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Test Taking Strategies: A Collaborative Approach

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As many of our students know, test taking can be a stressful, bewildering, and disheartening process. What is more, test taking and the all important score generated from such tests as the SAT, TCT, and GRE determine and provide us with a theoretical "profile" of sorts that determines entry into a university, school or program and even scholarship awards. With such weighty concerns, it is easy to see why many find test taking stressful. However, with good preparation that takes into account the many facets that have an impact on test scores and ability, a student can mentally, physically and intellectually prepare for a testing situation and expect to achieve moderate success.

For years students have been barraged with test taking advice such as "if you don't know the answer, always pick C.." and "you never have three of the same responses in a row." In addition to these there is still the pervading belief that the best way to prepare for any test is to cram like mad right up to the test. If we can change these beliefs and motivate students to begin to look at the test taking experience as an exercise in which they have control, we can certainly expect the stress from the test to dissipate as confidence grows.

I instruct students to prepare for the test taking experience in three ways: physiologically, intellectually and with common sense. Each have their own impact on test taking and each should be addressed with equal care and concern.

Physiological Preparation

I am constantly amazed at the lack of attention paid to physiological preparation for test taking. Students often ignore advice given by the most respected athletes in the world, that advice being, "the body is a machine and must be prepared for the activity you demand from it." What is true for the sports world is true for academics; students must pay attention to the demands of the body in preparing for an exam. Often we rely upon the cliché portrayal of studying being made up of students burning the midnight oil, consuming huge quantities of caffeine, eating inappropriate meals if at all, no exercise and ignoring the body's demands for sleep. The body, especially the brain, needs three things to run at peak performance; oxygen, energy and rest. What we can do to improve the body's reception of these critical components will have an impact on how the body performs in the athletic arena as well as the academic. Here are some widely accepted basic tips:

1. No red meat or heavy meals with complex fibers, fats or oils the night before or the day of the exam.
2. No smoking the day of the exam. Smoking puts Carbon Dioxide and Monoxide into the blood stream. Both of the gases more readily bond with blood hemoglobin, thus, depriving the body of this important gas and, thus, decreasing the amount of oxygen that goes into the brain and body. If it can be avoided no smoking the night before.

3. No alcohol the night before or the day of the exam.
4. Try to aerobically exercise daily for a week up to the exam at least 30 minutes a day and the day of the exam. This increases the body's ability to take and use oxygen as well as improve metabolism.
5. No caffeine the day of or before the exam. No Coffee, Diet Coke or Tea. This is false energy that will not help your body and will quickly dissipate.
6. Try to eat heavy natural (not Snicker's bars) carbohydrate meals the night before and the day of the exam. Foods heavy with natural fibers, oils and simple fats are examples of "good" foods to eat. (i.e. raw vegetables, brown rice, pasta with light simple sauces, whole grain breads, fish, skinned broiled chicken, etc.)
7. Try to get up at least two hours before the test and get at least eight hours of sleep before the exam. Do not stay up all night long.
8. Do not "hunch" over the test. Sit up straight, breathe deeply and give your body the oxygen needed to function.

Common Sense Test Taking

The second area that needs to be stressed is the timeless test taking strategies that can be applied to any testing situation. These have been handed down through the years and work quite well if applied together and carefully to the testing situation. They are what I call the common sense methods towards success.

1. The all time most important tip is to read all questions very carefully. Be looking for the questions that ask for the "converse" response. A converse response is a question that for all purposes you will gleam over as you are taking the test. A question like, "Which response is not 'A?'" and "Which is most likely to be the opposite of 'A?'"
2. If you are guessing, do not change your first guess response. It is usually correct.
3. Understand what type of test you are taking. You may or may not need to answer all of the questions to get a good score.
4. If the test is organized into sections, start with the section you are most comfortable with to both save time and get your cognitive net warmed up.
5. On reading comprehension questions, do not read the paragraph. Use the questions asked after the paragraph to search for the information from the paragraph. The questions are telling you to what to look for and what they want to know.
6. If you are working on an essay test, practice making outlines and writing from outlines.
7. In essay tests, always write in simple sentences and avoid compound/complex sentences.
8. Use page balancing techniques to help answer questions. Work on a test a page at a time. Answer those questions that you most definitely know the answer to. Those that

- are a complete mystery, mark at the bottom of the page. At the end of a section of a test or when you have time, go back and look at those questions again and try to answer as many as possible. If there are questions that still cannot be answered try to eliminate those responses that are most unlikely to be the correct answer. If you can get your choices down to two selections you have improved your chances to a fifty percent guess which is always better than twenty or twenty-five percent.
9. Do not panic. The bane of all test takers, a panic attack eliminates most clear thought processes and makes the test taking experience both miserable and unsuccessful.

Intellectual Preparation

The final area that needs to be addressed is the correct method of studying. Intellectually a test taker must finally prepare what and how material goes into the brain. Correctly studying, not cramming, can ease the stress of studying, test preparation and taking. This is crucial to studying materials for the exam into an order that best facilitates comprehension and retention of material.

