

## **Exam Strategies**



### **Scenario:**

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*The tardy bell is about to ring and students are rushing in to make last minute preparations for the big test that will be given in a few minutes.*

Tammy: (frantically) I didn't study last night because I had a fight with my boyfriend. Tell me everything you know about what's going to be on the test!

Jason: Be quiet! I'm trying to read the rest of the chapter before we begin the test.

Alice: I can't remember a thing I studied!

Barry: I think I studied the wrong things!

Garret: (*yawning*) I stayed up all night studying. Now I'm so sleepy that I can hardly keep my eyes open. I didn't even take time to eat this morning. I feel awful! How am I going to be able to take the test?

Frank: (*Sitting quietly at his desk reading a comic book. He appears to be relaxed before the test because he has test taking skill.*)

- ❖ **Do you see yourself here?**
- ❖ **Which student is most like you?**

**Read on to learn some ways to become more successful in taking tests and exams!**



Dear Student,

We all know that exams can be a grueling experience – you begin worrying as soon as they are announced, you try not to panic during and then you wonder how you did afterwards.

The truth is, there is no simple or perfect solution to make exam taking worry free, but there are some suggestions that can make the experience less stressful and more successful.

First of all you must be well prepared! There is no magical solution – you must have done your best to study and know the material. There is just way around that.

These tips are to help you, make the most out of the exam session so that you can master the exam and show what you know. It is very frustrating to have worked hard and then find that you “Blank Out” or don’t know how to respond to the exam you have just received.

Before you can succeed in any exam you must:

1. Be Prepared: you should have studied and mastered the material – so that before the exam you are reviewing, not learning what is to be tested.
2. Develop Pre-Exam Strategies: what to do before the test.
3. Master Taking the Exam: what to do during the test.

Please read the following carefully – you will find many helpful hints. If you are unsure or have questions, please see me, in my office in room A114-14.

I wish you all a confident exam period.

Sarina Matarasso

Guidance Counsellor – Laval Catholic High School





## Pre-Exam Strategies

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Before you enter the exam room, there are a few things you must prepare. Most of all you must be rested and in a positive frame of mind. Successful students believe in themselves. It is very common for students to tell themselves that they will fail, or that they won't be able to handle the exam. These thoughts are negative and contribute to students panicking or freezing up when they sit down and are faced with the exam. These messages must be changed to positive and encouraging ones like:

- ❖ **I'm prepared!**
- ❖ **I know I can do this!**
- ❖ **I am a capable student!**

Many students suffer from **Exam Anxiety**. This can make even the most well prepared student feel like they cannot manage the exam. They feel that they are no longer in control and that the exam is in charge. They begin to feel stressed to the point where it becomes hard to think or to remember what they just studied. If this is a problem for you, you can do something to prepare and reduce the stress you are feeling.

1. This may sound a little strange to you – but it works! The next time you begin to hear yourself saying things like:

- I'm going to fail!!*
- I studied the wrong things!!*
- Everyone seems to be writing more!!*



... *Then Stop.*

- Stop what you are doing...
- Breathe deeply...
- Relax...
- Tell yourself the opposite of the negative statements e.g. *I know my work! I can do this exam...* etc.

## **Pre-Exam Strategies** *continued...*

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2. Before the exam imagine yourself in the exam room. How do you feel? What makes you feel tense? Is it waiting for the exam to start? Is it that you find a question you don't know the answer to right away?

- How do you feel?*
- What is it that makes you feel tense?*
- Is it waiting for the exam to start?*
- Is it that you'll find a question you don't know the answer to right away?*

*Change That! Imagine yourself...*

- Arriving at the exam calm...
- Not panicking when a question seems hard...
- Confident that you'll find the right answer...



## **Practice! Practice! Practice!**

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The more you practice these situations the more confident you will become. The more you recognize your own signs of nervousness, the quicker you will be able to stop and relax, concentrate on something else and let them go. You will be able to go on from there.

Now that you understand the stress factor there are a few things you should do before the exam. These will help you have a calmer more positive attitude. You will be better able to sit down and master the exam.

