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IMPROVING TEST SCORES

*Why Are Study & Test-Taking
Skills So Important?*



Why Do I Need to Read the Next Twelve Pages?

STUDENT

WHY ARE STUDY & TEST-TAKING SKILLS SO IMPORTANT?

or WHY DO I NEED TO READ THE NEXT TWELVE PAGES?

All the World's a Test...

Tests are everywhere in a teenager's life. You take a test in every one of your school subjects (even P.E.). If you want to drive a car, you need to pass both a written and a driving test. Most important, if you want to go to college, you need to pass a BIG test.

You want to earn a good grade in a class? You better know how to study well and how to successfully pass the teacher's tests.

You want to get into higher-level gifted or advanced classes in school? You need to perform well on a test.

You want to keep out of double-period remedial-type classes that force you to lose your elective class? You better do well enough on a test.

Do you enjoy your parents' reactions when you bring home poor grades? Or, is your home life much happier when you come home with good grades? Then you better learn how to be successful on tests.

This supplement was created to help you study smarter and be successful on any tests you take. As you look over the next pages, think about how many of the ideas you read can be used and adapted to your life, so that you begin to study smarter and raise your test scores.

Test Taking Is a Skill

- ***Throwing a curveball for a strike in baseball is a skill.***
- ***Dancing en pointe in ballet is a skill.***
- ***Hitting 80% of your free throws in basketball is skill.***
- ***Completing a triple cartwheel in gymnastics is a skill.***
- ***Running a marathon is a skill.***
- ***Playing the lead in a Shakespearean play is a skill.***
- ***Singing a solo in front of the school completely on pitch is a skill.***
- ***Successfully taking tests is a skill.***

What do all of these activities have in common? What process do these experts go through?

In all of them, you need to study the various individual components of that skill. Each of these activities requires you to have a certain amount of knowledge in order to do them well and correctly.

For example:

To throw the curveball, you need to know how to position your fingers.

To dance en pointe, you need to know how to position your toes.

To throw a free throw, you need to know exactly when to release the ball.

To do a cartwheel, you need to know exactly when to leave your feet.

To run a marathon, you need to know how to pace your energy.

To perform in a Shakespeare play, you need to know how to display characterization.

To sing a song, you need to know how to stay on pitch.

To succeed on a test, you need to know how to study efficiently and effectively.

In each of these activities, you need to practice in order to get better at them.
Skills need to be practiced.

TEST TAKING IS A SKILL. There are many components to successful test-taking. And you need to practice these various components in order to become good at it.

To be successful at baseball, dance, basketball, gymnastics, running, drama, singing or dozens of other activities which require skill:

You need to know how to succeed doing the components of that skill.

You need to practice at that success.

To be successful in taking tests you need to know how to succeed doing the components of studying and test-taking, and you need to practice at that success.

Continue reading through the next pages for ideas on how you can accomplish this.

After all, all the world's a test, and won't your life be better if you're more successful at test-taking?

HOW TO STUDY BETTER AND GET HIGHER TEST SCORES

Did you ever study for hours for a test and then have it returned from your teacher with a grade much lower than you expected? Wasn't it frustrating, since you know you studied a long time? Why do you think that happened?

Most students study by simply reading over the chapter in the book, and/or their notes, a number of times. They may spend hours doing this. Unfortunately, it's also the worst way to study.

Quality of study time is important, not the **quantity**.

Let's look at why reading the material over and over is not a good way to study for a test.

When you watch your favorite television show, you concentrate fully on the show, correct? You normally don't do other things during the program, because you don't want to miss anything important. However, if you watch a rerun of the same episode during the summer, you'll probably discover that you don't concentrate as much. Why is that? *Because you know what's coming next.* Therefore, your mind doesn't need to concentrate as hard as it did the first time, because it already is familiar with the plot of that episode.

Studying is very similar.

