

From the folks at



Test Taking Tips & Strategies

(A Free E-Book)



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Hi there! Justin from Free-Clep-Prep.com here, and today we're going to talk about some tips and strategies for taking exams.

I've always been interested in learning why some people have such a hard time with exams while others don't. For example, I have a good friend who used to have serious trouble with any test he attempted. He's a smart guy, had the knowledge needed to pass, but there was something about a test that just rattled him.

I sat down with him a few years ago and went over some of the basics of test taking. It was yet another personal lesson that not everyone thinks or approaches things the same way. You'd think that after 32 years on this earth I'd have learned that by now.

In my friend's case, it was a bunch of little things that when added up, equaled a testing-breakdown. For example - He wasn't using his time as wisely as he could have. If he didn't know the answer to the first few questions, he'd consider the entire test a lost cause. If a question came up that he had no idea what the answer was, instead of using elimination to find it, he'd just guess.

I'd love to tell you that he now aces every test he takes, but that'd be untrue. He did improve greatly, and hasn't run out of time on a test yet, which used to be a chronic problem. Good test taking habits require practice just like everything else in life. You do it over and over again until you've mastered it.

Before you can practice, you have to know those habits. That's what this E-book is meant to share. Whether you have trouble testing, or enjoy them as much as I do, hopefully there's something in here that will help you.

We're going to cover multiple choice exams in this instance, because that's what the bulk of CLEP, DSST, and Excelsior exams are made of. That being said, most of this information can easily be applied to any test you come across. It's not rocket science by any stretch of the imagination. Let's get started!

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Everybody wins. ☺



Tip Number 1 - A test doesn't have to be scary.

First things first - At some level, test anxiety affects everyone who is serious about learning. I don't care how cool they are on the surface; everyone wants to do well on a test. So if you're the type that breaks into a cold sweat the minute you sit down; know that you're not alone! Rather than try not to be nervous, instead put things into perspective.

What's the absolute worst thing that can happen if you fail this test?

- I'll feel horrible! – This doesn't count. Feeling depressed for a day or two isn't lethal. Put your feelings to the side, and honestly look at the consequences.
- I wasted my money! - One of the benefits of these exams is that they're pretty cheap. Take it from someone who has blown \$3,000 on a certification course/test (and then failed the test) that you will survive, I promise. ;) More money will come, and you can always give the test another try later on.
- I wasted my time! - I consider my time more valuable than the money, so this is usually the worst case scenario for me. Having to wait six months to retake these can be a serious blow.

Ask yourself, "What are the alternatives to the exam?" Can you get the credits another way? If it's an elective, there are plenty of other exams to choose from. If it's for a required subject, then look at alternatives like ALEKS and Straighterline (More about those in the future). Sure the CLEP, DSST, or Excelsior exam is your "first" choice for these credits, but are they your only choice? Most of the time, you have other options.



Now, what's the absolute best thing that can happen if you pass this test?

- I'll feel great! – Anyone who has successfully passed one of these knows what a great feeling it is. In the interest of being fair, we're not going to count this. We're looking for tangible benefits.
- I saved my money! –I want to put this into perspective to make sure you really get my point: A typical undergraduate credit costs anywhere from \$100 to \$200. That's one credit. If you pay \$100 to take a CLEP and fail, you're out \$100. If you pay \$100 to take a CLEP and pass, you just picked up 3 credits for a fraction of the price of even the lowest costing college course. That's quite a savings!
- I saved my time! – A few weeks of relaxed study, a single two hour test, and we're done. Compare that with an eight week cram session, or fifteen week college class grind. I can think of much better ways to spend that time... Like studying for another exam. ☺

I usually go through the worst case/best case scenario well in advance of actually sitting down to take the test. Most of the time, that's enough to keep things in perspective and allow me to concentrate on what I'm supposed to be doing.

Finally, I remind myself that no matter what happens, I still studied and learned some pretty cool stuff preparing for this exam (whatever it may be). I'm better off than I was before attempting the test, so it's a win either way. This goes for you, too!