By using what materials exist and rendering them into an easily intellectually grasped form, a test taker can begin to get a handle on, usually, the vast amounts of material needed for an examination. By using what materials come from testing sources, an observant and attentive test taker can piece together a formidable plan of attack. These tips are designed to expand the cognitive net of information and increase the mind's ability to access material in one's cognitive net more readily and with greater accuracy. The cognitive net is, psychologists have shown, the method by which the human brain stores and retrieves information as it is needed. Think literally of a large fish net. Each knot represents a parcel of information on a subject. The rope between the knots represents an intellectual link. This link represents learning beyond rote memorization. As you increase the number of knots and links, you increase the overall size and relative success of your mind's ability to extract and use information from the cognitive net. As a test taker makes more and more connections in their cognitive net, thus the intellectual preparedness increases for that and any other test. Below is a list of tips designed to increase one's cognitive ability.

1. Try to find in published materials a list of testing objectives. The objectives tell you exactly what the test will target and thus study. I have even seen testing objectives that tell the percentage each objective is weighted in the exam.
2. Study the test by sections and not as a whole and always ask yourself, "What is this material linked to and how is it connected?" By creating these links in your cognitive net you expand your ability to access the net at different points and with greater accuracy.
3. Do not study the minute details. While it is nice to know

that Reagan was an actor in the mid 1950's, it is much more important to know what Reaganomics meant to U.S. History.

4. Look at the information as a body of knowledge, not as individual separate details. In your mind, be able to identify what a word, subject or event has to do with an era, larger subject or overall event. A timeline, mnemonic device etc. will serve this function well.
5. Do not spend a great deal of time studying chronological order as much as sequential order. Chronological order belies the study of information from dates, ages, etc. Sequential order belies the study of information from active placement of an item in its proper place of usage (i.e. you must do certain functions first before solving an equation).

As we look back over the testing experience there is a common thread that should be apparent. That thread is the assumption that you are at the testing site at an appropriate point and time in your academic experience. There are no tips, magic formulas or universal rules to follow when taking a test. Test preparation is left up to the ability of the test taker and that person's ability to adequately prepare and be prepared. Suggestions can be made to help prepare a test taker for a test; however, it is up to the taker to adequately prepare throughout the classes that make up a program of study. It is ultimately up to the student to develop the framework necessary for a cognitive net to be formed.

Year of the Arts from the Bottom Up,

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Not wanting the Year of the Arts to be restricted to performances on stages and exhibits in galleries, I transformed my section of English 102 during the fall term into an incubator where the study of the arts could thrive. My approach worked on several fronts. On the syllabus, I listed all the campus events that were part of the Year of the Arts. To this list I appended sheets identifying other events in Greater Atlanta. After seeing events myself, I talked about them in class to convey my enthusiasm, to model the informed response, and to demonstrate what plays, concerts, gallery shows, and similar events can mean. I required attendance, but students could pick the events—both on and off campus—that best suited their tastes and schedules. My way of seeing the requirement was met was to specify that at least one paper would be on encounters with the arts and the final paper would combine analysis of a literary work with analysis of a personal experience with the arts. Moreover, the material we read, discussed, and wrote about foregrounded the arts. In some cases the works were about art, such as “Musée des Beaux Arts” and “The Hunger Artist.” Some included allusions to art, and understanding of the work rested in mastery of the allusion. In this group were poems such as “A Late Aubade” and the play *M. Butterfly*. A third category focused on poems that incorporate a theory of poetry as an art form (“I Will Put Chaos in Fourteen Lines”) or stressed the value of seeing differently (“Read This Poem From the Bottom Up”). A fourth angle was to study works that depend on a highly pictorial quality so that we could see the similarity between writing and painting.

Typical works here were the short story “A White Heron” and the poems “Snake” and “The Bull Moose.”

For an impromptu essay the students found these instructions: “Write a high-level personal essay in which you analyze your encounters with art during the fall term 1997.” The rewards rolled in. These papers—written under pressure—told of changed views, changed minds, changed habits. Some who went to arts events out of obligation will be going back out of longing and respect; some who saw superficially claim now they must look in depth.

Year of the Arts in English 102 will be a hard act to follow, but I see the fall term as only a rehearsal. For the show opening in January, I had new texts about arts, new lists of what's going on around Atlanta, and renewed conviction that this is the way to make the Year of the Arts, not a year of formal events, but a series of meaningful moments that redirect individuals. If the focus of the year is to be a part of the academic experience of this university, we have to take it to the classrooms and craft it into the expanding consciousness of every student.

Note: KSU's focus for 1997-1998 is the “Year of the Arts,” a campuswide celebration of the musical, theatrical, literary and visual arts at Kennesaw State University. The purpose of the program is to raise the consciousness within the university and throughout the community of the value of the arts and of the university's accomplishments, potential and direction in the arts.