The first time that you read a chapter in the book, it is pretty easy to concentrate on the material, since it's fresh in your mind. However, the second, third and fourth time you read it over, your mind already knows "what's coming next." For example, it knows that at the bottom of page 45 there's a section telling about the Declaration of Independence. When your mind knows what's coming next, it quickly gets bored and starts to wander. For even if you don't know the material well, your brain has already "seen this stuff" and is no longer as interested in holding your attention. The material is no longer fresh, it's no longer new to your brain. You start thinking about other things, and your studying becomes less and less efficient. As a direct result, you begin to spend a lot of time learning very little. The same is true when you study your classroom notes. Your mind "knows what's coming next" on the page, and consequently, begins to wander.

And that's why even though you "studied" for hours, you did not learn the material well.

So, how can you fix this problem? By **studying the material in new ways that will make it fresh to your brain**. There are three main ways that you can do this, all of which will greatly improve your test scores.

WHAT IS STUDYING?

You hear the word "studying" a lot. But what does it really mean?

Studying does not simply mean going over the material. It means learning it. Knowing it. Instant recall. When you have studied the material and a question about it shows up on a test, you should instantly know the answer.

Studying may mean different things depending on the subject. It may be as simple as memorizing the spelling of ten words. It may be as complicated as explaining the economic system of medieval Europe. Whatever it entails, studying means learning the material to be tested in that particular class.

1 *Make and use flash cards*

Flash cards are probably the best way to learn important terms, equations and bits of knowledge to be tested. You may think that they're "stupid" or a "waste of time," but the process of making and studying the cards will greatly increase your knowledge of the material to be tested. (You don't need to buy index cards, you can take any piece of paper and cut it up into smaller "cards".)

Any important piece of information that is to be tested can be written on flash cards. This works for any subject, and at any grade level, from elementary school, up through university graduate programs!

Here are some examples from various subjects:

SCIENCE VOCABULARY

PHOTOSYNTHESIS	The process a plant uses sunlight, CO ₂ and water to create food
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HISTORY VOCABULARY

KING JAMES VI	King of Scotland who became James I of England; last time Scotland was independent
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MATH CONCEPTS

$(a + b)(a + b)$	$a^2 + 2ab + b^2$
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Improving Test Scores, 2006, pages 35-36

First, the action of physically making the cards forces you to review the material in your mind. You not only have to select what you want to put on the cards, but as you write it, you learn the information.

Second, as you review the cards, your mind sees the material in a different order every time. It becomes "fresh." For example, take the stack of cards, and as you get one right, place it into a new pile. If you get it wrong, put it in the back. Keep going through the pile until every card gets answered correctly at least once. By continually going through the pile of terms and information, you can ensure that you have learned all of the most important material on the test.

Finally, keep the cards close at hand. If you take a bus to school, pull them out and go through them. If you have some time between classes, look them over. It's a lot easier than pulling out your textbook or your classroom notes!

2 ***Go over textbook review questions***

Virtually every textbook contains review questions within and after the chapter. Go back over these and see if you can truly answer them correctly (not just a quick, incomplete answer). If you know within yourself that you are not sure of the correct answer, then go back into the chapter and locate the appropriate material.

If your teacher already had you complete these questions in class or as home work, go back over the ones that you answered incorrectly. Locate the correct answers.

This process is very important. Even though you are not turning in this material for credit or a grade, the knowledge that you will gain will directly help you receive a better grade on the test!

3 ***Review all textbook pictures, maps, graphs and charts***

This is the one area that is rarely studied before a test. The pictures, maps, graphs and charts are not in the textbook to make it look pretty! *They are there for a reason.* Go back over the chapter and look at each one. Then ask yourself, "Why did the author put this here?" Try to determine the concept or idea that the graphic represents. If the author took the time and expense to include this picture, map graph or chart in the book, then the idea behind the graphic is almost sure to be covered on the test.

If you do the three strategies listed above:

Make and use flash cards.

Go over textbook review questions.

Review all textbook pictures, maps, graphs and charts.

you will have covered all of the material for the test in a new, novel way. In other words, it will be fresh to your brain, and you won't have the same type of mind-wandering that you would experience if you simply read the chapter or your notes over and over again.

