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Taking Control of Your College Reading and Learning
Elaine H. Byrd, Elaine C. Carter, Stacy D. Waddoups

Publisher: Earl McPeak
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TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR COLLEGE READING AND LEARNING

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Australia Canada Mexico Singapore Spain United Kingdom United States

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Only include those activities that really help you remember information.

Finally move to the *Retain* stage. List the memory techniques you use to lock important information in your mind. Be sure to add additional memory strategies that you have learned from other sources. Only include those activities that really help you remember information.

Be sure to plan a regular time to review or rehearse the information you need to learn. If most people do not regularly review information, they forget or have great difficulty retrieving material when the need arises.

The selections you make as you create your personalized BICUM program do not have to stay the same. In fact, you may even choose to make modifications the next time you study. However, the plan you create now can serve as a guide as you continue to take conscious control of your college reading. Regularly use your metacognitive skills to appraise the effectiveness of using the specific steps and techniques that you included in your personalized plan. Then make adjustments as your study needs change.

Test-Taking Tips: Prove that You Remember

In college, not only is it necessary to read and understand difficult textbooks, but you also have to prove to your instructors that you remember the information you read. This proof is often required in the form of written exams. Unfortunately, many students are frightened by tests, and this anxiety interferes with their performance.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is quite common and is experienced by almost all students to some degree. However, worrying about taking tests can result in a number of problems. First, test anxiety is usually not task-focused. For example, it often involves negative self-focused thoughts that can interfere with concentration and the ability to accurately record answers. Second, inability to accurately record information translates into poor test performance, which reinforces the

negative self-thoughts that lead to poor test performance. The result is a vicious cycle of negative thoughts leading to poor performance, and poor performance leading to negative thoughts. Third, over time students may give up hope and decide to drop out of school rather than face further failure.

A simple technique that many students find useful to control negative thoughts is "thought stopping." This method involves monitoring your thoughts, mentally telling yourself "stop!" whenever negative ideas come into your mind, then replacing them with positive thoughts. Practicing this technique before, during, and after testing can help decrease negative thinking.

Actually the best cure for test anxiety is wise preparation. If you have actively followed the 4 R's in BICUM, you have already completed many activities that will help your performance on tests. Your wise preparation should serve you well in testing situations.

Following are some additional test-taking tips that you may want to consider completing before, during, and after taking tests to further improve your scores.

Before the Test

1. Prepare from the start.

Buy your textbook early and preview or read each chapter before your teacher discusses the information in class. Having some advanced knowledge of the material to be covered will equip your mind to more readily learn about the subject.

2. Attend class regularly. Be on time, and do not leave early.

There is a direct correlation between attendance and grades on exams. Students who never miss class are much more likely to earn higher test scores than students who only attend intermittently. Essential explanations and assignments are often given as class begins and ends.

3. Take notes.

Be attentive during the lectures. Write down important information. Do not try to record everything that your

instructor says. Instead, write only key ideas, usually in phrases instead of sentences. The note-taking guidelines that you learned in chapter 5, such as using abbreviations, also apply to class lectures.

4. Sit in the "Terrific T" of the classroom.

The seats across the front and the seats down the middle of the classroom are more conducive to active class involvement. If you sit in this area, you are more likely to stay focused and pick up the important information that will be covered on tests.

5. Ask questions in class.

Asking questions helps you become personally involved in the lecture. As a result, you are more likely to stay interested in the material and remember the information.

6. Complete all assignments on time.

Read your text chapter by chapter, reducing each one as you go. Regularly review the material that you have previously covered and keep up to date with additional assignments. Do not allow yourself to get behind. Having to catch up at the same time that you are trying to complete current assignments can be disastrous.

7. Call classmates for assistance.

If you are ill and cannot attend class, check with a classmate so you can return prepared. If you miss information as you take notes, classmates may be able to help you fill in the gaps. Conferring with them over confusing points in the text or lectures, checking to make sure you have recorded assignments correctly, or confirming test dates can prevent some possible frustrations later.