Tip Number 2 – Know how much time you have for each question before you take the test.

Look at this; two tips and we haven't even started the test yet! I know some people are probably scratching their heads on this one, so let me explain. There are a lot of factors that go into how long it takes you to complete an exam.



To name just a few:

- How many questions are on the exam?
- How fast do you read? - If you're a book-junkie like me, we can usually tear through questions. Of course that can also be dangerous, which leads us right into...
- Are the questions well-written? - Do you have to read them multiple times to understand what they're asking? Some exams are just written poorly. The questions may be subjective, full of misspellings, or missing entire words!
- Does the test have a reputation for being sneaky? – A close relative of the previous bullet-point. Some test creators will deliberately try to confuse you, or point you at the wrong answer.
- What type of answer do they ask for? – Are they Multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, or essay questions? Each of these takes a different amount of time to answer.

Some of these you'll know before the exam, and some you'll have to take into account when you sit down. All of these are going to have an effect on how long the entire exam takes you to complete. Why does it matter? Because you don't want to run out of time!

These days, almost every computer-based exam has a countdown timer on the screen. Rather than racing that timer for the entire test, I suggest you have a ballpark estimate in your head for each question.

If the test has 90 questions and you have 90 minutes, then you know you'll need to answer at least one question every minute. That's not as bad as it sounds. If it takes you 30 seconds to read the question and answers, that still gives you another full 30 seconds to make your choice. I'll show you how to improve those times even more in the next tip.



Knowing before the test exactly how much time you'll have for each question can help tremendously. It forces you to always keep in mind that the clock is ticking. This prevents you from glancing up at the timer halfway through the test and finding you only have ten minutes left! (Been there myself)

So what if the question is a really hard or tricky one? What if it's going to take you longer than normal? I'm so glad you asked! Just remember...

Tip Number 3 – The “Mark for Review” box is your friend.

For all of those who have never noticed this little guy, let me introduce you –

The screenshot shows a test interface titled "Random Test 001". At the top, it says "Question 1 of 74" and "2 hrs 38 mins left". The question text is "This is a really tough question and you have no earthly idea what the answer could be. Oh no!". Below the question are four radio button options: "A Answer 1", "B Answer 2", "C Answer 3", and "D Answer 4". To the right of these options is a checkbox labeled "Mark for Review". A red arrow points to this checkbox with the text "Review box to the rescue!". At the bottom of the interface are three buttons: "Previous (P)", "Next (N)", and "Review (R)".

So what does this unassuming little box do for you? To put it bluntly, it gives you total control over that countdown timer. Once you master this tip, running out of time will be a very rare occurrence.

For all those who don't know, the “Mark for Review” box allows you to come back later and have another crack at the question. Usually there will be a summary sheet at the end of the exam, and all of the questions you marked will be visible. You can then answer the questions at leisure rather than wasting time trying to figure it out.



Here's how this tip works –

I was always taught that each exam should be gone through three times. I know, I can hear some of you now screaming, “But if we’re racing the clock to get through it once, how are we supposed to do it three times!?!” Bear with me, I promise it’s not that difficult.

Three Pass Method:

- First pass – Read through each question and answers. Any question that you do not immediately know the answer, mark for review and move to the next question. Don’t think about the question, don’t eliminate the answers, just mark it and move on. Don’t be stressed if you end up with half of the questions marked by the end, this is only the first pass.
- Second pass – Review the questions you have marked. Read the question carefully this time and look for key indicators. Use the process of elimination on the answers. (More on both of these in a bit). If you can come up with the right answer after doing that, mark the answer, uncheck the “Mark for Review” box, and move to the next marked question. If you still have no idea what the answer is, don’t spend too much time on it. Just leave it marked and move to the next question.
- Third pass - By now you should have most of the questions you know for sure answered. You also have answered the questions that you were able to make educated choices on. If you’re pretty confident about those and they make up 80% of the test, then chances are good that you’ve already passed. From here on out there’s no stress. Of course we don’t just want to pass the test, we want to crush it. On the third pass you’ll want to attack the ones that you didn’t have a clue on before. Maybe you’ve read something in a previous question that partially answered one of these. If you absolutely have to take a complete guess, don’t worry about it. It happens to everyone! Use some of the upcoming tips to stack the odds in your favor.