***THE RESULT????
YOU'LL STUDY BETTER
AND GET A HIGHER
SCORE ON YOUR TEST!!!!***

HOW TO SUCCEED ON A MULTIPLE-CHOICE TEST

As you read earlier—test-taking is a skill, and all skills must be practiced. Remember, as with most skills, if you learn how to do the individual components well, you have a much better chance of succeeding at the whole.

The next two sections will look at both of the major types of tests that you will take—multiple-choice and short or long essay. You'll be given a number of strategies that you can use in order to learn how to successfully take these types of tests, and ultimately, get the best grade. Obviously, the most logical way to ensure a good grade on a test is to study well. However, if you also know how these particular tests work, you can improve your grade even more.

The skill of taking multiple-choice tests

The vast majority of tests that you will take are multiple-choice tests. Published textbook exams, your driving test, and especially the standardized tests at the end of the year, all fall into this category.

There are three main skills required in succeeding at this type of test:

- ***Learning how to scan through the questions to determine those you have the best chance of answering correctly***
- ***Learning how to use the process of elimination in order to get questions right, even if you don't know the correct answer***
- ***Learning how to use context clues in order to get questions right, even if you don't know the correct answer***

Scanning

Most of your multiple-choice tests will have a time-limit of some sort. It may be an exact time limit of a certain number of minutes; it may be that you are expected to finish the test within a particular class period. Many students do not complete their tests because they get hung up on certain questions, and spend way too much time on those questions.

When you are given a time-limit for a multiple-choice test, you need to be able to scan through the entire exam in order to determine:

- ***Which questions you know, and can therefore answer quickly***
- ***Which questions you can probably figure out with some effort***
- ***Which questions you have absolutely no clue how to answer***

It is critical that you get through and answer all of the questions which you should definitely get correct. You should also be able to get through the questions which you have a good chance of getting correct. And most important, you should spend the least amount of your limited time on those questions in which you have little chance of getting correct, outside of guessing.

In order to accomplish this, you should use the following procedures when faced with a multiple-choice test with a time-limit:

1. ***Read each question. Answer any questions to which you immediately know the correct answer.***
2. ***Draw a small check mark next to those questions that you feel you will be able to answer given a bit of time and effort.***
3. ***Draw a small "X" next to those questions that you believe you will have to guess at.***

Improving Test Scores, 2006, page 37

Using this system, you will go through the entire test and answer the questions that you already know. Then you'll go back and deal with the questions that are marked with check marks, ones that you may be able to figure out (being careful that you don't spend too much time on any one). Finally, you'll attempt to answer the questions marked with an "X," using both the process of elimination and context clues to figure them out, (which will give you a better chance than by simply guessing the answer).

The process of elimination

In multiple-choice tests, the goal is really not to see if you know the correct answer. Rather, it is a test to see if you can find the correct answer. This is an important difference. Obviously, if you studied well and know all of the answers, you won't need to rely on the process of elimination or context clues to answer the questions correctly. However, for those questions where you do not know the answer, these processes can still allow you to find the correct answer.

Try the following question in your head:

What is the currency of the former country of Yugoslavia?

- A. dollar
- B. pound
- C. lira
- D. dinar
- E. peso

Improving Test Scores, 2006, page 38

You probably selected "D"—or at least it was one of your final choices. (That is in fact the correct answer). How did you come to that answer? You probably did not know that the currency of the former country of Yugoslavia is called the "dinar." So how did you get the question right?

You did it through the process of elimination. You probably determined at least some of the following as you read this question:

"A" is incorrect because the dollar is the currency of the United States

"B" is incorrect because the pound is the currency of Great Britain

"C" is incorrect because the lira is the former currency of Italy

"E" is incorrect because the peso is the currency of Mexico

Therefore, in your mind, the answer had to be "dinar." Did you get less credit for guessing the answer instead of actually knowing the answer? No, of course not. You got the same credit as someone who actually knew that the dinar was the currency of Yugoslavia.