## **Before the Exam**

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1. Get sufficient sleep for at least two nights before the exam. Keep your mind fresh and alert. It is not good to over-study and exhaust yourself by staying up all night.
2. Arrive at school early – find the exam room ahead of time. Don't rush in, in a panic.
3. Bring all the materials you need or are allowed to have with you. Examples: pens, geometry set, erasers, math information sheets etc...
4. Don't be distracted by your friends or their last minute panic. Shut out all negative comments!
5. If you must, do only a light review before the exam. Do not try and restudy the whole course in ½ and hour. ***Remember: Do not Cram!*** It will make you nervous and you will not retain the information.
6. As you sit down in the exam room, arrange your desk and keep your equipment handy.
7. Take a few minutes to relax and adjust to your surroundings.
8. Listen carefully to the teacher's instruction – don't jump ahead.



## **Taking the Exam**

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Now that you have prepared, slept well and arrived on time, you are ready to proceed with the exam itself. Before looking at the exam, remember few students achieve 100% - nor are they expected to. Remember too, that you are prepared and ready. Wish yourself a good experience and proceed. No matter whether this is a multiple choice, essay or combination exam make sure you do the following:

1. Read over the whole exam first – before starting to answer any questions. Take note of the marking scheme. Identify the most important questions.
2. Start with the easiest questions. This will help you relax and gain confidence.
3. Have realistic expectations.
4. Jot down any formulas, dates etc... you memorized and may need to use.
5. If you are having trouble with a question, do not spend more time than its worth. Move on and come back.
6. Keep track of time and don't let the clock run out.
7. Leave enough time to check you exam at the end. Never hand in an unchecked exam.
8. If you feel yourself panicking, then stop and breathe deeply for 2 minutes before returning to the exam.





## **Different Types of Exams:**

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There are several types of exams: Multiple-Choice, Essay... The next following will give you some hints on how to manage these different exams.

### **Multiple-Choice Exams:**

Basically these are true or false questions with at least four possible answers. Follow these procedures while taking a multiple-choice exam:

1. Look over the exam. How many questions are there? Budget your time. Divide it up. For example, if you have 120 questions to answer, and the exam is two hours, spend only about one minute per example.
2. Start with questions that appear to be the easiest.
3. READ THE QUESTION AND UNDERLINE ALL THE KEY WORDS. The question may say "Which is *not* an example of...", "Which is the *incorrect* answer...", "Choose the *best* answer...". Some of the key words to look for are: **always – all – best – correct – incorrect – least – most – never – none – right – sometimes – usually – wrong.**
4. Read all the choices. You may believe that the first choice is the correct one. Read the remaining options anyway. The most correct answer may be further down the list.
5. Your first hunch is usually a good one. Pay attention to your intuition which may indicate the answer may be further down the list.
6. Cover up the choice of answers and try to figure out the answer on your own. Now compare your answer to the ones given. If you don't find a match, try this trick again.
7. Try to break the question into smaller parts. Through the process of elimination, try to work out the answer.
8. Eliminate the answer(s) that is (are) obviously incorrect first. Many times teachers structure multiple-choice answers with one statement that is obviously incorrect. Cross it out.



**Multiple-Choice Exams:** *continued...*

9. Pay attention to "All of the above" and "None of the above" answers. If two statements appear to be true, you are not sure about the third, and the fourth is "All of the above", the fourth choice is often correct. "None of the above" is also a very inclusive statement and often tends to be correct.
  
10. Be careful of:
  - A) Words that are **too** positive: all, every, always, best, invariable. These generally make an answer **false**.
  - B) Words that are **too** negative: never, worst, none. These also often make an answer **false**.
  - C) Words that sound "Unsure" like: many, most, few, as a rule, probably, often.
  
11. Watch out for double negatives. Ex: "it is not unlikely that" means that "it is likely that".
  
12. If two choices mean the same thing, you can probably eliminate both of the. If two choices are opposites, the correct answer is probably one or the other.
  
13. When looking over your choices, is there one that is different from the other? For example, if three of the four choices are listed in milligrams, and one reads, "1 gr.", that choice may be a distracter. You can then narrow your choice to the other three.
  
