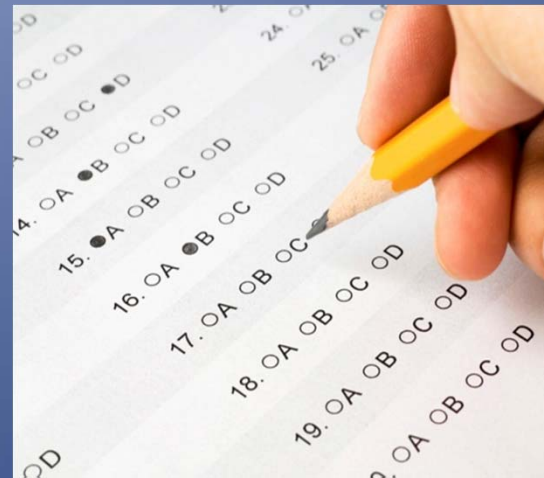
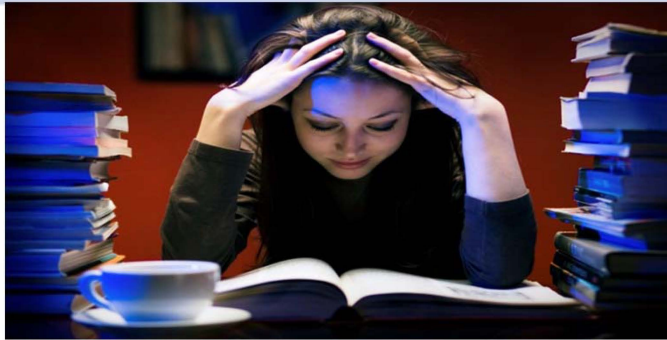


Overcoming Testing Anxiety



Overcoming Test Anxiety

Strategies for Stress Reduction And Better Test Performance



Do you study hard, but “blank out” in the middle of exams?
Do you find yourself feeling so stressed before tests that you almost feel sick?
Do you feel overwhelmed just thinking about taking your next exam?

If these, or similar experiences, resonate with you, we think you will find this information very helpful.

Understanding Anxiety:

What is anxiety?

A physiological and psychological response to a *perceived* danger or threat.



So what is anxiety anyway? There is one very important word in this definition, and that word is **PERCEIVED**. Something is stressful if an individual perceives it to be so.



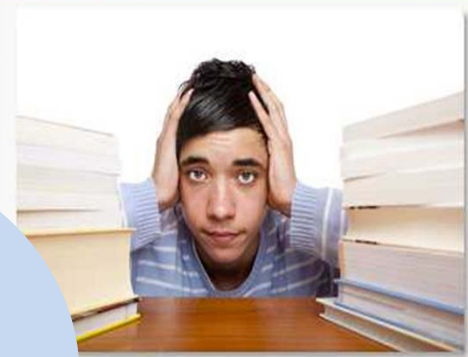
Anxiety Symptoms

Physiological:

- Upset stomach
- Rapid Breathing
- Sleep problems
- Headaches
- Cold, sweaty palms
- Muscle Tension
- Increased heart rate
- Back pain

Psychological

- Confusion
- Memory blocks
- Irritability
- Impaired concentration
- Poor judgment
- Frustration
- Blanking out/paralysis



When an individual perceives an exam to be a “danger” or a “threat” (“But, I might fail!”), these are some of the symptoms they may experience. These can undermine one’s ability to perform in a test situation.