By using the three pass method, you save all of your time for the questions that truly need it. The first pass should be at a dead sprint. Read the questions – Do you know the answer? If yes, answer it. If no, mark it for review and move on. The second pass takes a little bit longer since you're actually thinking about these. The third pass then gets the remaining time to really concentrate on the tough questions.

So what happens if you don't have a "Mark for Review" box, or if it's a pencil and paper exam? The same process applies. Just use a scratch sheet of paper to write down the question numbers that you'll need to review. As you answer them, just put a line through the number. A word of warning - If you're using a bubble answer sheet, pay close attention when you skip a question for later review. Make sure your next answer goes on the correct question's line. There's nothing like getting to the end of a 200 question exam and having a few extra unmarked bubbles. :P

Give the Three Pass Method a try the next time you take a test. I think you'll like the results.

Tip Number 4 – Read the complete question.

Sounds pretty simple doesn't it? Well it should be, but it still trips me up every now and then. This falls under the earlier tip of knowing what kind of test you're taking. Some creators deliberately word their questions (and sometimes answers) in a way that will be confusing at best, misleading at worst. Whether this is ethically correct is a whole other conversation and best saved for another day.

If you know that the exam has a reputation of being poorly worded or deliberately tricky, make sure you take the extra time to read the entire question. Read it slowly and deliberately. Make sure you factor this into your "Tip 2 - How much time per question estimate".

A few things to look out for:

Negatively-Stated Questions – Most people's brains naturally gravitate towards true statements when taking tests. That's hardly surprising since we're in such a Question and Answer groove. They ask for a peg that is



round, we give them a round peg. They ask for a peg that is square, we give them a square peg. Then all of a sudden they ask for a peg that is not oval. Bzzzzt! The brain short-circuits, skips over that pesky “not” word, and you’re giving them an oval peg. Test creators know this, and some will try to fool you by throwing in a negative. These days, most exams will capitalize the word “NOT” or “EXCEPT” in a question. Be on the lookout for those that do not.

Double Negatives – I hate these with a vengeance.

For example:

When adding hot water to a pot of cold water, the temperature of the water in the pot will rarely...

- A. Not Increase.
- B. Not Decrease.
- C. Not Stay the Same
- D. Not Explode

Did I mention how much I hate these? General rule with double negatives is the same as in math. Two negatives = a positive. In this case, “rarely” and “not” are your negatives. Just remove them from the entire question. So the question is asking – the temperature of the water will... what? In this case, it’s A – Increase.

Poorly Written or Subjective Questions – I hate to pick on Excelsior, but their paper and pencil exams are filled with these. There are some questions that I’ve had to read three or four times to figure out exactly what they were asking. The subjective questions are even worse, because often more than one answer will be correct (at least for me when I over-analyze). By the end of my third read-through and internal justifications, all of the answers are right!



For example:

The BEST way to go to the store is:

- A. By foot
- B. By bike
- C. By car
- D. By plane

Of course, the answer completely depends on your perspective and information that isn't supplied in the question. Is the store far? Then the car (or plane!) would be the best answer. Did your doctor tell you to get more exercise? Then walking or bike ride would probably be the way to go.

For subjective questions, I usually give the simplest answer that's closest to the textbook mentality. For those lucky individuals that go after their PMP (Project Manager Professional) certification... remember this rule well. I was tearing my hair out by the end of that exam. CLEP and DSST usually aren't as bad as Excelsior exams about this. The new Business Ethics and Society DSST did have a few semi-subjective questions.