By figuring out and eliminating the incorrect answers, you can raise the chances that you can guess the correct answer. Published multiple-choice tests (such as the standardized tests you take at the end of the year, or those that come with your textbook) are written very carefully. For example, a five-answer test is specifically designed so that:

- ***One answer is absolutely incorrect.***
- ***One answer is probably incorrect.***
- ***One answer may be correct or incorrect.***
- ***One answer is possibly correct.***
- ***One answer is definitely correct.***

You have a greater chance of guessing the correct answer if you can eliminate some of the incorrect ones.

For example:

Let's say you come to a test question where you have no idea as to the correct answer, so you decide that you have to guess. There are five possible answers from which to choose.

- ***If you eliminate 0 of the 5 answers and simply guess, you only have a 20% chance of getting it correct.***
- ***If you eliminate 1 of the 5 answers and guess, you now have a 25% chance of getting it correct.***
- ***If you eliminate 2 of the 5 answers and guess, you now have a 33% chance of getting it correct. Better.***
- ***If you eliminate 3 of the 5 answers and guess, you now have a 50% chance of getting it correct. Much better.***
- ***If you eliminate 4 of the 5 answers and guess, you have a 100% chance of getting it correct. Perfect.***

As you can see, the better you are at the process of elimination, the better your chances of getting questions correct when you do not know the answer. And that directly raises your test score.

Again—on a multiple-choice test it is important that you can find the correct answer, even if you don't actually know it.

Context clues

Once you have used the process of elimination to get rid of incorrect choices, you may still have a couple of answers left from which to choose. Rather than just guessing at this point, you can use context clues to try to figure out the correct answer, or to at least further eliminate incorrect ones.

Context clues are the clues that the test gives you that may lead you to the correct answer. Sometimes when you first read through the test, the wording of a question towards the end of the test may give you a hint to an answer for an earlier question. Sometimes just the wording of a question can lead to a correct guess.

Often things you already know, such as your knowledge of prefixes and suffixes, can assist you in finding the correct answer.

Take the following question as an example:

The reader could not understand the article because the author was _____ in his discussion.

- A. categorizing
- B. incomprehensible
- C. reiterating
- D. editorializing
- E. summarizing

Improving Test Scores, 2006, page 38–39

A context clue in this situation is the “negativity” of the question: (“The reader could not understand”). If you look over the answers provided, you'll find that only one of them has what is considered a “negative” prefix: “incomprehensible.” Therefore, if you did not already know the answer to this question, an intelligent guess would be the answer with the negative prefix, which would match the negative question.

Of course, It's always best to study well enough so that you know all of the correct answers on a test. However, in case you come across questions where you do not know the right answer, using the process of elimination and context clues can help you find the right answer. And you'll still get just as many points as if you actually knew that particular material!

HOW TO SUCCEED ON A SHORT OR LONG ESSAY TEST

Many students view essay questions with various degrees of horror. This really should not be the case. If you know and understand the material on the test, essay questions can be quite easy. Their strength is they give you an opportunity to explain things in your own words, and not be limited to those of the test-maker. (However, if you do not study well, and do not know the material, then yes, essay questions can be a horror).

There are three basic steps for answering an essay question:

- **Think**
- **Plan**
- **Write**

Unfortunately, students too often skip the first two and jump right to the third one. This is a grave mistake. Not only will you most likely forget some information in your answer, but the essay will often not sound logical to the teacher. Your argument won't flow well, and you won't look like you know the material. The organization of your essay becomes more and more important depending on how many essays your teacher has to grade.

Think about it. If your teacher has 5 classes of 35 students, and all complete just one long essay question which must be graded, then she has 175 essay questions to grade. Taking just one minute for each, it will take her about three hours to complete her grading on just this one essay question. Therefore, the easier time she has, the better. The essays that are constructed logically, where the teacher doesn't have to waste time trying to figure out your argument, are going to receive higher grades.

By going through the three steps of **think**, **plan**, and **write**, you can achieve this goal and get better scores on essay tests!