TOP TEN REASONS FOR TEST ANXIETY

1. There are two types of testing anxiety: Anticipatory and situational. Anticipatory test anxiety plagues you before the test. Situational test anxiety occurs during the test.
2. Test anxiety is similar to other anxiety and can be treated in a similar manner.
3. Fear that you will not be able to answer the questions on the test is one of the major causes of anxiety. Procrastinating and waiting until the last minute to cram for an exam is one of the worst approaches you can take if you wish to avoid anxiety.
4. A consistent, planned study schedule is one of the best preventions for test anxiety. Planning your study schedule as you take your classes will help you devote the appropriate amount of study time to topics you have covered in class.
5. It is possible to learn how to alleviate situational test anxiety before the test actually occurs by practicing anxiety relief techniques ahead of time.
6. If you get sufficient sleep, eat well, and exercise regularly before the test, you are less likely to suffer from test anxiety.
7. Breathing techniques and meditation can help alleviate symptoms of anxiety both before and during the test.
8. Stretching at your desk, getting a drink of water, or stepping away from the testing area to take a short walk can help settle your nerves during the test.
9. Test anxiety is very common, so you are not alone if you suffer from it. Chances are that most of your classmates also have some level of worry or concern about final exams.
10. Test anxiety can occur when you focus on past failures you have had with similar tests. Sometimes you do everything you can do in order to alleviate test anxiety, yet you may still find yourself freezing up or going blank when the test is put in front of you. In these situations—which hopefully will be rare—having a set of coping tools at hand to manage test anxiety while you are actually taking the test can help you make it through.

Assess Yourself



As you think about your experience with test anxiety, what “score” would you give yourself?

A 1 would mean that you have a sense of complete calm and confidence about test taking. However, a more common feeling is to be a little nervous before an exam, even though you have strategies to manage your stress.

A 10 would mean that you are extremely stressed—in fact you go into tests and can hardly remember your own name. You experience most, if not all, of the symptoms listed on the previous slide.

Should your
goal be to
eliminate stress
from your life?

The answer to this question is **NO**.
We are emotionally healthier when we
acknowledge that stress is a part of life.
A manageable amount of stress motivates
us to study! We want to reduce and
manage stress, not eliminate it.

How to Manage Test Anxiety

Preparation is key to taking & passing tests by using the following approaches:

Efficient studying involves learning how to study more effectively so that the amount of study time is reduced.

Increase the quality of study time, thus reducing test anxiety, ensures using time efficiently during study sessions.

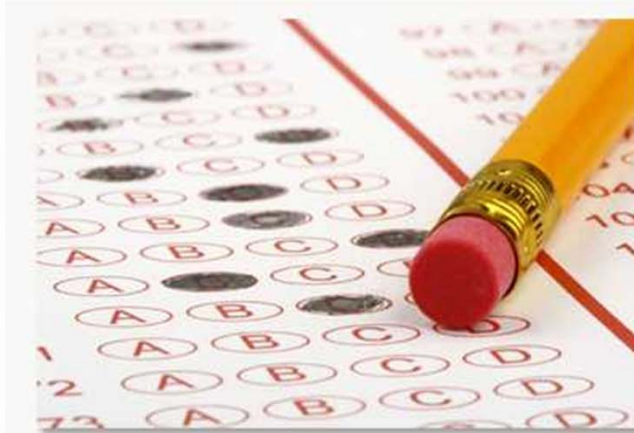
Space out your study time. Spending an hour each night reviewing that day's class notes & assigned materials is much more effective than "cramming" the week - or even the night - before the test.

Focus on most relevant materials. Pay attention to material stressed during lecture and in sections of the textbook.

"Stress should be a powerful driving force, not an obstacle" - Bill Phillips

Approaches to managing test anxiety:

Cognitive Restructuring
Relaxation Techniques
A Balanced Life
Efficient Learning Strategies



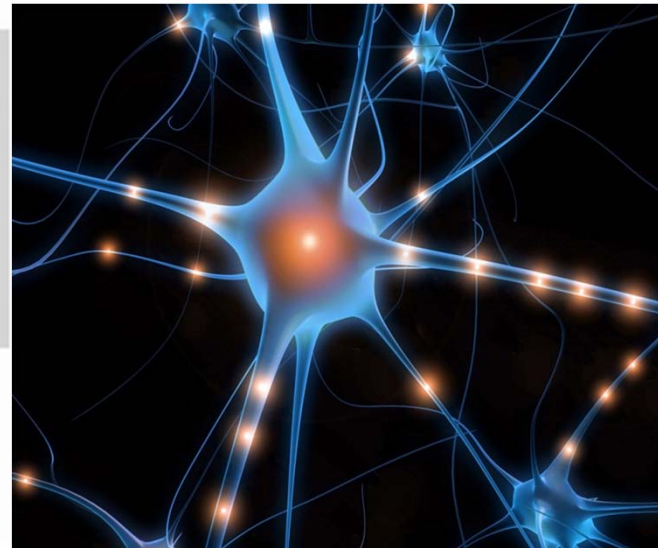
There are several ways to approach the problem of test anxiety. We have chosen four strategies that we feel are most effective. Let's now take a closer look at each strategy...