8. Designate a study area and time.

Studying in a regular place and at set times will help you be a more efficient learner and aid in test preparation.

9. Find out what the test will cover.

Except for pop quizzes, instructors will likely tell you in advance what will be on the test. If you are uncertain, be sure to ask for clarification. Also, find out what percentage of the test will come from class notes and what percentage will result from textbook reading.

10. Find out the type of test.

Knowing whether an exam will be multiple choice, true/false, or essay can also help you study more efficiently. For example, essay tests demand recall level learning. If this is the type of test you will be taking, plan to study more thoroughly. Prepare by writing answers to practice essay questions.

11. Predict possible test questions.

Few teachers give out exact exam questions, but many teachers give strong hints as to what information will be included on exams. Occasionally instructors will have copies of old tests available upon request. If you are conscientious, you can learn to "read" your instructors and anticipate test questions. For instance, they might say, "This is important to remember," or "This would make a good test question." Instructors might also write important information on the board or print it on overheads. Any time teachers emphasize ideas, be aware that the information may appear on a test. Learn to watch for these hints; record and highlight possible test questions in your notes and directly in your text. This is an appropriate place to mark with a **T** to signal text questions, as suggested in chapter 3.

12. Make up, take, and correct practice tests.

Dr. Ruel A. Allred, a nationally known reading expert, believes that a great deal of learning can take place during the testing process. He believes that this is especially true if students correct their own tests and receive prompt and correct feedback. Also, many educators suggest that taking practice exams can help students reduce their test anxiety.

You can take the advice from these experts and begin to learn from self-testing and reduce your fear of taking tests. Review the hints you noticed from your teachers on possible exam questions. Look over the chapter questions in your textbook and your reduced forms. Consider all this information as you construct a practice test.

Wait a day or so and take the test. Be sure to write the answers to your questions, as you will probably have to write the answers on your test. Few teachers give oral exams. It is possible to be able to answer questions vocally, then forget the information when you must write it. Make your practice test as similar to the actual exam as possible

so you will not have this problem. Very soon after you finish your practice test, correct it. Notice what you missed and why; then learn that material also.

13. Prepare yourself physically.

Do not stay up all night studying. Get a good night's sleep before your test so you can think clearly. Also, eat a nutritious breakfast.

14. Review your notes just before going to bed and soon after you awake.

Take advantage of your subconscious mind. Look over your notes before going to bed so your mind can process the material while you are sleeping. Then, when you wake up, review your notes again to increase your chances of success on your test.

During the Test

1. Arrive a few minutes early.

Plan to arrive a few minutes before the test is scheduled to begin. That way if something unexpected occurs you may at least be on time. Rushing in late gets you off on the wrong foot and can interfere with your concentration. If you give yourself a few spare moments, you can collect your thoughts and mentally prepare yourself to succeed.

2. Use a two-minute spill.

Before looking at the test, jot down on a piece of scratch paper everything you want to remember. (You may need to ask in advance for permission to use scratch paper so you will not be accused of cheating.) Record the acronyms you learned, the words that they are connected to, and the lists of ideas you memorized. Writing this information down can give you a sense of security and decrease your test anxiety. Even if you forget other information, you can be assured that the ideas you wrote in your two-minute spill are safe. Having a written copy of some important information can be comforting.

3. Think positively. Tell yourself that you can do well.

Do not allow yourself to dwell on negative ideas or fears. A well-known writer, James Allen, once said, "As a man thinketh, so is he." If his idea were to be applied to test taking, it might read, "As a student thinketh he/she will do on an exam, so will he/she do." The power of the mind to control actions is sometimes called self-fulfilling prophecy. Whether you think you can or think you can't, you are right. If you have prepared wisely, you can and definitely should confidently say to yourself, "I will do well on this test."

4. Preview the test before you start.

Quickly look over your test. Count the pages. Notice the number of questions and what types of questions are included. Are there point values attached to the questions? If so, notice which ones are worth the most.

