



How to Increase Test Performance



by Yun C.

MD-PhD Candidate

Harvard University

Queen Elizabeth Advisor

One of the most common questions students

ask is, “How can I increase my test performance?” Every student encounters several tests during a school year, and this can be a source of continuous stress. Test performance reflects your content knowledge and concept knowledge of a topic and topics studied through the year.

In this article, I will introduce you to the top 3 strategies for how to enhance your test performance.

Strategy #1: How to Manage Time During a Test

When the timer starts on a test, begin by carefully reading the test instructions. For example, if the test prompt asks you to “Answer with 3 examples,” you must pace yourself to answer with THREE examples (not two, not four, but exactly THREE). Do not misread or misinterpret the test instructions because this will cost you points on the test.

Time management during a test is crucial. Increase your test performance by dividing your time up. Take 60 seconds at the beginning of each test to make a plan of how long you will spend on each part of the test. Then make sure you stick to it! Students who do well on tests always know how they are going to approach a test, and how to portion out their time so that they don't run out.

Here's how to structure your time for the entire test:

1. Start by looking to see what parts of the test carries the most number of points, and how long you're going to need to get those points. For example, if you write 3 essays and 30 short answer questions in two hours, you don't want to spend ages on a difficult short question at the expense of the essays. Spend 20 seconds looking at the point distribution in the test.
2. Before a test, try out a few different approaches to answering questions on practice tests, and see which plan of action works best for you.
3. Be sure to leave some time at the end of the test to come back to unanswered questions or check over other questions.

Here's a simple 3-step summary for remembering how to allot time on testing. I call this the “Triple A Method: Allow-Allocate-Allot” :

1. **Allow** sufficient time at the beginning to read through the test, decide which questions you're going to answer first, and how you're going to approach them.
 2. **Allocate** time for each question based on the number of points it's worth.
 3. **Allot** time at the end to check your work and fill in the gaps.
- For one week before the test, try to practice writing quickly. If you don't practice writing essays before a test, you may be (unpleasantly) surprised at how difficult it is to write quickly and legibly. Messy handwriting can annoy the person grading your test, and you don't want to undersell your knowledge and thinking by not finishing your answers because you write slowly. Choose a specific type of pen or pencil that you know you can write comfortably and quickly with. Then the week before the test, write out an old test quickly and neatly.





Strategy #2: How to Tackle Difficult Questions That You Cannot Answer on the First Try

There is nothing more nerve wracking than encountering a test question that you don't immediately know the answer to—or even where to begin! To tackle the most difficult questions, begin by re-reading the question carefully. In multiple choice questions, you will have to select an answer from a range of choices. Before you leap in, take a deep breath and read the question very carefully. What is the test really asking you to answer? Do not skim-read, and do not dismiss an answer choice before thinking about it for a few seconds.

Some people like to launch directly into the hard stuff, to get to a question that's most difficult so that they can get it out of the way. However, this can be a huge mistake. If you get stuck, then you'll be wasting the majority of time on that one question, and if you decide not to answer it first after all, you will be worried about it throughout the remainder of the test.

When you encounter a difficult question that you don't know the answer to, translate the question into your own words. Attack unfamiliar words or phrases by sounding them out, or breaking them into familiar parts with meanings you know. Look at the surrounding words and sentences for clues to the meaning of the work. Use your general knowledge. For instance, ask yourself, "What do I already know about ___?" You may be surprised that by rephrasing questions into your own words, you will actually be able to understand what the question asks—and then you may know the answer! Here's my step-by-step method for tackling the most difficult test problems:

1. Understand the problem: Determine what you are supposed to find or answer. What is the unknown? Consider drawing a sketch or flow chart to sort out the test question. Also, note and underline each part of the question. Some questions may seem difficult because there are several parts. Answering each part separately will make it seem easier and more manageable, and will also ensure that you don't leave anything unanswered for which you will lose points.
2. Find a way to solve for what is unknown: Write down everything that is given or known. Write down all the relevant formulas that you know (if it's a physics or math question)

and all the facts that you know (if it's a science question).

