

## **TEST TAKING ON-LINE WORKSHOP NARRATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the Test Taking Workshop offered by the University of Texas at Dallas Student Counseling Center. If you have any questions about the workshop content, please contact us during regular business hours at 972-883-2575 or stop by our office in the Student Union.

This workshop will include a description of the effects of test anxiety and ways to manage test anxiety, suggestions for developing effective study skills, and tips for taking different kinds of tests.

### **TEST ANXIETY**

Test anxiety can be experienced before and/or during test taking situations such that performance is impaired.

Exams are stressors for some people that induce strong, negative reactions. Some students become easily distracted while studying for and/or taking exams due to their anxiety. Some experience physical symptoms, such as nausea, headaches, and shortness of breath. Others may experience mental blocks in which they “blank out” and are unable to remember the material. Obviously, test anxiety can have some pretty detrimental effects.

### **WHAT CAUSES TEST ANXIETY?**

But what causes test anxiety? Many students complain that they are just not good test-takers. For many, though, a more accurate statement is that they are not good “test-preparers.” They often do not understand what it takes to sufficiently learn course material so they can achieve on their exams. In fact, many students will spend hours and hours preparing, so it is often not a question of not spending enough time.

Some students have difficulty during exams that are a result of poor test taking strategies. For example, believing that a pattern exists among the correct answers or believing that when in doubt, “C” is the best option. Other students fall into the trap of negative thinking, which can fuel test anxiety. For example, some students place unrealistic and perfectionistic expectations upon themselves. Some students may base their self-worth on their performance... such as “if I don’t get an A on this test, then I must be stupid.” Others are concerned with pleasing others and feel anxious because they fear they won’t be able to live up to another’s expectations. For some, they feel competitive with other students and become anxious that they won’t outperform another. Some students’ negative thinking becomes out of control (catastrophic), such that they believe if they fail one test, they’re a failure as a person.

### **OVERCOMING TEST ANXIETY**

Test anxiety, like any other stressor, can be handled effectively. A few strategies include relaxation, rational thinking, good study skills and test taking strategies, and knowing when and where to ask for help are all ways you can tackle test anxiety.

## **RELAXATION**

Before the exam, you might try Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). PMR is a technique in which relaxation is achieved through alternating between tensing different muscle groups and then allowing those groups to relax. Typically, PMR begins with the head and slowly moves down through the muscle groups until the toes are reached. For example, you might begin by raising the eyebrows as high as they can go and holding for several seconds and then releasing. Repeat this several times before moving to the next muscle group.

During the exam, another effective technique is deep breathing. This is also known as Diaphragmatic Breathing. Relaxation can be brought about by breathing slowly, steadily, deeply, and originating your breaths in your abdomen instead of chest. Inhale slowly through your nose while silently counting to three. Hold your breath for another count of 3. Then, exhale slowly through your nose while silently counting to 3. Repeat the cycle several times until you have the rhythm without counting. Deep breathing is an excellent relaxation technique that can be done anywhere.

Counselors in the Counseling Center are available to teach you these and other relaxation techniques on an individual basis. There are also numerous instructional CDs and DVDs on relaxation techniques available in libraries, in stores, and online.

## **RATIONAL THINKING**

Challenging destructive and/or irrational thoughts focuses on changing how we think about ourselves and the situations in our lives. Challenging destructive thoughts can help manage intense emotional reactions.

The way we think about a situation can strongly influence how we feel and behave. Unfortunately, these negative thoughts are often so automatic that we do not know they exist. All we are aware of is the fact that we do not feel good—you might feel depressed, sad, or angry. Thus, we often misattribute our negative emotional state to the event that has just happened. For example, when a student fails an exam and feels sad or angry, he or she might say the exam caused the emotional response. Instead, we need to identify the negative manner in which we are thinking about the situation and alter it, substituting more rational, positive thoughts. In this example, the student might believe that failing the exam means he or she is worthless and stupid. It is these beliefs and this self-talk that is resulting in the negative feelings. Substituting more rational, positive thinking can lead to increased self-esteem, confidence, motivation and less stress. In our example, substituting the negative self-talk with things like, "I have the ability to do well in this class, but I need to alter my study strategies to do better on the next exam," will lead to more positive responses and better future outcomes. As you become more confident and experience more successes, your efficacy will increase.

## **BEWARE THE "ILLUSION OF KNOWING"**

For students who study for sufficient amounts of time and still do poorly, two major problems may exist. They fail to prepare using deep-level learning and processing strategies. Instead, they tend to rely on surface level approaches, such as rehearsal and recitation alone or reviewing notes and textbook readings without elaborating--simply reading the notes without really thinking about them.

Some may also fail to self-monitor their learning while studying. In other words, they do not

accurately (or adequately) gauge how well they are learning what they are studying. Students who self-monitor are able to determine how well they know the material they are studying and thus have a good idea of how well they will be able to answer exam questions.

Failing to use deep-level learning strategies and failing to self-monitor generally leave students with the “Illusion of Knowing.” They think they know the material, but in fact they do not. This may explain why so many students are confident before they take their exams and end up feeling surprised by a low exam grade. This “illusion of knowing” can lead to frustration and hopelessness if the student is not able to view this as a sign that it’s their study approach—not amount of study time—that requires adjustment.

## **EFFECTIVE STUDYING**

Developing a study schedule can go a long way in helping students prepare for exams. Always make sure to mark down all your deadlines. If you write down all your upcoming tests over the course of a semester on a calendar, it will be difficult to be taken off guard. Make it a point to organize your materials before you begin to study. If you constantly have to get up to retrieve something you need, your concentration will be continuously broken, which is not optimal for effective learning.