5. Plan your time.

If you have limited time in which to complete the test, be careful to plan your time wisely. Assign a specific number of minutes to spend on each question. Consider the point values of each one. Spend more time on the ones that are worth the most. Include five minutes to look over your test when you finish.

6. Read carefully.

Students often misread or overlook test directions. As a result, they lose points. Also, many students miss questions because they do not read them correctly or do not follow the directions precisely. For example, if there are three parts to a question, be sure to answer all three parts. Many students inadvertently answer only a portion of some questions. As a consequence, they miss points, sometimes on information they know very well. Do not let simple reading errors lower your test scores.

7. Ask for clarification on poorly worded questions.

If you do not understand a question, ask your instructor. If this is not possible, write your concerns and reasoning on a piece of paper, or in the margins on the test. If you used an additional page, attach it to the test when you turn it in. Instructors will often give credit for alternate answers if your reasoning is valid.

8. Go through the test three times.

The first time, answer all the questions you are sure about. This builds confidence and reduces test anxiety. The second time, answer the harder questions; the third time check your work for accuracy and review the answers that you were unsure of. Be cautious about changing answers. Often your first impression is the right choice.

9. Pick up hints for answers throughout the test.

Use the information in other questions to answer the questions that puzzle you. If you come to a question that stumps you, leave it blank and work through the rest of the test. Many times you will find some of the information you forgot given in another question. Using this information can save you points that you otherwise might have lost.

10. Answer every question.

Unless you are penalized for incorrect responses, never leave a question blank. Guessing can often add a few additional points to your score.

11. Follow specific tips for taking true/false tests.

- A. Answer the questions as quickly as possible, and don't waste time looking for hidden meanings.
- B. All of the information in a question must be true for the whole question to be true.
- C. If questions are long and complicated, they are more likely to be false. Because there are many parts included in these sentences, it is easy to overlook a minor but nevertheless significant untrue word or phrase. Evaluate these sentences very carefully.
- D. Watch for absolute words, such as "invariably," "never," "always," "all." Generally the questions that contain absolute words are false.
- E. Assume that a question is true unless you can determine what makes it false. It must be true without exception. Statements tend to be false when they state a reason. They tend to give an incorrect reason or they don't give all the possible reasons.

- F. If a test item contains two statements, both must be true for the item to be true.
- G. Watch out for “not” and other negative words. These change answers to the opposite of what you expect. Negative words are very easy to overlook. Consciously look for them so you won’t lose points.

12. Follow specific tips for taking multiple choice tests.

- A. Eliminate impossible, illogical or irrelevant answers. If you narrow down the possibilities to choose from, you will have a greater chance of getting the answers right.
- B. Read all the options before answering questions. Sometimes the answer that first appears correct is not as good as another one of the options. Often your task is to select the “best answer.” More than one answer may be correct, but one will be better than the others.
- C. If you narrow down the answer to two similar-looking phrases, decide how the two differ and how the differences make one correct and the other wrong.
- D. As with true/false tests, watch out for negative words. You might try circling them so they will stand out and you can take them into consideration when you answer.
- E. Absolute words (always, never, all, etc.) are just as important to notice in multiple choice questions as they are in true/false questions. Usually questions that contain these words are false. Few situations are 100% one way or the other.
- F. Answers with qualifying words such as “often,” “usually,” and “generally,” are often correct.
- G. If you have studied thoroughly and are well prepared to take the test, you can usually assume that multiple choice options containing unfamiliar words, sentences and phrases are incorrect.
- H. The longest option is often the correct option, particularly if the test was created by your

instructor. In creating the test, your teacher likely created the correct option first, making sure it included all the necessary information to make it correct. Then he/she constructed the alternate answers and probably didn't take as much time to create them or found it difficult to create good distractors. Therefore, they might be shorter and less comprehensive. (This will probably not work on professionally constructed tests because they have been reviewed several times, and hints like this would likely have been eliminated.)

