



Exam Strategies: How to Tackle Exam Questions

I. Quantitative Questions

1. Understand the problem: Determine what you are supposed to find, what you need to find it, and what the unknown is. Consider whether drawing a sketch will help. Also – note each part of the question. Not answering each part is an easy way to lose points.
2. Find a way to solve for what is unknown: Write down all that is given or known. Draw a sketch when appropriate to show relations. Use good notation, with each symbol standing for only one thing or equal things. Be sure the notation is consistent with that used in formulas with which you are accustomed. Write down all relevant formulas.
3. Carry out the procedure you have devised: For numerical problems, estimate an answer first. This will help you to check your work later. Neat, careful work keeps you from making mistakes, and allows you to find them when you do make them. Additionally, when the instructor can see your work clearly, he or she may give you partial credit for what you do know, even if your ultimate answer is incorrect.
4. Check your Answers: This requires the same quality of thought originally used to solve the problem. Is your answer what you thought it would be in your original estimate? Is it a quantity that makes sense? Did you use all your data? Is your answer in the correct units? If your answer does not seem reasonable, rework the problem.

II. Multiple Choice

1. Read the stem: First, read the stem and make sure you understand what it is getting at. Look out for double negatives or other twists in wording before you consider the answer.
2. Try to come up with the correct answer: *Before* you look at the answer choices, try to come up with the correct answer. This will help you to rule out choices that are similar to the correct answer. Now read and consider each option carefully.
3. Look for clues in the stem: Look for clues in the stem that suggest the correct answer or rule out any choices. For example, if the stem indicates that the answer is plural you can rule out any answers that are singular. The basic rule is: the correct answer must make sense grammatically with the stem. Options which fail this test can be ruled out.

4. Cross off any options you know are incorrect: As you rule out options cross them off with your pen. This will help you focus on the remaining choices and eliminates the chance of returning to an item and selecting an option you had already eliminated.
5. Come back to items you were unsure of: Put a mark next to any questions you are unsure of. If you complete the entire exam with time to spare, review these questions - you will often get clues (or even answers) from other questions.

III. Essay Questions

It is important to realize that answering an essay question correctly requires mastery of your material. That means attending all lectures, reading all assignments, taking thoughtful notes and reviewing and reciting what you've written down.

1. Manage your time: Figure out roughly how much time you can spend on each essay to complete the test. Stick as close to your time plan as you can, but don't become overly anxious or rigid about doing so. Always start with the easiest questions.
2. Read directions and questions carefully: Exam directions often contain specific instructions for answering the questions. As you read the questions, write down words or phrases that come to mind in the margin. These may help you organize your answer.
3. Consider how to organize your essay: Carefully organize your essay, using a recognizable pattern. The decreasing- importance pattern starts off with the broadest and most important information and then gradually narrows in scope. In a descriptive or chronological essay move systematically from one end of what you're describing to the other. If the question asks you to compare and contrast, make sure you shift back predictably between the things you're comparing and contrasting.
4. Write an outline: Once you understand the question, write an outline for your answer. This will help you make sure your essay addresses each part of the question and has a clear structure. This will also help your professor see what you were thinking.
5. Get to the point right away: Time plays a key role in essay questions. Be sure to get right to the point, even skip writing an introduction. It is best to put your answer in the beginning, followed by supporting evidence or illustrations.
6. Support your opinions with solid evidence: The well-written essay usually contains the answer in the first sentence. The bulk of your essay should be devoted to the evidence that supports your answer. Support all general opinions with logical or factual evidence, and avoid including personal opinions unless asked to do so.
7. End with a summary: Summarize your essay in a final sentence or two. This will tie your points together.