Cognitive Restructuring

The first approach in combating test anxiety is to examine how you talk to yourself.

“**Cognitive Restructuring**” is based on the premise that what you are feeling right now is altered by what you are thinking—internal messages or “self-talk”. The goal is to restructure those thoughts that cause anxiety and undermine your success. Restructured self-talk, when properly implemented, can be one of the most powerful tools for managing test anxiety.

Now take a moment and consider the thoughts that are going through your mind before an exam. How do these anxious thoughts get there in the first place?



Changing the way we think – Changing the things we dwell on.

Cognitive Restructuring: Negative Self-Talk Traps

We all talk to ourselves, but we don't realize how negative internal dialog can thwart our attempts to do well in exams. Often, we not only accept but cultivate negative and irrational messages, which creates even greater anxiety. A seed of negative self-talk can be planted as a result of fear, a bad experience, or misdirected motivation. Which of these problems do you identify with?

Trap	What you are thinking:
Previous Problems with Test Performance	"Remember when you thought you did well on that test and yet scored a D? That is going to happen again!"
Fear of Exposure	"I fooled everyone into believing that I am smart, but I'm not. This time I will really screw up and they will find out that I am not what they suppose."
Focusing on the Grade vs. Learning the Material	If your primary focus is to get a good grade rather than learn the material, the pressure of this focus can undermine your ability to perform on an exam. The threat is the message, "I am less valuable if I don't get a good grade!"
"All-Or-Nothing" Thinking	Students who engage in negative self-talk often view things in "all-or-nothing" categories. If they receive anything less than an "A" they see the test as a total failure.
Self-Labeling	Self-labeling occurs when your thinking shifts from, "I am having difficulty understanding this information", to "I am stupid", or "I am a total loser".

So, how can you actually *restructure* the way you think?

Be assured, the answer does NOT lie in just trying to “think positive”.



Some will try to counsel people with anxious thoughts by saying, “Just stop thinking that way!”. Well, those who have experienced significant anxiety know it is not that easy. Cognitive restructuring involves exchanging a negative thought process with a rational, balanced message based on reason. For instance, it would be unrealistic for us to tell you to think, “I love tests, and I love this topic” when you don’t. A more effective restructuring would state something like, “Although I have had difficulty with this topic, I have studied the material, so now I am going to go in and share what I know.”

How would you restructure this message to yourself?

"Remember when you thought you did well on that test and scored a D? That is going to happen again!"

Take a sheet of paper and try this. Write down a few sentences that reflect how you would restructure this message. Remember, you are going to re-write this "thought" to make it a realistic, yet positive and encouraging message to yourself.



"I have had some bad experiences with tests before, but with this test I am going to let myself start fresh. I will go into this exam recognizing that I have studied and now will just share what I know. I will use my test taking strategies and do my best."

How would you restructure this one?



"I must get a good grade on this exam!"

Let's say there is a lot riding on this test. In fact, let's say that if you don't get an A or a B you will not be able to get into a program you have been wanting to get into all your life! The pressure is not only in your head—there are significant consequences to not doing well. So, how would you restructure this message?

Taking the pressure off with messages that are true and encouraging can make the difference between freezing and sharing what you have studied with the professor.

I recognize that if I do not get at A on this test it may change my life plans. But I also know I have done all I know to do to prepare for this exam. I know that putting too much pressure on myself can backfire. So I am choosing to release myself from the pressure, and realize that as much as I want this A, I can and will handle the consequences of the grade I make. I will do my best. I can do no more.

