captured the whole idea.

7. *If you missed something important, stay after class and ask the teacher about it so you can fill in the gap in your notes.*
8. *Write legibly.*
9. *Develop abbreviations of common words and recurring terms so you can save time while taking lecture notes.*
10. *Use a symbol, such as an asterisk (*), to mark the points the teacher emphasizes.*
11. *Keep assignments or suggestions for reading separate from class notes but close enough to indicate which class they are related to. One good place is at the end of your notes on each topic.*
12. *If ideas or examples come to mind as the teacher lectures, jot them down—but label them “me” or identify them in some other way so you won’t get your thoughts mixed in with the teacher’s words.*
13. *Be alert for clues to test items.* Sometimes the teacher will say, “This is important,” or, “I might ask you this on a test,” or, “You will see this again.” You might want to asterisk and underline these items in your notes.
14. *Always record your teacher’s examples exactly as they are given.* They might turn up again in a similar form on a test.
15. *Copy all charts, diagrams, and lists exactly as your teacher gives them.*
16. *Stay to the end of the class and keep taking notes to the end.* Sometimes teachers run out of time and crowd half the planned lecture into the last five minutes.
17. *Don’t rely on a friend to take notes for you unless you have to be absent.* The notes may not be good, or even if they are, they may not trigger the same information for you as they do for someone else. Therefore, they will not be as effective as notes you take for yourself.
18. *If you are absent, copy someone’s notes.* Try picking someone in class who takes good notes and knows what is going on. Read over the notes. If you do not understand something, ask the teacher first. If you can’t ask the teacher, then ask the person who took the notes.
19. *At the end of the day, go over your notes from all of your classes.* Fill in the places that seem incomplete; in a week, your memory of the class won’t be as clear. Wherever possible, it is an excellent idea to label your notes for each class by topics that were covered.
20. *Label any handouts with the course name or number and the date.* Later, group those handouts with the appropriate class notes by punching holes in the handouts and putting them behind the notes in your binder or folder.

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Textbooks and Outside Reading

Students should keep up with their assigned textbook(s) and outside reading. There may come a time, however, when too much work comes all at once. This shouldn't be cause for panic (Barbarick & Ippolito, 2003; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Kras et al., 1999). Instead, students should complete as many of the steps listed below under "How to Read a Textbook Step-by-Step" as time allows. That way, they'll have at least some degree of familiarity with the material. To *survey quickly* the assigned textbook chapters or other reading and get an idea of the content, follow Steps 1 through 5. If there is time, skim the chapters to get a more detailed picture of their contents as directed in Step 6.

Step 7 tells how to *read* the assignment. Step 8 tells how to *take notes* on readings for test preparation after having read each chapter or section. Steps 7 and 8 will have to be omitted if students have a whole textbook to read in only a few days. The chapter notes collected in Step 8 can be valuable review material prior to chapter, unit, midterm, and final exams.

How to Read a Textbook Step-by-Step

Step 1: Pictures. Go through the entire chapter and look at all the pictures, tables, charts, diagrams, graphs, maps, and other illustrations. Read any written notations under or above the illustration for clarification, and read all the information in tables, charts, and other illustrations containing statistical data.

Step 2: Introduction. Most well-written chapters have an introduction. This will usually be the first few paragraphs. Read the introductory paragraphs to each assigned chapter and try asking yourself the factual questions that a reporter asks—*Who? What? Where? When?*—and the inferential questions that a reporter asks—*Why? How?*

Step 3: Bold Print. Read all the bold print from the beginning to the end of the chapter or section. Very often, the bold print serves as an outline of the chapter.

Step 4: Summary. Most well-written chapters have a summary or some type of wrap-up paragraphs. These will usually be at the very end of the chapter. Read the summary paragraphs.

Step 5: Questions. If there are questions or points for discussion in the chapter or at the end, read them over. These questions will often be clues about the most important information in the chapter.

Step 6: Skim. Starting at the beginning of the chapter, read the first and last sentence of each paragraph. The first sentence is usually a key one. The last sentence usually wraps up a thought and ties it in with the first sentence of the next paragraph. After reading the first sentence in a paragraph, skim through the following sentences until you come to the first word of the last sentence. Then read that sentence.

Step 7: Read. Starting at the beginning of the chapter, read it all the way through. Whenever you come to bold print, turn it into a question and read to answer that question.

Step 8: Note Taking. Fold a sheet of loose-leaf paper in half vertically. On the left half of the paper, write the boldfaced headings from the chapter. On the right half, write a few key words or phrases that will answer the questions you asked from the bold print in Step 7 as well as any words, phrases, or ideas that might show up as test items.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

It is normal for students to be nervous to a certain degree at test time. No matter how well prepared they are, they will still feel some tension. Teachers should instruct students not to be alarmed by this. Even the professional actor, lawyer, football player, runner, and business executive feel tense before a big event. These professionals let their tension work for them and help them sharpen their performance. Students can do the same: if they have prepared well for a test, which is their big event, the odds are very good they will do well because they are *prepared*.

Students know how to psych up when they can see the connection between their ultimate goals and the test. They know how to relax when they get too tense when they schedule their study time before a test to allow for leisure-time rewards and when they use relaxation techniques. And they know how to organize their course content by keeping thorough, systematic class notes and by reading their assignments for content, step by step.