Test Taking Strategies to Support Your Success at Work

### **Test-taking Strategies for adults**

Test-taking doesn’t end with graduation: You will likely have to take a test at some point in your career — whether you’re pursuing additional degrees or certifications, or your job requires periodic evaluations. The great thing is that these test taking strategies can be used to help improve how you work, how you learn, and how you continue improving your skills throughout your life.

When we store information in long-term memory, it’s filed away by rules, procedures, pairs, and categories. There are two ways to access that information: recall and recognition.

#### Recall and Recognition

Recall is being able to remember information on demand.

That’s what students are asked to do on a test or quiz: recall the information that they’ve learned.

*Recognition is the process of retrieving pieces of related information and putting them together to complete an idea.*

When we recognize that something has happened before — that we’ve learned something before — and we can put those pieces of information together, recognition occurs.

Even the best students can have trouble with recall and recognition when tested on material they have learned. Nerves can wreak havoc on even the most prepared. There are strategies, however, that you can use to help assist and promote recall and recognition.

1. Simulate the actual test conditions.
2. Do a practice test.
3. Look up problem-solving and memorization strategies.
4. Use positive self-talk.
5. Rest, hydrate, eat.

#### The Advantage of Simulation

Research shows that to do better on tests, it’s best to practice taking tests in the same environment and under the same conditions as the real test. You’ll experience less anxiety when it’s time to test.

During last year’s social distancing, it was easy to simulate the test environment because many tests were given remotely, allowing people to take them in their home office or sitting on the couch.

Now that things are opening up, you are more likely to have to take a test in an unfamiliar environment. Maybe you have to go to a different building to be tested by HR on a course you took via the LMS (learning management system). Or perhaps you’re getting a professional certification and the exam will be held on a college campus or conference center.

To prepare for the environment you’ll be testing in, visit the location personally if possible. Otherwise, look it up online. This will give you an idea of the size and layout of the test location; you can find out where to park, where to check in, and more from the venue’s website.

#### Practice Makes Perfect

The more important the test is to your career, the more practice you should put in ahead of the actual test date. A good example of this is the Project Management Institute’s professional certification [exam](https://www.pmi.org/certifications/project-management-pmp?utm_job_number=5&utm_campaign_name=pmp_lead_generation&utm_region_name=north_america&utm_program_origin=planned_campaign&utm_program_type=continuous_campaign&utm_campaign_intent=acquisition&utm_funnel_stage=lead_acquisition&utm_initiative=certification&utm_product=pmp&utm_marketing_channel=paid_media&utm_marketing_subchannel=search_ppc_nonbranded&utm_start_date=05012015&utm_end_date=12312030&utm_source=google&utm_custom_field_one=pmp_certification_north_america&utm_custom_field_two=pmp_exam&utm_custom_field_three=457565161392&utm_custom_field_four=pmp exam process&utm_custom_field_five=e&gclid=CjwKCAjwtpGGBhBJEiwAyRZX2sM3zTcIbPbyTrPzJZpZJHg4OrVMgA223P3pJBElG1pPfiz3Zy7AvBoC4aoQAvD_BwE)for project managers. Coursework for a PMP certification takes months to complete, and while it’s comprehensive, the test itself can still be a stressful event. However, the PMI offers practice exams, information on the exam itself, and advice on preparing for it.

If the idea of taking an entire certification test as practice sounds daunting, then avoid tackling it at first! There’s no reason to wipe yourself out with practice.

Instead, take shorter practice tests at first. If a pre-set practice test isn’t available, you can break up the big practice test into smaller chunks.

Another highly effective option often overlooked is creating your own practice test. When we force ourselves to create test questions that we think might be asked, we are forcing our brain to think the way a test-maker thinks. That gives us an advantage and deeper understanding going into the test situation. “When students create questions, they have the opportunity to relate their questions to their own experiences. This then hooks that information into long-term memory because students are relating new knowledge with previous knowledge.”(Arie van Deursen, 2016)

#### Strategy Wins the Battle

Tests administered by a company’s HR department after an LMS course tend to weigh heavily toward memorization. Most professional exams require memorization as well as problem-solving skills.

You can excel at both types of tests by reinforcing your memorization (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1998) and problem-solving skills. Strategies are easy to find through a Google search: For example, the Learning Center at UNC Chapel Hill has several helpful posts like [how to boost memorization](https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/enhancing-your-memory/).

The use of effective test-taking and memorization strategies has also been shown to be positively related to the motivation levels of test takers. That said, test anxiety has been shown to negatively impact the motivation for students to use the very test-taking strategies that would help them succeed! (Dodeen et al., 2014) (Peng et al., 2014). Test anxious individuals have been reported to use poorer study and test-taking skills (Culler & Holahan, 1980; Huntley et al., 2016)

#### The Power of Positive Thinking

How many times have people told us, or have we told others, “Think positively!” Turns out, that simple piece of advice may be some of the best you’ll ever give or receive.

As a teacher, I quickly learned that if a student believed that a subject or class was too challenging and they might fail, they often would fail. So, I worked with students right away, teaching them positive self-talk: That they were fully capable of learning this subject, and that they would succeed as long as they applied tools to learn.

Positive self-talk encourages the brain to release helpful chemicals, dopamine and adrenaline, in the right amounts to the frontal lobe, the part of the brain responsible for problem solving, judgment, and memory.(Oei et al., 2006)

#### Power Up Your Brain!

Hydrating (Lieberman, 2007), getting plenty of rest, and nourishing your body and brain are proven power-ups for test takers.

We are “electrical” beings and our brain’s neurons work by electrical connections. Water has been found to be the best thing we can use to facilitate the thinking process because of its capacity to conduct electricity and assist cell function. So, a simple drink of water before a test or before going to class can have a profound effect on your brain’s readiness to work.

Likewise, being sure you’re well-rested before a test will boost your energy and memory.

And don’t forget to eat something before the test — but not too much. A large, heavy meal may make you feel sluggish.

A final suggestion: Consistency is key to being successful at test-taking. Develop a strategy for study, review, and test preparation that you can easily implement, based on your schedule and life’s other demands, and stick to that strategy. You’ll develop habits that will help you throughout your professional life, especially in building certifications or attaining high-level degrees to advance your career.

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