3. Carry out the procedures you have devised: For numerical problems, estimate an answer first. This will help you check your work later. Neat, careful work steps keep you from making mistakes, and will easily allow you to find them when you do make errors.

4. Check your final answer: Does your numerical answer make sense? If the number seems too large or too small, chances are that you make a mistake in calculations. If it's an essay question, ask yourself: "Does my essay answer all the parts of the question promptly?" Summarize your essay in a final sentence or two—this will tie your points together. For math and physics questions, circle your final answer so that it's easy to find.

Strategy #3: How to Calm Yourself and Overcome Test Panic

What should you do if disaster strikes? This is every student's worst nightmare, but we are here to help you plan ahead and work through it! If you go totally blank and realize that you've answered the wrong number of questions, or discover that you've misread the question, do NOT panic.

1. Quickly write down what you have done in your test space, so that the test grader can see what has happened, and you may earn at least partial credit for the work you did do. Then, use the remaining time to write a new, or alternative answer in short bullet points. Get in as much information as you can, because you want to show the grader that you've realized the problem and tried to correct your error. Show them that you actually know your stuff.
2. Decide the order in which you will answer the questions. You can calm down by answering the ones you feel most confident about. This will also help you "ease" into the test and overcome your anxiety.
3. Try a focus exercise: Take a breath in and straighten your back. Look straight ahead at something inanimate (such as the clock) and focus your mind on the positive thought, "I CAN DO this test" as you breathe out. If your concentration wanders or if you begin to feel panicky again, try the focusing exercise again, or try one of the additional techniques:



A. Thought-stopping method: When we become anxious, we begin to have negative thoughts (“I can’t answer anything!” or “I’ve forgotten everything!”). If this happens, halt the spiralling thoughts by mentally shouting “STOP!” or picture a road STOP sign. Once you have literally stopped your negative thoughts, continue planning your test, or practice a relaxation technique above.

B. Bridging objects method: It may help to carry or wear something with positive associations with another person or place. For example, wear your favourite red shirt on test day. Seeing your shirt will be comforting in its own right, and will exert a calming effect.

C. Self-talk method: Try to consciously replace negative thoughts with positive thinking. Purposely turn a negative thought such as “I’m going to fail” into an encouraging and motivating thought like “This is just anxiety, it can’t harm me.”

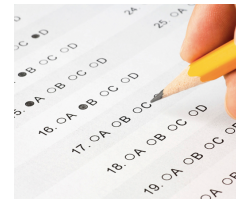
Stress management is crucial while studying for a test and especially important during the test!

You may find, as you read through this article, that you are already routinely practicing some of these skills. There may be other strategies that you’re not practicing as regularly. It is encouraged that you identify one or two of the new skills and incorporate it into your test taking strategies.

How to Tackle Multiple Choice Tests



by Yun C.
MD-PhD Candidate
Harvard University
Queen Elizabeth
Advisor



Taking a test composed of multiple choice questions may seem easy, but often these questions are tricky because of their wording, and you may get stuck on more than one answer choice. Studying for a multiple choice exam requires a special method of preparation and thinking. To overcome struggles with taking a multiple choice test, follow these strategies:

Strategy 1: Understand the Question

Multiple choice questions ask students to recognize ONE correct answer among a set of options or ‘answer choices.’ This means that you will need to rule out several wrong answer choices called ‘distractors.’ You can only arrive at the correct answer choice if you UNDERSTAND what the question is asking. Each part of a multiple choice question has a name:

Stem: Refers to the description you first read. This is often a short narrative that gives you background information.

Lead in: The actual question itself. Usually, it is one sentence.

Answer Choice: An answer hidden among other answers.

Carefully read the information given in the Stem, and do not be careless about understanding what the Lead-in is asking of you.

Multiple choice questions tend to focus on details, and you cannot remember many details effectively in short-term memory from cramming. Learn a little detailed information each day and allow plenty of time for repeated reviews. This way, you will build a foundation of information for more reliable long-term memory recall.