

How You Can Prepare for Objective Tests¹

*To be able to discern what is true is true
and what is false is false; this is the mark
and character of intelligence.*

--Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)

Swedish scientist, inventor and theologian

A week or two before the test is scheduled to be given, ask your instructor some questions about the test. Ask what kinds of items will make up the test. What per cent will be multiple choice? What per cent will be matching? Will there be any word fill-ins? What per cent will be true-false? Check and see if any samples of previous exams are available. (The Academic Support Center has sample tests on file in some classes.) These kinds of questions are perfectly legitimate and they may give you some useful clues for your study review.

Use Your Pre-Test Time for Review and Not New Learning

Finish your assigned readings and complete the underlining of your different notes a full week before exam. Then begin reciting and memorizing as many of the details and facts as you can remember.

How You Can Prepare for Recognition Items

On most objective tests you will have a large number of recognition items. For example, if the item of the multiple choice question says:

The President in office at the end of World War II was:

- a. *Hoover*
- b. *Roosevelt*
- c. *Truman*
- d. *Eisenhower*

All you have to do is recognize that Truman was President; you do not have to try to recall his name or spell it correctly as you would if you were asked, “*Who was the President at the end of World War II?*” It’s easier to recognize than it is to recall. This does not mean that you should not use recitation and memorization. Recognition is based on factual and informational knowledge, which is best learned by recitation and memorization. For an objective exam, you need to study and review all of your material, emphasizing details, many more details than you might memorize for an essay exam.

¹ Taken from How to Study in College, 4th edition (Houghton Mifflin, Arizona, 1989)

How You Can Decide Which Facts and What Information to Study

Names are important; names of people, places, processes, and theories appear frequently on objective exams. When you learn the names of people, also note what their main contribution was. Make a special point of always knowing the names of the people who have conducted important research studies. Know what the research findings were too, but be able to recognize the research study by the last names of the researchers. In most modern fields of study, research is referred to by the names of the people who have conducted the research. Even if you know the study well, you will lose points if you cannot recognize the names of the people who did it. If four or five people were involved in the study, remember just the name of the most important researcher. If you can't figure out who that is, ask your instructor.

When you memorize names of places, also remember the reasons why these particular places are important. When you memorize the names of different processes, also make a point of remembering the steps in the process and the order of those steps. The rationale for a theory, its major proponents and its key ideas are things to keep in mind when remembering theories.

Numbers also are often important. High and low point numbers which indicate trends on graphs and charts should be memorized. The number of subjects involved in different experiments may be important, especially the numbers involved in the findings of the experiment. If any numbers are given in your text which you feel are related to an important fact or event or trend, use recitation to memorize them with the event, the experiment or the trend.

Dates are also worth remembering, especially as they relate to people and events. Textbooks in many subject matter areas will have a chapter devoted to historical milestones. Other sections of these texts will indicate dates related to more recent events or discoveries. Remember them. In other cases, the sequence of events (which came first, second, etc.) is important to know, even though exact dates are not given.

Definitions of the special vocabulary of the course should be memorized. Illustrations or examples which clarify the definitions should be learned. Sometimes an example is given and you are asked to recognize which definition best fits the example. If you know different illustrations or examples of the term defined, you will be in a better position to answer questions on the meaning of the word. Sometimes you are asked to recognize the one difference between two things or ideas which are alike in most other respects. When studying, it's wise to look for similarities and differences between things or ideas.

These similarities and differences make good objective items. They frequently take the following form:

The major difference between ___ and ___ is:

- a.*
- b.*
- c.*
- d.*
- e.*

What Three Things You Can Do to Study For an Objective Test

With an objective test, don't bother to try to write down your guess as to what form the multiple choice or matching True-False items will take. Instead, spend your time doing three things:

1. Identify the important topics, ideas, and supporting facts in your notes and in your underlined books.
2. Use the recitation method of reading your central ideas by covering the material asking yourself "What are the important ideas here?"
3. use memory devices to memorize the important details. To combat forgetting, many students use mnemonic devices--easily remembered words, phrases, sentences, or rhymes that are associated with difficult-to-remember principles or facts. Almost all people use a mnemonic or two without realizing it. Probably the most widely used mnemonic device is the old jungle by which most of us learned the days of the month in our calendar:

*Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November,
All the rest have thirty-one,
Except February alone.*

Rivalling this days-in-the-month mnemonic is one for spelling:

*i before e except after c
or when sounding like a
as in neighbor and weigh.*

Use the evening before the test and even the hours before the test for review, going over the memory associations you have used to remember key facts. Use this last-minute review to go over material you already know and understand. Review the high points in your notes which give you the feeling "*I know this pretty well.*" Don't try to review everything in the last hour or two. The impossibility of such a task might depress you.

