



Tips for Tests

This handout offers advice on different types of tests and different types of test questions. Included also are 12 common guide words for test questions.

Test Types

Essay Exams

Set up a time schedule to answer each question and to review/edit all questions.

- If six questions are to be answered in sixty minutes, allow yourself only seven minutes for each. This will give you time to review.
- If questions are “weighted,” prioritize that into your time allocation for each question.
- When the time is up for one question, stop writing, leave space, and begin the next question. The incomplete answers can be completed during the review time.
- Six incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than three complete ones.

Pay attention to how each question is phrased and to words such as "compare," "contrast," "criticize," etc. These words should guide how you answer the question.

Write down your thoughts in an outline at the beginning of the test so you don't forget later.

Before attempting to answer a question, put the question in your own words.

Get right to the point in your topic (first) sentence.

- Use your first paragraph to provide an overview of your essay.
- Use the rest of your essay to discuss these points in more detail.
- Back up your points with specific information, examples, or quotations from your readings.
- Begin with a strong first sentence that states the main idea of your essay and continue this first paragraph by presenting key points.
- Develop each point in a complete paragraph.
- Use transitions to connect your points.

Use quotations appropriately.

- Use quotations to illustrate a point, to draw on the authority of the source, or because you could not say it better.
- Quotations can be short. Three or four words can be extremely effective when they are worked into the structure of your sentence.
- Don't over-quote. Extensive quoting may detract from your point or argument.
- A reference to a quote may be as effective as the quote itself.

Review at the end.

- Edit for clarity, typos, incomplete words and sentences, and incorrect dates/numbers.
- If you begin to run out of time, outline your answers. You may be given some credit for this partial work even though your response is not complete.

Open Book Exams

In an open book exam you are evaluated on understanding rather than recall and memorization. Access to content (books, notes, etc.) varies by instructor. The exam can be take-home or in the classroom, and you may or may not see the questions before the exam. Do not underestimate the preparation needed for an open book exam!

To prepare, stay current on readings and assignments in class and take notes on the main ideas and concepts you know will be on the test.

Make your reference materials as user-friendly as possible so that you don't lose time locating what you need.

- Familiarize yourself with the format, layout, and structure of your source materials.
- Develop a system of tabs/sticky notes, color coding, concept maps, etc. to mark important summaries, headings, or sections.
- Write short, manageable summaries of content.
- List out data and formulas separately for easy access.

Question Types

True/False Questions

Every part of a true sentence must be "true." If any one part of the sentence is false, the whole sentence is false despite many other true statements. Pay close attention to negatives, qualifiers, absolutes, and long strings of statements.

Negatives can be confusing. If the question contains negatives, as "no, not, cannot," drop the negative and read what remains. Decide whether that sentence is true or false. If it is true, its opposite, or negative, is usually false.

Qualifiers are words that restrict or open up general statements. Words like "sometimes, often, frequently, ordinarily, generally" open up the possibilities of making accurate statements. They make more modest claims, are more likely to reflect reality, and usually indicate "true" answers.

Absolute words restrict possibilities. "No, never, none, always, every, entirely, only" imply the statement must be true 100% of the time and usually indicate "false" answers.

Long sentences often include groups of words set off by punctuation. Pay attention to the truth of each of these phrases. If one is false, it usually indicates a "false" answer.

Often true/false tests contain more true answers than false answers. You have *more* than a 50% chance of being right with a "true" guess than a "false" guess. However, your teacher may be the opposite. Review past tests for patterns in the amount of "true" answers versus "false" answers.

If the sentence contains words you've never heard of, guess "false."



Multiple Choice Questions

Multiple choice questions usually include a phrase, sometimes called a *stem*, followed by three to five answer options. Read the stem, cover the options, and try to answer the question yourself first. Select the option that most closely matches your answer.

If two alternatives seem correct, compare them for differences, then refer to the stem.



Treat each option as a true-false question, and choose the "most true" option.

Is there an option that contains negative or absolute words? Try substituting a qualified term for the absolute one, like "frequently" for "always" or "typical" for "every" to see if you can eliminate the option this way.

If you know two of three options seem correct, it is a strong possibility that "all of the above" is the correct selection.

For answers with numbers, toss out the high as well as the low and consider the middle range.

For "look alike options" it's likely that one is correct. Eliminate choices that mean basically the same thing (and thus cancel each other out). Choose the best from what remains.

If two options are the complete opposite of each other, chances are one of them is correct.

Favor options that contain qualifiers like "sometimes" or "never." The result is longer, more inclusive items that may better answer the question.

Strategies to answer difficult questions:

- Eliminate options you know to be incorrect.
- Eliminate options that don't fit grammatically with the stem.
- Eliminate options that are totally unfamiliar to you.

Guessing:

- Always guess when there is no penalty for guessing or you can eliminate a couple options.
- Don't guess if you are penalized for guessing and if you have no basis for your choice.
- Use hints from questions you know to answer questions you do not.
- Don't change your answers unless you are sure of the correction.



Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

Unless the directions state that you will be penalized for a wrong answer, *always* write something.

The number of answer lines may indicate whether the correct answer is one or more words.

Because key concepts are often the answers to fill-in-the-blank questions, keep alert for these concepts elsewhere in the test. The answer you need may be part of another question.

After writing your answer, reread the sentence to make sure it makes sense. It's also important to make sure every answer is grammatically correct.

Short Answer Questions

The space provided by the professor may indicate how much writing is expected. Always write something, even if it is a complete guess. Your instructor can't give you points if the question remains unanswered.

Underline the topic in the question to help you stay focused on your short-answer. Jot down any related ideas and supporting details on a scrap piece of paper.

Begin your answer by turning the question into your main idea. Use supporting details, examples, evidence, explanations, and experience to flesh out your paragraph. Use other questions to develop supporting details. End your paragraph with a brief summary.

12 Common Guide Words for Test Questions

1. **Analyze.** Identify the parts of something and explain how those parts contribute to the whole.
2. **Compare.** Show the similarities (and possibly the differences) of two or more things.
3. **Contrast.** Show only the differences of two or more things.
4. **Define.** State the meaning of something.
5. **Describe.** Tell about something in detail.
6. **Discuss/explain why.** Provide a detailed account that demonstrates cause.
7. **Discuss/explain how.** Provide the details of a process or procedure.
8. **Discuss/explain the effect.** Provide the results of something.
9. **Evaluate.** Assess strengths and weaknesses while providing reasons.
10. **Explain.** Make clear and comprehensible a phenomenon, etc.
11. **Illustrate.** Offer an example.
12. **Summarize.** Provide a condensed version that highlights only the main points.

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