Think

When you read an essay question, take a minute or two and just sit back and think of the possible answers. Pretend that you are explaining the question to someone, or teaching the subject in class. What are the main points that you will want to cover? What proofs do you have for these positions?

Once these ideas start to come to you, then go on to the next step:

Plan

Start to jot down ideas on a sheet of paper. Let the question you were given assist you in organizing your thoughts.

For example, let's look at the following short essay question:

What were the basic reasons why slavery took hold in the South, but not in the North?

The following example is taken from *Improving Test Scores, 2006*, pages 39–41

It's obvious from the question, that the test wants some sort of compare and contrast answer. Therefore, as you think about the topic, you might come up with the following list:

North	South
small farms	good soil
poor soil	plantation
	labor needed
	indentured servants—no
	African slaves—yes

Once your list is complete, then you need to prioritize the ideas. In other words, plan out your paragraph as to the order in which you will write your answer. Simply putting the ideas in numerical order can accomplish this organization.

Using the example above, the numbering of the ideas might look like this:

North	South
7—small farms	1—good soil
6—poor soil	2—plantation
	3—labor needed
	4—indentured servants—no
	5—African slaves—yes

Once you have organized your ideas, and only at this point, should you go on to the next step:

Write

If you have organized your thoughts well, this last step becomes the easiest part of answering an essay question.

Always use the actual essay question as your topic sentence for your paragraph. Then, simply go down your numerical list and explain each point in a sentence. You'll be surprised how easy your essay begins to flow from the material.

Using the organized list example above, the following short essay could be written. (Notice how the actual question is incorporated into the topic sentence):

Slavery took hold in the South but not the North mostly because of the land. The South had very good soil, which led to large plantations. Southerners needed workers for these plantations. First they used indentured servants, but these people often either finished their service terms and left or ran off, and they could not be found easily. African slaves were permanent workers, so plantation owners favored their use because they didn't have to worry about losing their work force. In the North the soil was poor. Most Northern landowners had only small farms, and they had no need for workers or slaves.

Notice how easily the paragraph flowed from the organized ideas above. The paragraph is well-organized, and directly answers the essay question. The result is you have answered an essay question which covers the major points. Most important, it is logical and easy to read, which your teacher will love and will most likely show appreciation with a higher grade.

Now, all you have to do is proofread your paragraph for spelling and grammar mistakes, and also to make sure that you covered all of the material you need to answer the question.

***By always using the
three processes of***

— Think —

— Plan —

— Write —

***you can succeed
at answering all
short or long
essay questions
with a minimum of
difficulty and receive
the maximum grade!***

HOW TO SUCCEED ON THE NEW COMMON CORE TESTS

I'm sure that you've heard of this new thing called the "Common Core." It's a set of standards—and tests—that are different from the curriculum and the end-of-the-year tests you have been taking since you started school. Whereas all of the previous test-taking skills in this booklet will still work with the Common Core, there are some additional things that you should focus on, to be the most successful test-taker possible.

WHAT IS THE COMMON CORE?

The Common Core is a new set of learning standards that are the same across the country. Whereas the old system involved lots and lots and lots of memorization of facts and formulas and individual pieces of knowledge, the Common Core is more focused on STUDENT THINKING, and working with the information that you learn in class. It's meant to get you ready for the type of high level thinking that is needed for success in college and later on as an adult in the modern job market.

THERE ARE FOUR BASIC PARTS OF THE NEW COMMON CORE:

1. QUESTIONING TO MAKE YOU THINK BETTER

Most tests under the old system asked questions where you simply had to remember bits of information. The Common Core focuses on questions that make you think. This is called high levels of critical thinking.

2. FIND EVIDENCE FOR YOUR ANSWER

The Common Core asks students not just "What is the correct answer?"—but "How do you know it's the correct answer?" The system wants you to always find evidence to prove that you are correct.

3. GET IT RIGHT BEFORE YOU GO ON

Under the old system, there was sooooo much to learn before the end-of-the-year test, that the teacher usually had to go on to the next area—even if not everyone "got it". Under the Common Core, you are to review material and really learn it before you go on to the next subject. There are fewer things to learn, but you are supposed to learn them well—better than before.