Do you get the gist of the new restructured message? The goal is to release oneself from the pressure of messages that undermine your ability to perform to the best of your ability.

Change Your Mindset

As you begin to process through your anxiety, these are important messages to work into your mindset. Take a moment to read them.

- We need to take responsibility for our own choices regarding test anxiety
- Growth and development involves a PROCESS
- The “answers” do not lie in magic—they lie in making changes and implementing strategies
- We are all creatures of habit and patterns, but we have the capacity to change
- You CAN teach an old dog new tricks - (You just need really good treats)
- A *change* of life style patterns and thoughts comes with *repetition and practice*
- We reap what we sow. The seeds (new thoughts and strategies) we plant and water in our garden today are going to be the flowers (reduced anxiety) we enjoy later.

Do you agree with these statements? Are you ready to make changes in the way you “talk” to yourself?



Things to dwell on...



- I have done what I can, now I am just going to do my best.
- I have a choice as to how I perceive this situation.
- Will I remember this in 10 years?
- There is more to life.

"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced." --Soren Kierkegaard

To build a positive mindset, we recommend that you actually write down a few encouraging messages, quotes or verses, that encourage you to think with a rational and positive perspective. Read these often. Bring them to the exam and read them before you go in. Remember that some of those old negative messages have been a part of your thinking for a long time. It will take some effort and repetition to maintain a new perspective.

Relaxation Techniques: Deep Breathing

Deep breathing

- Inhale a deep full breath all the way down to your tummy, then exhale slowly and completely
- Think of breathing in peace with each inhalation. Visualize blowing out tension and negativity with each exhalation.

Take a few moments to try this deep breathing exercise. As you inhale slowly, fill your lungs as full as you can. When you exhale, allow your muscles to relax as you blow out all tension and anxious thoughts. Repeat this several times. Do this before you study, in the middle of a break, just before a test, and in the middle of your tests. Not only do our bodies relax when we practice deep breathing, but our brains work much better with sufficient oxygen! This extra oxygen allows you to think more clearly and can help alleviate mental blocks. Try it!



Relax... *Progressive Relaxation*

Progressive Relaxation is an exercise whereby you slowly and methodically relax each muscle in your body while keeping your mind alert and calm. It can take from 5 minutes up to 20 or more minutes. It is a very calming and soothing way to relax your body and prepare for a test that may normally cause anxiety. It can also be an effective exercise to practice before studying. The next three slides include a progressive relaxation "script".



