12 Tips for Exam Time

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In a just world, the score you receive on an exam would reflect how much you know and how well you studied. Unfortunately, this isn’t always the reality. From the moment you walk into the exam room, you need to make the right moves to maximize your performance. Here are 12 tips for doing just that...

1. **Arrive early.** Allow a couple of minutes to get settled. You want to begin the exam focused and organized, not rushed and panicked.

2. **Enter the exam room prepared.** You obviously need to know the material, but you also need to have the correct tools in hand. Do you have several pens or pencils? Did you bring scratch paper if it is allowed? For math and science tests, did you bring the correct calculator with fresh batteries? Do you have a watch?

3. **Help your short-term memory.** If you’re worried about forgetting a formula, character name or date, write it down in the margin or on scrap paper as soon as you get the exam.

4. **Watch the time.** The minute you get the exam, skim through it to see how many and what types of questions there are. Figure out how much time each question should take, and be careful to pace yourself. If you take 45 minutes for a short essay that should take 20 minutes, you’ll be in trouble.

5. **Read carefully.** Many well-prepared students do poorly on tests because they fail to read the directions and questions carefully. If you’re asked to list four factors leading up to the American Revolution, don’t list three. If you’re asked to show your work, don’t simply jump to the solution. If you are asked to explain, don’t give a one-word response. If you need to **contrast**, don’t explore two similar examples.

6. **Start with the easy questions.** If you get bogged down with a difficult problem early in the exam, you’ll burn up time and begin to panic. By beginning with what you know well, you’ll lock in those points and build your confidence.

7. **Clear your head.** Everyone gets a little nervous at exam time, but work to stay as calm as possible. Take a few seconds during the exam to stretch tense muscles, breathe deeply and focus your eyes across the room (but make sure you don’t look like you’re looking at someone else’s exam!).

8. **Write legibly and professionally.** Despite what your grade-school teacher may have said, professors don’t care if you print or use cursive. Use whichever is most legible. And realize that your handwriting does make an impression – loopy writing, smiley faces and big circles over your “t”s will make your exam look childish.

9. **Pay attention to point values.** If the essay at the end of the exam is worth 50% of the total score, give it lots of time and attention. Don’t waste excessive time on difficult questions that are worth little.

10. **Partial Credit.** Never leave a question blank – that’s a guaranteed zero. If you can get down the first step of a proof or jot down a few ideas related to an essay question, you will probably earn at least a few points. If there’s no penalty for guessing, then you should always guess. If you’re running out of time on an essay, outline your ideas.

11. **Ask for clarification.** Unfortunately, not all professors write clear, error-free exams. If something in the exam doesn’t make sense, raise your hand for help.

12. **Use all the time.** Your professor will not be impressed that you finished the test in half of the allotted time. If you answer all the questions before time runs out, check and double-check your answers. Expand your ideas. Reread the questions and make sure you have answered them correctly and thoroughly.
During an exam, DON'T...

1. Crunch on Doritos or Cheetos. You'll drive your classmates nuts, and your professor won't be impressed by the orange stains on your exam.
2. Play your iPod. Many professors don’t allow headphones, and you want all your attention on the exam.
3. Use pink ink. Or purple or red or green. Everything except blue or black will look amateurish.
4. Overdose on caffeine. Is it really wise to be sweaty, agitated and nervous during a test?
5. Click your pen. Or shake your leg or tap your fingers. Be considerate of your classmates and recognize that these nervous habits can be very distracting.
6. Cheat. Obviously you shouldn't cheat, but a surprising number of students do. Realize that a bad test score is far better than an "F" in the course or expulsion from college.