TIPS ON TAKING OBJECTIVE EXAMS

Bring Materials You May Need

Have two sharpened soft “*number two*” lead pencils. Do not use a ballpoint or other pen. Some tests are scored by electric impulse through the graphite on the paper and the ink in ballpoint pens does not contain graphite. Do not use a pen even if it is permissible (**unless specifically required by the instructor**), because you cannot clearly erase most pen markings and you may mistakenly fill in the wrong blank and then wish to change an answer. Make sure that your pencil has an eraser or bring an eraser for mistakes.

The exam itself may contain typing or other errors. If you notice something that appears to be an error, simply raise your hand and wait until the instructor comes over and then whisper your question about the possible error.

The separate answer sheet will usually have five spaces for your answer. The spaces are numbered (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), or lettered (a), (b), (c), (d), (e). True-False items usually take space (1) or (a) for True answers and space (2) or (b) for False answers. If this is not clearly indicated in the directions for the True-False part, ask your instructor where he/she wants these answers. Unless it is indicated, you may have to put your completion or fill-in items answers on the test. When in doubt ask the instructor. The instructor is there to help you better understand the exam.

Get an Overview of the Whole Exam

Quickly check through to see how many of each kind of objective test questions there are on the test. Then read the directions to each section to get a clear picture of what is expected of you.

How You Can Decide About Guessing on the Test

If there is no correction for guessing, plan to answer every item, even those about which you know absolutely nothing. If there is a correction, ask how much it is. You may or may not get an answer to this question because even the instructor may not have decided yet. Ask anyway. It may be important. For example, there are 100 True-False items and the correction formula is Rights minus Wrong. You get fifty right and you try and guess the other fifty but miss all of those you guess at. Your score is fifty minus fifty = zero! On the other hand, if you try fifty and get them all right but do not try the other fifty, your score is fifty minus zero = 50. If in this same test there was no correction for guessing, you could guess at all of them and still get your 50 right. In such a test, if the instructor simply counts the number right and takes off nothing for those wrong, you can feel free to guess at all of them.

On a multiple choice test, the correction might be $R - 1/5 W$. If you had 100 items, got 50 right, tried and missed another thirty-five, and left fifteen blank because you were very unsure of them, your score would be $50 - 1/5 (35) = 50 - 7 = 43$.

If Those Left Blank Are Not Counted as Wrong Answers

Beware of becoming too cautious. When some students hear that a penalty for guessing is used in a test, they freeze up and become very cautious, answering only those items that they are absolutely certain of. This is a mistake which can give you a very low score. The guessing idea about whether he is right or wrong. A good rule of thumb on a multiple choice question is that if four out of five of the choices look correct, and there is a penalty for guessing, don't guess on that question. However, if two choices out of five look good and third is an outside possibility--try it. You have a pretty good chance of being right. It's a fairly safe gamble even with the penalty for guessing.

How to Pace Yourself to Help You During the Exam

Quickly go over the directions to each part of the exam and notice the number of points that are given for each subpart, i.e., the multiple choice true-false, the matching and the fill-in. To pace yourself you will have to do some quick arithmetic. If you have fifty questions to be answered in fifty minutes, you should be spending an average of one minute on each one if they are all alike, e.g., multiple choice. In actuality, some of them will take a half a minute and others may take as much as three minutes. Don't bother to check your watch after each item, but do check it about every tenth item. If you have spent twenty minutes answering the first ten items, you are going too slowly and will need to speed up and spend less time on the tough ones if you are going to finish the test. If a fifty-item test to be done in fifty minutes has twenty-five multiple choice items and twenty-five true-false items, you should plan to spend about 2/3 of your time on the multiple choice because the true-false ordinarily take much less time to do. However, if each of the items is worth one point apiece then do the true-false first because you can pick up more points per unit of time.