- I. The correct answer will agree grammatically with the stem (beginning part of the question). Sometimes incorrect answers do not match. Again, the correct option is often created first, and great care is taken to eliminate any confusion in the answer. The other options might not have been as carefully constructed, so they might not agree grammatically. (Don't look for this hint in professionally constructed tests. Flaws like this would likely have been found and corrected.)

13. Follow specific tips for taking essay tests.

- A. Read through the entire test before beginning to answer any of the questions. As you do this, jot down thoughts in the margins that you want to include in your answers.
- B. If you are being timed, it is especially important in essay tests to plan how long you can afford to spend on each question. Also, allow a few minutes to look over your answers. Filling in words you left out or cleaning up confusing thoughts can add valuable points.
- C. Mark the important direction words that tell you what to do: "compare," "describe," "list," "define," and so on. Be sure you follow them precisely.
- D. Often essay questions have multiple parts. Number each one so that you remember to answer *all* of them.
- E. If time permits, briefly outline your answers before you begin to write. Having a plan to follow will

help you state your information more clearly and avoid rambling.

- F. Use the first sentence as your main idea. Do not include an introduction. Creative writing is not appropriate for answering essay questions. You do not have to introduce your instructor to the topic; just clearly state what you have to say.
- G. Follow the main idea with clear supports, using numbers or transition words to indicate these points (first, second, another reason is, also, etc.).
- H. End your essay with a summary statement that ties your ideas together. This can be as simple as restating the main idea.
- I. If you run short of time, quickly outline answers to the questions that remain. List the information without worrying about writing complete sentences. You will likely receive at least partial credit.

After the Test

1. Look up any material on the test.

Go to your text or notes and find the answers to the questions you were unsure of on the test. Once you find the material, recall your reasoning during the test. Ask yourself why you answered the questions the way you did. You can learn a lot about your testing behavior when you answer these metacognitive questions.

2. Ask to see a copy of the test. Find out which questions you missed and why you missed them.

If your instructor hands back the tests and goes over the answers with you, pay careful attention. For each question you missed, find out precisely why you marked it incorrectly. Check to see if any of the following questions explain your mistakes.

- A. Did you misread the questions?

- B. Did you overlook negative words or absolute words?
- C. Did you know the material but mistakenly mark the wrong answers? (This is a common mistake.)
- D. Did you fail to study the material you missed? If so, find out the sources of this information: lectures, notes, text, etc. Maybe you were simply unaware of material for which you were held responsible.
- E. Did you read more into questions than was really there? It is possible to over-analyze a question and unknowingly include information that is not actually required to answer correctly.
- F. Did you change answers and not erase completely? Scantron checkers are very sensitive to smudges and stray marks.

If your instructors do not normally hand back tests, be assertive and politely ask to spend time in their offices reviewing the exams. Most instructors are very willing to accommodate sincere students.

3. Positively reinforce yourself on the questions you answered correctly.

Notice how much of the test you answered correctly, and tell yourself that you did a good job. Even a sixty percent on a test means that you got more than half of the questions right. If you consciously praise yourself, you are less likely to have negative thoughts enter your mind when you take future tests. Remember that negative thinking can interfere with your concentration and cause low test performance. Make a point to compliment and/or reward yourself for your successes (however small they may be).

4. If you did poorly, see if you can retake the test.

If your instructor offers retakes, be sure to take advantage of them. Some teachers give repeat tests that are averaged with the initial tests. Be sure you are aware of your options.

5. Decide what you can do differently to prepare better for the next test.

Take all the information you have accumulated from the above questions, and make a plan of how to prepare for your next test. Remember that testing can be a learning experience. You can make this happen for you if you use your metacognitive skills to learn from your mistakes. For example, if you noticed that you missed several questions from your notes, plan to review your notes more carefully next time. Or if you noticed you overlooked the word "not" and recorded the opposite answer, you can plan to circle this word on succeeding tests. The information you have gained about yourself as a test taker can help you improve in future performance.