Tip Number 5 – Use the Process of Elimination.

Elimination is one of the reasons I love multiple choice exams. Usually, if there are four questions, at least one can immediately be spotted as a wrong answer. It may be so far out of left field that you can automatically discard it. That leaves you three answers left. Most of the time, you can narrow the correct answer down to one or two of those three possibilities. Worst-case scenario – you now have a 50/50 chance of getting the question right.

This type of question should be put off until the third pass (Tip 3) so hopefully you get a few hints from other questions you've successfully answered. CLEP exams are better than DSST's in this regard. Often they will give you the answer to one question by asking another. Pay attention to any questions on the same subject as the one you're having trouble with.



See if they'll help with the one marked for review. I usually get one or two answers this way.

Other ways to use the process of elimination:

Multiple Answer Question –

For example:

What list contains ONLY primary colors?

- A. Blue, Red
- B. Blue, Red, Purple
- C. Red, Maroon
- D. Blue, Purple, Red, Maroon

Some people really get rattled on these. The trick is not to find all of the correct answers, but to disregard the incorrect ones. Only then do you find the correct answers.

So, let's pretend we don't know the answer to this already.

First, we look for the wrong answer. We know that Maroon is definitely "not" a primary color, so we can disregard that any answer with Maroon in it. That leaves us only with A and B.

Next, we'll look for the right answer. We know that Blue is a primary color, but we're not so sure about Red or Purple (play along). Then we notice that Red is in every answer listed. So no matter what answer you pick, Red is obviously a primary color.

Now we know that Red and Blue are the primary colors, but we're still not sure about Purple. This is where your gut instinct comes into play. To me, the fact that Purple is only listed twice, and one of those is with a wrong answer is a warning sign. Add to that I'm really not sure if it's a primary color or not. I personally follow the rule – "When in doubt, leave it out" I'll probably end up going with "A" on this, and lucky for me – It's the right answer.



Full proof plan? Not hardly, but it's a far sight better than just scratching my head and picking an answer at random.

Remember –

1. Use elimination to get rid of the wrong answers
2. Look for the right answers
3. Make your educated choice

Tip Number 6 – Know why you change your answers.

I'd like you to really take note of this tip. If you're like me, you may want to pick it up... look at it closely... get a good grip on it... and then beat yourself in the head with it until it sticks.

Seriously, it's that important.

Here's where Justin takes a ride on the crazy-train. You know the old saying, "Always go with your first answer! Don't change your answers on a test or you'll do worse"? That advice is wrong!

Granted it's an urban myth that teachers still tell you today, but it doesn't change the fact that it's wrong. There have been plenty of studies showing that students who go back and change answers score higher than those who do not. Don't believe me? There are decades of studies, [all saying the same thing.](#)

When it comes to taking tests, many of us are our own worst enemy. We over-analyze the questions. We get stressed out. We go blank on a question we just knew the answer to. We second guess ourselves and change our answers for no good reason. Out of all of these, the last is the most destructive on an exam.

By now you're probably asking, "So is he saying that changing your answers is a good thing or a bad thing?" My answer is... "Yes" ☺

Here's what I mean - You should never change your answers... without a good reason. If you knew the answer to that question the first time you saw



it, why would you change it? Has anything happened to prove you wrong? If the answer is no, then leave it alone.

If you remembered something else, or if another question gives you a different answer, then by all means go ahead and change it. Just ask yourself before you do – Why did I answer it the first way? What was my logic? Does that still apply? If not, then change away. If it does, then once again... leave it alone.

My point is to always know why you're making the change. Don't change it just because it doesn't look right. You need a better reason than that. Another fun fact from the above studies – People who changed their answer did better than those who didn't, as long as they only changed their answer once. This goes back to our tip though. As long as you have a good reason to change your answer, you shouldn't need to change it more than once. If you don't have a good reason to change it, then for the last time... leave it alone!

Tip Number 7 – Always answer every question!