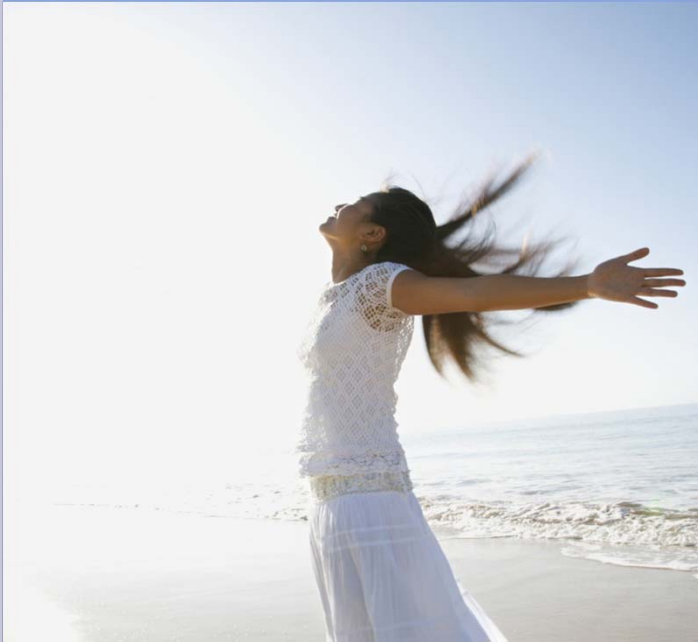
Progressive Relaxation Exercise



- Take a deep breath - completely fill your lungs. Now release as much air as you can. Repeat this three times. Now begin this exercise by focusing on your toes. One by one, relax each toe. Take your time. Let each little muscle in your foot relax as you allow a warm sense of relaxation to move through your foot and to your ankle.
- Notice how you are breathing deeply, and with each exhalation a little more tension is released from your body. Your mind is very alert, but your body is starting to relax.
- Let the warm sense of calm continue to move gently up your legs. The muscles in your calves will begin to slowly relax. Notice how this relaxation moves up through your knees to the major muscle groups in your thighs. Invite this sense of calm to slowly move through your hips and then into your back. Allow the relaxation to travel up your spine, one vertebra at a time. At the same time the warm gentle flow travels up the front of your torso. As the relaxation reaches your shoulders, observe how it makes its way down each arm and slowly through each finger.
- Now focus on the base of your neck and allow the calm, warm sense of relaxation to move up the back of your neck, slowly up over the top of your scalp and finally relax your forehead, ears, eye lids, nose, lips, and jaw.
- Notice your deep breathing and a total feeling of relaxation; a sense of calm has enveloped your body and mind.

Take a Mind Vacation

... Visualize yourself in a wonderful place.



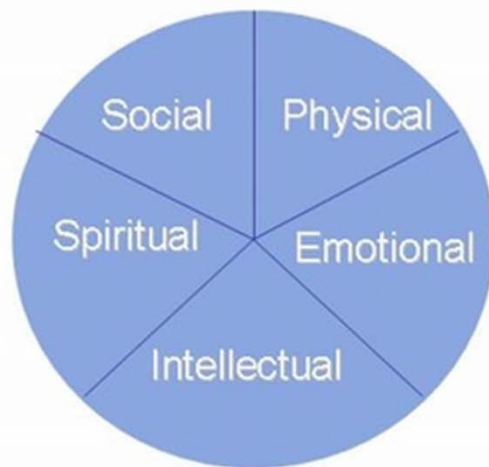
Another calming exercise is the “Mind Vacation”. Visualize in your mind the most beautiful and relaxing spot you can think of. Now imagine yourself there. Use the deep breathing exercise to relax. Experience your feelings about this place... What do you see, what do hear, what does it smell like? Are you warm? Can you feel a gentle breeze across your face, or the sun caressing your skin? This is a great exercise anytime, or for a short break in the middle of a very long exam. Take just a few minutes to try this.



Balance: The Wellness Wheel

It is important that you balance your academic life and the time you focus on studying with other elements of life. Take time to be with friends, exercise, attend to your sense of the spiritual, and take care of your emotional needs.

“A Balanced Life”



The wellness wheel is dynamic and the sections are always changing in size based on what's happening in your life, but the ideal is a sense of balanced proportions.

Physical Health

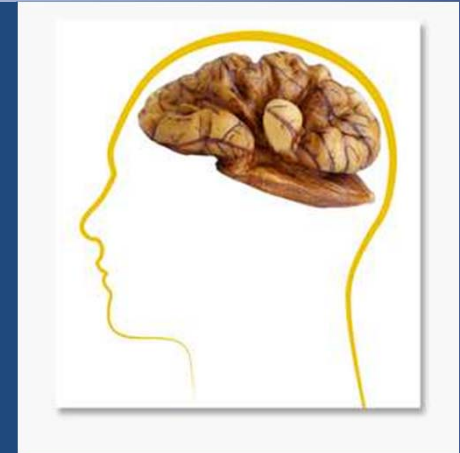
- Eat colorful meals
- Try the food pyramid
- Drink 6-8 glasses of water a day
- Exercise 3-4 times a week. Make it fun!
- Practice relaxation



Stay healthy and avoid fatigue, illness and “burn-out.” Eat colorful, balanced meals and limit “junk foods”. Hydrate your body with lots of water and non-caffeinated beverages. Take a walk, a run, work out, or enjoy sports for exercise. Just a few minutes of exercise each day increases the production of endorphins in your body... natural “feel good” chemicals that ward off depression and fatigue. Take time in practicing relaxation and deep breathing.



What You Eat Can Reduce Anxiety



If you suffer from test anxiety, try to eliminate anxiety-inducing foods from your diet several days before the test.