14. If you come across a difficult question:
  - A) Eliminate the choice you know are wrong.
  - B) If you still can't decide on the correct choice, mark the question clearly in the margin, then go on. Remember to come back to it later.
  - C) Don't panic! Very few students get 100%. You have to get a lot of questions wrong before failing.
  
15. When you have gone over the test for the first time, go back to the questions you have missed. Perhaps you were able to get other clues from the rest of the exam questions. If you still don't know the answer, guess! You won't lose marks for guessing.





## The Essay Exams:

With short answer questions, you need to know the answer, as there are no choices given to you. However, if you don't know the exact answer but do know something related to it, write down what you **do** know – this may help you to remember what you thought you forgot. Your teacher may give you partial credit. Also, **guess** if you don't know the answer, unless your teacher tells you not to do so.

**Essay Questions:** For essay questions, you have to organize your ideas before you begin. These types of questions usually focus on ideas and understandings. Include facts where necessary to prove your point. When you are studying, try to anticipate the essay questions that your teacher will ask. Then actually take the time to write out sample answers.

1. When you first get the test, read the directions carefully. If you have a choice of questions, read **ALL** of the question first. Then choose the ones that you can best answer.
2. Take a few minutes before you answer the essay to make an outline. List all the details that you want to use. Try to list the information in order of importance. Organizing your thoughts beforehand can save you time later, plus give you some self confidence.
3. Underline key words.
4. Budget your time. **If a question is worth more marks, then you should spend more time answering it.**
5. How to use your time:

Thinking and outlining: 15% - 25%

Writing the essay: 65% - 75%

Reading over and editing: 10% - 15%

For example: If you have 20 minutes to write an essay you could divide your time as follows:

Thinking and outlining: 5 minutes

Writing the essay: 13 minutes

Reading over and editing: 2 minutes



**Essay Questions** *continued...*

6. More does not necessarily mean better. A shorter, but well organized and well written essay will earn a higher mark than a longer one that is written poorly and disorganized. Follow your outline. Keep to the point.

7. Key Word used in Questions:

<b><u>Key Words</u></b>	<b><u>Ask for</u></b>	<b><u>Meaning</u></b>
<b>State</b>	Everything	Describe precise terms Re-produce definitions easily
<b>Discuss</b>	Everything	Give pros and cons
<b>Summarize</b>	Main Ideas	Give brief account of a theme or principle
<b>Contrast</b>	Specific Characteristics	Show the difference between 2 or more things
<b>Explain</b>	Specific Characteristics	Clearly state and interpret details around something
<b>Evaluate</b>	Give your supported opinion	Appraise the value or usefulness of something using your own opinion and examples

8. Restate the question in the first sentence of your essay. Get right to the point. If the question is "Discuss the many ways to improve your study sessions", your answer should begin with a reference to your question. Your thesis statement might be "There are many ways to improve a study session". Then make sure you use details to support your ideas.

9. Make sure each paragraph begins with a good topic sentence. What will that paragraph be about? Never ramble or move away from the topic. Stick to the facts when supporting your answer.

10. Essays need formal structure. Use full sentences.



**Essay Questions** continued...

11. Use *transition words* to emphasize your organization. Tie your thoughts and concepts together with transitions such as: *for example, because, for this reason, however, likewise, in summary, ultimately, first – second – third, also.*
12. Make sure you have a conclusion. It should be a restatement of your opening sentence showing how you have answered the question. A good concluding statement brings together all the points of your essay.
13. Use the terminology or technical terms you learned in class. This shows that you are familiar with the topic.
14. Proofread your essay: Look for errors in spelling, grammar and sentence structure.
15. When you have finished the exam, reread each answer asking the following questions:
  - Do I answer the question directly?
  - Do I say enough to earn the marks available?
  - Do I make clear statements, clarify them, and support each one with evidence from the material I've studied?
  - Are there any spelling mistakes I need to correct? Are names, dates, and details accurate?
  - Make corrections as neatly as you can.

