

# Effective Test Preparation Strategies

The following are proven strategies that have helped students improve test scores and prepare more effectively for exams.



1. **Manage your time effectively and plan study time** – The difference between a poor student and a good student often boils down to how effectively each manages and uses their time. Time management isn't about "activity" but rather "*productivity*" as the goal. Setting aside regular time to study is critical for achieving high test performance. Prepare a term calendar, weekly schedule, and daily schedule that includes regular study sessions. As you progress through the term it's okay to amend your study schedule to meet changing needs, but make sure you plan study sessions in advance and most importantly stick with them. For more details review the **Time Management: Foundation of Academic Success** handout available at <https://www.cgc.edu/student-resources/title-v-epic-success-team>
2. **Employ the SQ3R method to reading materials before going to class** – Most tests are based on reading assignments, class notes, work assignments, and if applicable lab work. Employing the SQ3R reading method will improve understanding, recall, and ultimately test performance. SQ3R stands for Survey, Question, and Read, Recall, and Review (3Rs).
  - **Survey** - Before jumping in to read the text, skim through each chapter to get a general idea of the main ideas and themes. Pay attention to chapter headings, introductions, subheadings, visual aids, and summaries. Try to develop an idea of what the text is going to communicate. This will provide your reading direction and focus.
  - **Question** – While surveying the text, use chapter headings, subheadings, and introductions to develop questions. Actively searching for answers to these questions as you read will help you stay focused and engaged.
  - **Read, Recall, Review** - After surveying the text and developing questions, begin reading for meaning and understanding, and seek to answer the questions previously developed. Immediately after reading each section, summarize in your mind what was just read, paying attention to the important concepts and topics covered. This improves the ability to *recall* important information come test time. Finally, *review* the questions you developed and try to answer each one without referring to the text or your notes. Can you answer them from memory?

For more information about the **SQ3R Reading Textbook Method** go to page 24 on the List of Proven Study Strategies available at <https://www.cgc.edu/student-resources/title-v-epic-success-team>

3. **Go to class prepared and employ a well-organized note-taking method** – Preparation for class is key to effective note-taking. Arrive at class having read all assigned material AND having reviewed class notes from the previous lecture. There are several effective note-taking methods. Key recommendations include:
  - Start a new notes page for each new lecture or class period.
  - Date and number each page.
  - Keep notes in chronological order within the binder/notebook.
  - Leave blank spaces within the notes to add comments or additional notes later.

- Use only one side of the paper, make additional notes in the margin but don't write on the back.
- Keep notes concise using phrases instead of sentences.
- Use abbreviations and symbols when possible.
- Note down unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary and seek clarification later
- Bring a highlighter to class to underline important concepts within your notes that will likely be on the test.

Visit the section on **Note-Taking Methods for Better Learning** on page 20 on the List of Proven Study Strategies available at <https://www.cgc.edu/student-resources/title-v-epic-success-team>.

- 4. Pay attention, listen, and watch for clues** – Don't only focus on the instructor's words, focus on the message being communicated by the words. Listen for meaning and adjust your note-taking accordingly. Watch for clues your instructor might provide about possible test questions and formats. Participate in test review sessions and ask questions about unclear concepts. Never be ashamed to ask questions.
- 5. Review notes after each class** – Review class notes within 24 hours. Edit the notes, if necessary, and if something doesn't make sense, correct or clarify it. Review all highlighting or underlined notes. Studies show that nearly 50% of what a student learns in class is forgotten within the first twenty minutes and over 60% is forgotten after one day. Reviewing notes is just as important as taking good notes.
- 6. Ask the instructor for direction** – Don't hesitate to ask your instructor about what subjects or topics will be on the exam – even what types of questions may be in it. Ask directly about the best way to study for the test. Most faculty members are open to sharing with students suggestions as to how best to prepare for their exams.
- 7. Don't Cram. Begin reviewing a week before the test** – Good reviewing is no substitute for poor studying. **The key to improving test performance is to employ effective study habits and techniques all semester and then employ effective reviewing techniques about a week before a test.** Put together a test preparation plan to review all lecture notes, reading assignments, and other class materials. Key components of a review plan:
  - Identify the most important study materials and techniques for the test (i.e., reviewing notes, practice problems, etc.)
  - Prepare an outline of the main topics and concepts that will be covered during an exam, then use this sheet to study. This will help you memorize key facts and other information you will be tested on.
  - Include visual aids like charts, diagrams, and graphs to condense and simplify information, and improve recall at test time. These resources are especially important if you're a visual learner.
  - Decide how many hours will be needed to study and how to allocate those hours.
- 8. Review with a group if you can** – Reviewing in preparation for a test as part of a study group will allow you to improve your notes, fill in any gaps in your understanding, more fully explore complex concepts, cover more material, gain additional knowledge about what might be on the test, and provide you with a support system.
- 9. Self-Test** – Test yourself using old tests, practice tests provided by your instructor, or by making your own practice test. If you make your own practice test, it is recommended to develop the test with the

help of study group members to provide a greater array of problems likely to appear on the test. An important part of self-testing is to take your practice test under actual test-like conditions. Completing your practice test under the same conditions as the actual test (for example, timed, not open book, no use of notes, etc.) will ensure knowing the material well enough to perform well come test day.

**10. Stay healthy** – Getting plenty of rest and exercising regularly will enhance your ability to perform well on a test. Eat a nutritious meal before taking a test to be alert and focused. Stay away from junk food. Eating junk food or sugar before a test will cause your energy levels to deplete quickly and can impact your ability to focus.

**11. Get plenty of sleep** – Sleep is critical for academic success. It is counterproductive to stay up all night cramming before test day because it causes students to sacrifice sleep time and it increases their anxiety. Both lack of sleep and anxiety negatively affect recall. Studies show that students who spend more time upfront studying and less time cramming the night before typically perform better on tests

**12. Employ proven test-taking strategies during the test** – After preparing adequately for the test, employ the following test-taking strategies to improve test performance:

- Arrive early
- Practice relaxation
- Budget your time
- Do a memory dump
- Read directions carefully
- Look for cues
- Answer all questions
- Rely on your first impression
- Review your answers

For more information about test-taking, go to the **Test-Taking Strategies** available at <https://www.cgc.edu/student-resources/title-v-epic-success-team>.

*Adapted by CGCC's Title V Project from:  
Loveless, Becton. "Study Skills for Students", January 2024, Education Corner,  
<https://www.educationcorner.com/study-skills/>. Accessed 3 July 2024*