This tip applies primarily to CLEP, DSST and Excelsior Exams. Other exams may also qualify, but you'll need to check. Here's why –

On CLEP, DSST and Excelsior Exams, an unanswered question counts as a wrong answer. Knowing this, there is no downside to taking a wild guess at a question that otherwise wouldn't be answered.

Now obviously our goal is to never run out of time, and always make educated choices. If you use the Three Pass Method and the other tips, it's rare that you'll need to use this one. Still, life happens... Computers sometimes crash and take 30 minutes to reboot. Testers sometimes *ahem* fall asleep at the keyboard for an hour until the proctor wakes them up. If you ever find yourself in this situation, remember that all is not lost. Use that first pass mentality and skip all questions you're not sure of, marking them for review. If time is getting tight on the second pass then just take your best guess.

Make sure you answer them all! Every unanswered question is a wasted opportunity to get one right.



Tip Number 8 – The hard questions are always at the beginning of the test.

This tip is mainly a head-fake. I know that with random question banks and other real-world nonsense that the above statement may not always be true. When I sit down at an exam, I don't bother with that real world stuff. I'm in Justin World! In that world, I rock at every test I take, I sometimes wear a cape (a red one), and every hard question is going to be at the beginning of my exam.

This allows two possible reactions within the first five minutes of the exam -

- A) I know the answers to all of those "hard" questions and am therefore going to crush this easy test.
- B) I don't know the answer to those hard questions (after all, they're the hard ones!), and simply Mark them for review until I find where the easier questions start.

Either way, I dodge the horrible "I'm doomed" feeling if I don't know the answers right out the gate. I'm a firm believer that attitude dictates performance and expecting to fail a test is a good way to make it happen.

You may be wondering – What happens if you don't find the "easier" questions until halfway through the test? Well, you've got one hard test! 😊 It does happen sometimes. I've had over half of an exam marked on my first pass. I think my record on the second pass is around 20 questions (the [Biology CLEP](#) if memory serves). Remember what we learned in Tip 3 though – If I'm only "reasonably" certain on those 20 questions, the chances are pretty good that I've already passed thanks to the other 80+ questions that I answered using knowledge and elimination. Not bad eh?

Make a world of your own when you sit down. Sure it's all in your head, but that's where all the answers are, too! (Red capes optional)



Conclusion

So hopefully you picked up one or two helpful tips out of this list. As I mentioned at the beginning, good testing habits take practice. I still catch myself skimming questions instead of reading them completely, and that's about as basic a habit as you can get! The learning never stops. ☺

I've set up a page dedicated to the collection of tips and strategies for CLEP, DSST, Excelsior Exams, and every other test for that matter. If you have a favorite tip that you'd like to see here, why not submit it? If it's a good one, I'll include it on the next version of this Ebook and everyone can make use of your experience. I'd like this to be a living document, constantly changing and getting better and better.

On the next page I've listed all of the tips along with a short blurb for each. If you want something to carry to the testing center for reinforcement, you can just print off that page. I doubt your proctor will let you bring it to your desk, but you can ask them to tape it on the wall somewhere close by. Glance at it every now and then and keep practicing those habits.

I know you can do it!

Wishing you nothing but the best,

-Justin

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www.Free-Clep-Prep.com



Quick Reference Sheet

A test doesn't have to be scary – Remember, best case/worst case scenarios. Don't stress!

Know how much time you have for each question before you take the test – Time the questions, not the entire test.

The “Mark for Review” box is your friend – Use the Three Pass Method!

Read the complete question – Watch out for key indicators (NOT, EXCEPT, and poorly written questions)

Use the Process of Elimination – Look for the wrong answers first, and then the right answer.

Know why you change your answers – Always have a logical reason for doing so, and only do it once!

Always answer every question! – Even if it's a guess, something is better than nothing!

The hard questions are always at the beginning of the test! – Because red capes are cool ☺
Have a positive attitude!