Foods to Avoid:

- **Caffeine.** Large quantities of caffeinated sodas, beverages, or coffee consumed to stay awake during study sessions can leave you both agitated and tired from lack of sleep.
- **Sugar.** Processed sugar creates an energy rush that is soon followed by an energy crash. Sugar can make you jittery, and nervous, and depression and anxiety can set in after the sugar rush wears off.

Maintain your normal food intake and eat regular, healthy meals so that your body will function properly on the day of the test. Avoid processed foods high in fat and simple carbohydrates and consuming large quantities of caffeine and sugar.

Brain Foods and How They Help

- **Whole grains and nuts, especially walnuts and almonds**
- **Fish, particularly wild salmon**
- **Berries, especially blueberries**
- **Seeds such as pumpkin seeds and sunflower seeds.**

These “brain foods” provide micronutrients, chemicals, and specialized fats used by the brain to produce receptors that help carry signals between individual brain cells. These nutrients also help prevent cell damage and help reduce inflammation that can occur individual cells. Making a few changes in your diet not only helps you feel better, but also reduces the possibility of having test anxiety either before or after the test.

Emotional Health

- Practice forgiveness of self and others
- Find something you are passionate about
- Set healthy boundaries
- Develop a few *really* good friends
- Communicate your feelings in appropriate ways
- Serve and support others



It is normal and appropriate to experience a wide range of human emotions in life, both positive and negative. Choose one or a few trusting friends to share feelings with. Having a "sounding board," who listens and gives feedback, helps to put life issues and related feelings into perspective. Don't be afraid to seek professional help when things are difficult. Remember, counseling is available. Visit the counselor.

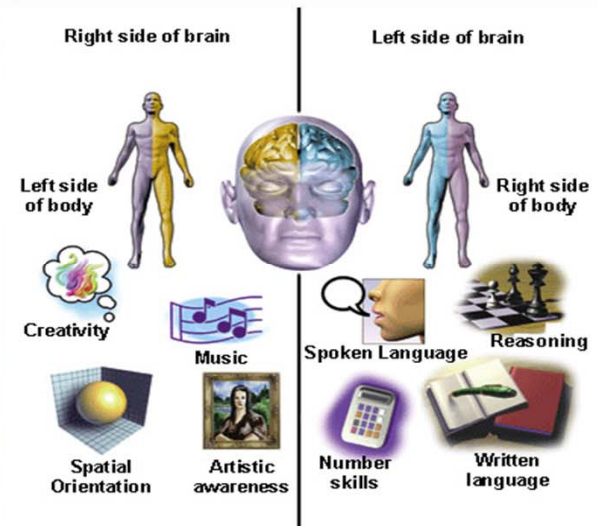
Visit it. Practice assertive communication and set healthy boundaries with others and with yourself. Be willing to limit your "to-do's" and to say "no" when you are feeling overwhelmed. Be easy on yourself, quiet your inner-critic, nurture yourself, and be passionate about life.

Intellectual Health

Develop a love of learning.
Adopt new learning strategies.
Surround yourself with people who challenge you.
Seek out opportunities to expand your mind.
Diversify!
Read. Discuss. Read some more.



Break down learning tasks and utilize new learning strategies that are congruent with your innate abilities. Are you left or right brained? Are you a visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or reading/writing learner? What is your personality type? Take our on-line diagnostics to find out. Learn for the experience of learning; enjoy the process.



Spiritual Health

- Take time for quiet solitude
- Practice deeply private and public faith
- Let it change your life continually
- Don't be afraid to ask the big question: "*why am I here?*"
- Practice random acts of kindness, and senseless acts of beauty



Take time to be still, contemplate, meditate, or pray. Enjoy the beauty of nature. Listen to your intuition or your "guiding source." Don't be afraid to ask yourself, "Who am I," and "Why am I here?"



Social Health

- Laugh
- Be creative about social things to do
- Put some effort into it!
- Seek to spend time with people who make you feel good about yourself and vice-versa
- Limit TV
- Limit video games and aimless web searching

Make good friends to share experiences and feelings with. Be creative about things to do that are interesting, healthy, and fun. Be active and try something you haven't tried before. And, most of all, find humor in your life.