It is typically more helpful to schedule several short study sessions rather than one long cramming session. This is also more conducive to learning. If you have a big project coming up, break it down into smaller, more manageable parts. Some students become so overwhelmed by big projects that they have difficulty knowing where to begin. By breaking things down, you may prevent the feeling of being overwhelmed. Be willing to ask another student for help when you need it. Classmates can make excellent study buddies. They might understand some material that you didn’t and vice versa.

Find the right environment in which to study. If you are in a distracting environment, not all the material you are trying to learn will get in. Quiet locations, such as the library, are more conducive to learning. Spread out study session over the week before the exam. Don’t wait until the last minute to study (i.e., cram), because this approach does not facilitate learning, but rather the illusion of knowing. An often underestimated strategy is self-care. Often students forgo sleep, exercise, healthy foods, etc. when preparing for tests. Make sure that you take care of yourself.

## **EFFECTIVE STUDYING (Continued)**

Make studying an active process. Don’t just sit back and passively read something. Often students highlight information just for the sake of highlighting and don’t even think about the information they have highlighted. Try to avoid this trap. Recite the information you have gone over. Ask yourself questions about the material you have just read. Review lecture notes frequently. Compare your lecture notes and text readings. Be willing to ask for clarification if you’re unsure. If you don’t want to ask a question in class, visit your professor during their office hours or e-mail them.

## **TEST PREPARATION**

Well before the exam, make sure you have all the necessary materials, such as a scantron, blue book, pencil, calculator, etc. Get to the exam early. Being late for an exam can increase anxiety.

When you get the exam, the very first thing you should do is read the directions. Often,

instructors give important information in the instructions that could be detrimental to you if you don't read it. If you are worried about forgetting information, jot down the information on the test. For example, if you need to remember several mathematical formulas, write them down on the exam before you even begin to answer questions. Answer the easiest questions first. If you're uncertain about a question, circle it and come back to it later. Just make sure to come back to it. Make sure to keep track of the time. Even if you know the material really well, but run out of time before you can demonstrate this... that can be a big problem. Keeping track of the time can help you stay on track. Make it a point to answer all the questions. If you are unsure about an item, look for grammatical cues that might provide direction. If you get stuck, try to remember something that was related to what you learned. This might help jog your memory.

## **GENERAL TEST TAKING TIPS**

General Testing Taking Tips

### **TRUE/FALSE**

There are several strategies that you can use on True or False questions. Remember that the statement must be 100% true to be true. If it is partially correct, it is false. Pay attention to qualifiers such as always, never, best, etc. Qualifiers can change the meaning of the statement. Pay attention to longer statements because each part of the statement must be true for the entire question to be true. Don't read too much into the question. Answer it based on what is in the statement, not what you might infer. When you have absolutely no idea, you may be better off guessing true. This approach is consistent with the idea that questions are true until you prove otherwise. Don't invest a lot of time in these if they are not worth many points. Don't base your current answer on the pattern of Trues and Falses in the preceding questions.

### **MULTIPLE CHOICE**

There are also several helpful strategies to use when taking multiple choice tests. Remember that multiple choice tests may be harder than they appear. Just because the answers are provided doesn't mean the questions aren't difficult. There are different levels of multiple choice questions, many that go beyond simple recognition. Always read the question and options all the way through before responding. Choose the best response, not just a good one. This is another reason it is important to read all the options before responding. If you are stumped, look at each response as a statement and decide whether it is true or false. If it is true, then it may be the correct response. Immediately put a mark through choices that are incorrect. If you can narrow your choices, you can increase your odds of getting that question correct. If time is running out and you still have several to answer, guess. Don't leave questions unanswered unless there are penalties for wrong answers.

### **MATCHING QUESTIONS**

When answering matching questions, consider using the following strategies... determine if an option can be used more than once. Start with the terms you know and then mark off matches to avoid redundancy. Match shorter items (the terms) to longer ones (the answers). This approach helps because you only have to read the long items once and thus can save time.

## **FILL IN THE BLANK**

When answering fill in the blank questions, consider using these strategies... read each question carefully and look for clue words, such as an, as, that, and, the, & these just before the blank. Doing so will help you make your response grammatically correct. Don't leave anything blank. Even if you are not sure of the exact term, write something related. Also, make sure your answer makes sense in the completed statement once you've made your choice.

## **ESSAY EXAMS**

For essay exams, consider the following strategies... quickly write a brief outline before beginning. This can serve as a guide and cue as you write your answer. Always write neatly and legibly. Be as specific and concrete as possible and avoid flowery language and extra sentences for drama. Begin each paragraph with a focused sentence that communicates the main point of the paragraph. Avoid writing a long introductory paragraph. Make sure to include the purpose of the essay in the introduction. Unless asked for, do not include personal opinions. Don't change voice in the middle of the essay. If you start with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, then stick with that. Always write something. If you run out of time, but have written an outline, you might get partial credit because your ideals would be with the answer. Frame the answer as early in the essay as possible. If time allows, proofread your answer.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Thank you for participating in the Test-taking workshop offered by the UT Dallas Student Counseling Center. Please visit the Counseling Center for additional resources such as self-help books and individual counseling to meet your needs. Checking out books and counseling services are offered at no charge to enrolled students. You can learn more about these and other services on our website—[www.utdallas.edu/counseling](http://www.utdallas.edu/counseling). Please contact our office if you have any further questions or would like to make an appointment with a counselor.

Also, please take the short, multiple-choice test provided for this workshop to receive verification that you have completed this workshop.