

Test-taking strategies

Marc R. Roussel

Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry
University of Lethbridge

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Taking tests is not a natural thing for most of us. It's something we learn to do. This note suggests some strategies that should help you do as well as you can on your tests.

1 Before the test

- This may seem obvious, but sometimes people forget this: **Study what you don't know.** Studying things you already understand feels good, and you may pick up a detail or two that might help you on the test, but you are likely to pick up more marks if you focus your studying on things you haven't mastered yet.
- If possible, **look at previous years' tests by the same instructor.** Most instructors have a well-defined test-writing style. Looking at their past tests will give you an idea of the format to expect, types of questions asked, etc.
- Are you allowed to bring any resources into the test (formula sheet, textbook, etc.)? If so, spend some time organizing this material. If you're allowed to bring a formula sheet, make sure it's well organized and contains only the things you are likely to need since a cluttered formula sheet can slow you down. If you're allowed to bring a book, mark pages containing key information with sticky notes or other similar devices (assuming this is permitted by the instructor, of course). Most importantly, make sure that you know where to look for information you are likely to need since you don't want to waste time looking around during the test.

2 When the test starts

- **If there are instructions, read them.**
- **Look the test over.** How many questions are there? How many marks are the questions worth? Do a quick mental calculation to determine how many minutes you have per mark (or, depending on the instructor, how many marks per minute). The

weighting of the questions ought to tell you how to allocate your time. It will also tell you how complex or detailed an answer the instructor expects. A one-mark question may only require an answer of one or a few words. A ten-mark question probably requires a long answer.

- **Have a quick look at any data given separately** (e.g. at the end of the test paper). This may speed up data lookups later.

3 As the test proceeds

- **Keep track of your time.** If you figure that you have one minute per mark (for example), then abandon any question that seems to be taking longer than this. You can always come back to it later if you have time, and you really need to leave yourself enough time to do the other questions.
- **When you read a question, ask yourself if you can do it right away.** If so, go ahead. If, after you've read a question and given it a little bit of thought, you're not sure how to start, leave it and go on to the next question. The strategy here is to pick up any easy marks first in order to maximize the time you have for the harder questions.
- **Give an answer commensurate with the number of marks assigned to the question.** A question worth very few marks requires a short answer. If you write a half-page answer for a one-mark question, you are wasting time. A question worth a lot of marks requires a longer and, probably, deeper answer.
- **Show your work.** This is particularly important for questions worth more marks. If you just give an answer and it's wrong, I have nothing to mark.
- **If there are questions worth a lot of marks, make sure you leave plenty of time to work on them,** even if it means that you have to abandon work on other questions. Getting 5/5 on a small question is great, but not if it results in your getting 1/10 on a larger question. You would be better off getting 3/5 and 6/10. Remember: You're not out to impress the instructor with how well you do one particular thing. You want to demonstrate that you understand something about most (ideally, all) of the material tested.

You may have noticed that a lot of my advice revolves around time management. A lot of very bright students fail to perform as well as they might in university courses because they do not manage their time well during tests.

Much of the advice given above can be summarized in two words: **Be strategic.** Focus on the things that will generate the most marks. This advice applies to studying for the test, and for your work during the test itself.

Good luck!