Do the Easiest Items First

Another factor is which items are personally easiest for you. If the multiple choice items are generally easier, by all means do them first. If the true-false are easiest, start with them even though they are numbered twenty-six through fifty on your answer sheet. On most objective tests each item is worth one point, so get all of the easy ones that you know for sure taken care of first. Go through the entire test and answer the questions that you know first, making a mark beside ones you are not sure of. This may give you extra time answering the ones you may have questions on.

Read the Directions Very Carefully

When you actually begin a section of the test, read the directions very carefully so that you clearly understand what's to be done. Sometimes students are in such a hurry to begin the exam that they simply assume the directions and don't bother reading them carefully. This can cost you points.

Be Cautious in Reading Through All of the Choices Before You Answer the Item

If you recognize the first choice (a), to be true, it may still be the wrong answer, because some instructors use the following pattern to their choices.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d. *All of the above*
- e. *Both a and c, but not b.*

If you are reading such an item rapidly and immediately notice that (a) is correct and go no further down the items, you can miss the item because possibly both (a) and (c) are correct so the answer would be (e) and not (a). Or maybe (a), (b), (c) are all correct so that the answer then would be (d) and not (a). Also, read carefully the type of item where (d) or (e) says “*none of the above.*” Unless you read all of the choices in these items, you will miss them.

Be Careful to Read the Negatives

If the stem or first part of the multiple choice questions reads “*Which of the following was **not** a part of T. Roosevelt’s campaign platform:*” and you don’t notice the “**not**”, you have just lost another point on the exam. If you find that four out of five of the choices look right, reread the item. You may have misread it and not noticed the “**not.**”

Whenever you find negative words such as **not** or **except** in the stem or in the options, circle them so they’ll stand out. Then make sure you take them into consideration when you choose your answer. Always circle 100 percent words such as **never, no, none, best, worst, always, all, and every**; and be suspicious of the options in which you find them. In fact, if you have to guess, first eliminate all the options that contain absolute words. Then choose your answer from the remaining options.

Similarly, be careful about reading double negatives such as “*Which of the following is **not inconsistent** with your lecturer’s views?*” Read these a couple of times until you are certain what they mean. If you don’t decipher them, you lose points.

True-False statements that contain negative words and prefixes are difficult to sort out and answer. The negatives can upset or complicate your thinking. Negative words include **not** and **cannot**, and the negative prefixes are **dis-**, **il-**, **in-**, **ir-**, **non-**, and **un-**, as in **inconsequential** or **illogical**.

Notice, in the following three statements, how the addition of negatives increases the difficulty of understanding what the statements mean--let alone deciding whether they are true or false.

Thomas Edison’s fame was due to his many practical inventions.

*It is **illogical** to assume that Thomas Edison's fame was due to his many practical inventions.*

*It is **illogical** to assume that Thomas Edison's fame was **not** due to his many practical inventions.*

When you are confronted with such statements, begin by circling the negative words and negative prefixes. Then try to get the meaning of the statement without the negatives. Finally, reread the sentence to find out whether it is true or false in its entirety. Here, the first statement is true, the second is false, and the third is true.

What Special Words You Need to

Watch Out For as You Read the Test Questions

There are usually one or two words in every multiple choice and true-false item which are the central or crucial words. If you leave them out or misread them, the meaning of the sentence changes. Watch for these key words. A true-false item which reads "*Success in college is **frequently** related to study habits,*" would be answered differently if it read "*Success in college is **seldom** related to study habits.*" The meaning would change again if we put the word "*always*" in place of "*seldom.*" These qualifiers, as they are called are central to the meaning of the true-false or multiple choice item. Always look for them. By identifying and concentrating on the qualifiers to look for are value words such as "*better,*" "*very well,*" "*best,*" "*crucial,*" "*finest,*" and other such adjectives. Other qualifiers include "*partially,*" "*primarily,*" "*mainly,*" "*generally,*" "*occasionally,*" "*usually,*" "*frequently,*" "*sometimes,*" "*seldom,*" "*always,*" "*never,*" etc., which are adverbs. Prepositions, such as "*except*" may also be important. By watching carefully for the key adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions in objective test questions, you will be able to more correctly interpret the meaning of the sentence and will be in a better position to pick out the best answer.

