

Performing Your Best on a Test

By P.J. DeMaris, Professor/Counselor Palomar College

To do your best on upcoming tests and exams, try these steps organized by the acronym **PR.O.M.P.T.**

1. **PR- Prepare mentally**

- Remind yourself that one test does not measure how intelligent, capable, or creative you are. A test is one measure on a given content on a given day. You are not your test grade.
- Utilize positive affirmations such as “I have studied hard for this exam and I can’t wait to demonstrate how much I have learned” or “I am in control of the outcome of this test”.
- Put the test in perspective. Rarely does the performance on one test determine the outcome for the rest of your life.
- Relax. Visualize yourself moving through the test questions with ease, try an aerobic activity such as walking or dancing, take long, deep breaths through your nose and blow slowly out of your mouth, and do not allow yourself to rehash negative self-talk.
- Maintain your usual routine for sleeping and eating.

2. **O- Organize**

- Make a “to-do” list of what needs to be studied and allocate time for each task. Study different topics at different times at intervals not to exceed 1 hour without a break. Do not allow trivial, unnecessary activities to take priority over what needs to be done to prepare. Plan a light review right before you go to sleep the night before.
- Make a list of everything you will need to have with you on test day (blue book, pencil, calculator, bottle of water, etc.)
- Be clear as to what the test will cover- is it comprehensive, by topic, timeframes or chapters? Attending the class immediately before the exam is valuable for collecting this information. Also, the professor will often use this class to review the material, give details on the test format (essay, multiple choice, short answer) or make adjustments on the content. This is information you can use!
- Organize your study tools. Create mind maps, make flash cards, summarize your class notes and/or turn them into likely questions, make up acronyms, acrostics, poems, movement or songs to help you remember information.
- Organize your study space. Have a regular, designated study area that is well lit and that has everything you need in one space ready to go. Work with your biological clock and reduce outside distraction as much as possible. It is not recommended to study in bed.

3. **M- Memorize**

- Commit to memory the information you will be expected to recall. Use methods such as recite and repeat, acronyms (new words that are created by the first letter of each piece of information you need to recall such as NASA, SCUBA or PROMPT) or acrostics (creative sentences containing the first letter of the elements you need to remember such as Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge for the notes on the music scale). Try rewording the information using your own words or creating funny stories that incorporate all the details you need to recall.
- Start with the more general information and then bring in the detail.
- Help your memory by creating visual representations of the material. Draw diagrams or illustrations that represent a difficult concept. For a sequence of information try the “loci” method where you visualize a familiar space (like where you live) or routine (like driving your car) and assign the new information to the old. For example, visualize yourself walking out to your car and associate that with the first piece of information in the sequence, then opening the car door with the second item, sitting down in the car seat with the third and so on.

4. P- Practice

- Practicing is often overlooked but key to your success. Practice the testing situation as closely as possible. Are you practicing with the same type of questions you are likely to be asked on the test? What about the time? Are you practicing under the same time constraints as the actual test? Anything you can do to mimic that actual testing environment will give you more familiarity and ease when it is time for the real thing.
- Practice, practice, practice. The more frequently you have revisited the information the easier it will be for you to recall it when the situation calls for it. Overlearn the material so it seems as familiar to you as your name and birthday.

5. T- Test

- Get a good night's sleep, eat light, and arrive early.
- Try some relaxation techniques upon arrival and do not participate in pre-test chatter (other students may not be as prepared as you and their anxieties could rub off).
- Once the test begins, put your name on everything.
- Scan the entire test and make strategic decisions on how much time you will dedicate to the different portions. Consider point values for the questions as well as the nature of the questions. True and false should go fairly quickly but essays are often time consuming.
- Write down any memory tools on the materials provided for reference later.
- Read all the directions. Read them again. Listen for directions from the professor. Be clear on the directions or ask for clarification.
- Find out if there are any penalties from incorrect answers (or guesses).
- As you test, answer the easiest questions first, look for answers embedded in other questions, do not allow yourself to get stuck on one question (you can come back, elect to skip it altogether, brainstorm related material to help you remember, and remind yourself you will remember that information later).
- When answering True and False questions go quickly and trust your first response. If any part of the statement is false, no matter how small, the entire statement is false. When you see absolute qualifiers such as "always, never or all" then the statement is likely false. On the other hand, vague words like "often or sometimes" are usually true.
- When answering multiple choice questions, try to answer in your head before looking at the choices. Start off by eliminating the unreasonable choices and then read all the other choices. There may be some choices that are acceptable, but the professor is looking for the best and most complete answer. Be sure to watch for key words in the questions that change the entire meaning of the question such as "All of the following are true except" or "Which is not true?"
- For essays- try the L.I.B.E.C method. Make it legible, have an introduction, have a body of explanations, give examples and illustrations, and have a conclusion. Be sure you are answering the question that was asked and get to the point.
- For math and science questions try to estimate the answer first, try reverse operations to check your accuracy, analyze how you think you want to approach solving the problem before jumping into valuable computational time, translate complicated questions into plain English whenever possible and systematically check every step of your work.

Despite your best efforts you may someday find yourself in a situation where you have to "cram". The first thing you need to do in this situation is to decide what material you can fully study in the time you have available. In other words, be strategic on what content you can study thoroughly in the time you have and omit the remainder. You will have greater success studying less material well than trying to study everything superficially. Relax and get plenty of sleep. Don't waste time now on "beating yourself up". After the test there will be plenty of time to examine what circumstances contributed to this situation so you can learn what to do better next time.

I hope these tips have been helpful. Take charge, chill out and slam that test out of the park!