

**How to Keep Calm during Tests**

*For most college students, exam time is particularly stressful. While there is no guarantee for an easy time on exams, there are some specific guidelines that you can follow that will help you learn more efficiently before, during, and after exam time.*

**Before the Test**

Preparation for exams takes place over the entire semester, not just the night before! And while you are certain to have heard this already at some time in your life, how you take care of yourself physically has much to do with how well you will be able to think clearly and stay calm when facing the demands of the test.

Here are some considerations to keep in mind.

**Prepare** **Practically**

* Know the time and place of the test and what you need to bring.
* Allow yourself plenty of time to do things you need to before the test and still get there a little early.

**Prepare** **Physically**

* Try to stay on a reasonably regular schedule of reviewing, eating, sleeping, and relaxing. Start at least a week, preferably two, before your exams begin.
* A program of exercise is said to sharpen the mind. This could be as simple as walking around the block.
* Get a good night’s sleep the night before the exam. Last minute cramming just creates more stress.
* Don’t go to the test without having eaten. Fresh fruits and vegetables are often recommended to reduce stress. Stressful foods include processed foods, artificial sweeteners, carbonated soft drinks, chocolate, eggs, fried foods, junk foods, pork, red meat, sugar, white flour products, foods containing preservatives or heavy spices, and chips and similar snack foods. If this last list describes your diet, at least change the way you eat before your exams!
* Drink lots of fluids. Ice water has been found to stimulate thinking! Excessive amounts of coffee may produce confusion and even disorientation of thought processes.

**Prepare Mentally**

* Learn your material thoroughly. You will feel more relaxed knowing you have studied well.
* Get help if you are confused or if you don’t feel you know the material well enough. Tutors, classmates, your instructor—all can provide the academic support you may need.
* Don’t force yourself to study beyond your normal limits of concentration. If you find yourself able to concentrate for only ten or twenty minutes, study for only that period of time and then take a short break. Your concentration should return. In fact, short and regular study periods are more productive than lengthy single sessions. So this rules out cramming the night before!
* Don’t try to do a last minute review. Instead, do something that will relax you.
* Don’t talk with classmates about the test immediately beforehand if you know it makes you more nervous.
* Approach the exam with confidence. Focus on what you know, not what you are afraid you have not learned or have forgotten. Look at the test as an opportunity to show how much you’ve studied.

**During the Test**

While you are taking the test, there is more to do than just answer questions.

* Read the directions carefully, even if you think you know what to do. There may be surprises!
* Read over the entire test! This may seem like a waste of valuable time, but, in fact, it will save you time. If you know what’s coming, you know what to expect!
* Plan your approach. Look at which sections are worth more points. You want to place your emphasis on these parts. This will help you know which question to start with. Question 1 may not be as important or worth as many points as question 14.
* Give yourself time limits so you can complete the entire test, starting with the sections with the most points and saving the parts that have fewer points for the end of the class session.
* Once you have read the directions and the entire test, you will know if you do not understand something about the test. Now is the time to ask for clarification. If you don’t, your anxiety will build because you aren’t sure about what you are expected to do. It’s ok to ask questions about a test!
* Approach the test with the attitude that you are determined to do your best. If there are parts you don’t know, accept that and move on. Sometimes the answers you have forgotten will come to mind later and you can go back and fill them in. If you stop and worry, you will just become more nervous and will end up forgetting even more! On an essay exam, write down anything you can remember on scratch paper to stimulate your memory and get your mind focused. Stay active!
* Relax physically during the test if you notice you are not thinking well or your body is tense. Change positions, stretch. Take several slow, deep breaths, concentrating on your breathing. Do this any time you notice you are worrying excessively about one problem or question, not reading carefully, or forgetting information you know.
* Don’t panic when students start turning in their papers. There is no reward for being finished first! Pay attention to the test, not to others or the negative messages running through your mind. If you hear yourself saying “I can’t….” replace that message with “Look what I have done! I can do more!” Worrying, doubting yourself, wondering how other people are doing, blaming yourself—none of these will make you more successful. Pay attention to what you can do to complete the test to the best of your ability.

**After the Test**

* As soon as possible, write down how the test was structured and what you think you need to do next time to prepare more effectively. If you wait too long, you will forget many important points that will help you later.
* When you get your test back, don’t just look at the grade and throw the test away. Look at what you did well! So often we focus on our mistakes and forget to congratulate ourselves for what went right. These are the areas which show that the way you studied worked. You’ll want to use these study strategies again.
* When you look at the areas where you lost points, ask yourself questions about your study strategies. How do you need to study differently for the next test? What was not clear? How were these questions different from the ones you answered correctly? If you don’t know what you can do, see your instructor or a tutor. Mistakes are good! They show us where true learning can begin!

Remember: the goal of education is to learn information and skills so you can use them whenever they are needed. You are also learning how to learn, how to organize and retain information, how to take tests, how to succeed. The more you benefit from your mistakes, the easier your educational journey will be. No one is expected to know all the answers. If you did, you wouldn’t need to be in college. Mistakes can be wonderful when learning is the true goal of education! Thinking of mistakes this way also allows us to be much calmer about test taking.