Eliminate the Obviously Wrong Choices

If it's all right for you to write on the test, make a point of crossing out the clearly incorrect choices. For example, by crossing off (b), (c), and (d), you can more clearly concentrate on the choices, (a) and (e), that are left. Sometimes you are told not to make marks on the test. In that case simply make your light cross-out marks on the answer sheet itself. However, remember to erase any cross-out marks before you hand in your answer sheet. If the test is scored electronically, your stray marks may register as guessed answers. You might lose several points because only one answer is supposed to be given for each test item and your cross-out marks may make it appear that you have marked two or three choices. It is best to make that light mark on the test and go back and erase the test.

How You Can Keep Your Attention Focused on The Test

Devote all of your attention to the question that you happen to be working on at that moment. If you are reading question 8 and find that you are slipping down and reading parts of 9 and 10, catch yourself by mentally saying "*I better concentrate on question 8.*"

Don't be sidetracked by continuing to think about a terrible unfair or insidiously stupid question you have just tried. If you continue to dwell on it you will simply lose time and be less able to concentrate on the questions following. Remember, each item is only worth one point. Forget that bad one; at least some of the others will be better. Concentrate on them!

Don't Spend Too Much Time on Any One Question

It is easy to become fascinated by a very difficult item and spend five or more minutes on it, thereby getting behind on the test. Circle or check the number of the tough item with a light pencil mark on the answer sheet. Then come back to it after you have finished the rest of the test.

How to Keep From Losing Your Place on The Test

Temporarily skipping tough questions is an excellent idea, but it has one drawback. Whenever you skip around, you run the risk of carelessly losing your place on the answer sheet and marking in the wrong column. For example, if you answer items 1 through 22, then skip numbers 23 and 24, and then answer 25 through 31 and skip 32, etc., you can easily lose your place and put down your answer on the wrong numbered answer space.

There is one way to catch this skipping mistake without rereading your entire exam. Check your answer blank numbers. If you have two answers for one item, you may have mixed up your numbers and put one answer in the wrong blank space. If item 44 has two answers, (b) and (d), reread item 44 and see which answer it was you wanted. Let's say the answer you wanted for 45 was (d) and you have (c) darkened. You can guess that you were reading item 45 and putting the answer (d) in the wrong place, i.e., number 44. Then read 46; the (c) answer you had down for 45 may have been meant for item 46. If this is the case, spot check all of the items past 46 to see if the right answers are darkened. If they are not, you should quickly correct the errors. Answering on the wrong number space is a very easy way to fail an objective exam. Luckily, this error is easily avoided by making a point of checking the number of the question you are answering and the number on the answer sheet about every 10th item. Then, if they don't match, you can find your error within the last 10 items rather than checking through the whole test.

How You Can Decide Whether or Not to Change An Answer

When you go back over the tough items which you have already tentatively answered, be very cautious about changing that answer. Look it over again, but if you are still so undecided that it could go either way, then don't change it. If you have thought of some new information that gives a new clue as to the right answer, a change is needed. Also, if you have simply misread the question the first time and now see that the answer you gave is obviously wrong, make the change. However, if it's still a toss of a coin, leave it alone! You are more likely to lose points by changing it.

How You Can Add Finishing Touches to The Exam

When you are about to finish, check to see that your full name, class number and class hour are on your answer sheet. Erase any extraneous marks you have made on the answer sheet and test. Check to see that all of your marks are heavy and black. Make sure that you have marked one and only one answer for each of the multiple choice and true-false items. Be certain that all of the matching blanks contain answers and that you have tried all of the fill-ins.

Final Thoughts

Objective tests require lots of serious studying and memorizing. Beyond that, knowing some tips on taking objective tests, such as asking about penalties for guessing, being able to scan the test for point values and types of questions, reading directions carefully, pacing yourself, and knowing how to avoid test anxiety, will help to defuse the grade/test bomb that everyone carries around inside.