Use Efficient Learning Strategies!



Many students are having test anxiety for good reason... they are not prepared! Another excellent way to combat anxiety is to practice efficient learning strategies. One of the most effective ways to start is by implementing **The Study Cycle**. It is all about studying **SMARTER**.

Study **SMARTER!**

As you study, try to imagine yourself actually taking the test and answering questions correctly. This exercise can minimize some of the intensity of the test taking experience. When you arrive for the exam you will have "been there" many times as you have studied.

The Study Cycle

A continuous process of learning

Try the following system of studying for *each class* you are currently taking. You will notice the short preview and review sessions are more powerful for memory and retention than you may have anticipated. You will also find the Intense Study Sessions allow you to get more done in less time. We guarantee this works.



Preview the assigned material either the night before or the day of the class. (You can call it a mental "warm up") **Look over bold and italicized print, headings, outlines, formulas, images and graphs.** Read over the summary and other material offered at the end of the chapter. As you "skim" the chapter ask yourself questions you would like answered in class.

Attend class. Ask questions, **take creative, meaningful notes.** Due to the preview, you will find yourself feeling more confident and "connected" to what is going on. Your notes will be more meaningful and clear.

Review as soon after class as possible. (This is your "cool down") Look over your class notes, make sure they are complete and accurate. Make note anything that was confusing.

Do several sessions each day based on your class needs. These sessions are designed to allow you to accomplish more in shorter, more intense periods of focused study time.

Utilize Intense Study Sessions:

- Set a goal for the next 30-50 minutes
- **Study** with focus and action (organize, map, summarize) to accomplish your goal for 30-50 minutes.
- Take a 5-10 minute **break**
- **Review** what you just studied
- Do you have more time? Start again with a new goal...

Refresh your memory! At least once a week look over your notes from the entire week.

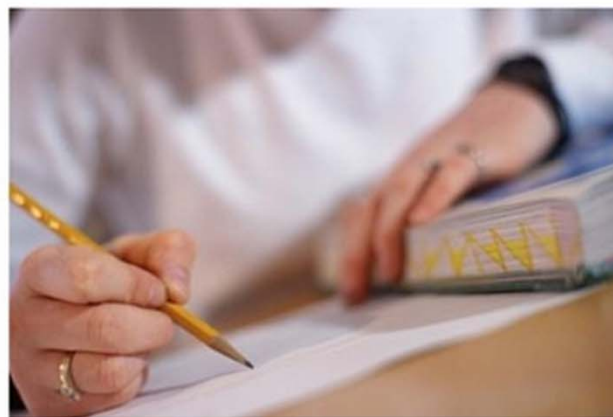
Tips for In and Out of Class



- Meet your teacher. Take advantage of tutorials after school hours and on Saturday.
- Preview material and attend class regularly.
- Take careful notes. See our on-line workshop, "Listening and Note Taking", for tips.
- Get the names and phone numbers of other students in your class.
- Review class notes as soon as possible
- Form/join a study group.
- Attend tutorial sessions, if they are offered.
- Review and rework the problems presented in class.

Test Prep Tips

- Carefully read the textbook, or assigned materials, with paper and pencil in hand.
- After reviewing notes, re-work class problems, read text, and THEN start working homework problems.
- Keep old quizzes/tests (for review).
- To prepare for tests, re-work those problems you could not solve. Review examples from class and do chapter reviews.
- ALWAYS correct returned tests.





Your best advocate can be....

...you.

Don't let anxiety over your tests get in the way of your success. Many people have experienced severe test anxiety, and have used the strategies presented in this workshop to make significant changes in their test taking experience. Decide to make some changes in the way you think and study. You will be surprised at what a difference these strategies can make.



RAUL YZAGUIRRE SCHOOLS

Thank you!

For more information: Please see Ms.
Maria Salinas, 832-797-0747,
maria.salinas@tejanocenter.org

Source: Janice McCue, SSC
Program Coordinator at West Virginia
University