4. NON-FICTION IS VERY IMPORTANT

Too often you only read fiction in school—novels, short stories, plays, poetry. However, when you get to high school—and especially in college—almost all of your reading will be in the form of non-fiction. To get you ready, the Common Core system wants you to read as much non-fiction as you do fiction.

HOW CAN YOU PRACTICE FOR COMMON CORE SUCCESS?

As we have been saying over and over—test-taking is a skill and you need to practice in order to succeed at that skill. The same concept applies to succeeding with the Common Core material and tests. Here are a number of suggestions that you can use and practice to get your brain working in a way that will allow you to succeed on any Common Core exam:

1. START READING NON-FICTION

Along with novels and other things you like to read, practice reading non-fiction works on a regular basis. These include:

- Biographies and autobiographies
- Historical pieces
- Articles and essays—paper or online
- Magazines—paper or online
- Newspapers—paper or online

It doesn't matter if they are in paper form, online or on a tablet—just start to read non-fiction! It will greatly prepare you for the type of material you will use—and be tested on—with the new Common Core.

2. PRACTICE ANSWERING HIGHER ORDER CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

This is the most important aspect of the Common Core—thinking at a high level. Most questions that you answer are of this sort:

who, what, why, when, where, which, choose, find, how, define, match, recall, compare, contrast, demonstrate, explain, summarize

These are all considered lower level critical thinking questions. They do not involve a lot of thought to answer them—to answer them you mostly just have to remember what you read.

To prepare for Common Core success, you should start thinking with higher level questions such as these:

analyze, categorize, classify, compare, contrast, examine, simplify, infer, conclude, develop, estimate, formulate, invent, originate, plan, predict, modify, theorize, elaborate, criticize, determine, evaluate, justify, interpret

These questions involve taking the material you read and really thinking about it in different ways, and coming up with new ideas. Here's a simple example of what we are talking about. Read the passage from a social studies lesson:

Before the railroad transported settlers out west, pioneers had to use other means of transportation to make the journey. Most pioneers used covered wagons pulled by oxen. They traveled in wagon trains with many other people across the Great Plains.

Lower level thinking questions may be something like:

How did the pioneers travel across the Great Plains?

What pulled the wagons for the pioneers?

These questions don't involve much thinking and can be answered by simply looking at the text. However, if you asked yourself the following types of questions, you would have to do a lot more thinking and investigating of the material:

Analyze why the pioneers used oxen instead of horses.

Explain why it was important for the pioneers to travel in wagon trains.

These are the types of questions you will need to learn how to answer for the Common Core tests.

As you work with your classroom texts, other than making up questions to ask yourself, you can practice using higher order thinking to conduct a simple exercise by looking at the pictures, graphs and maps that are included in the material. For each one, ask yourself:

Explain why the author chose this particular graphic for this section.

Determine the main ideas that this graphic wants you to learn.

If you follow this exercise, you will not only understand the material much better, but you will also become more prepared for the type of questioning that you will see on the end-of-year Common Core tests.

3. PRACTICE FINDING EVIDENCE FOR YOUR ANSWERS

The easiest way to practice this is to add the word "because" to your answers. Using the example above, if your teacher asks, "What pulled the pioneers' wagons?", don't just answer "oxen." Instead, practice providing some evidence, such as, "Oxen, because they were more rugged than horses and lasted longer."

Another way to get into the habit of providing evidence for your answers is listing the page number of the evidence when you answer a question on a written assignment. Rather than simply answering it from memory, locate the answer in the book, and jot down the page where you found it.

Is this more work? Of course. However...not only will you have a greater chance of getting the question correct, but you will also be practicing an important skill needed to succeed on the end-of-the-year Common Core tests.

4. PRACTICE GETTING IT RIGHT BEFORE YOU GO ON

This is one of the hardest things for a student to do—but one of the most important. If you get questions wrong—correct them, even if it's only in your mind. Make sure you understand what you didn't understand originally. You can do this by looking back through your book, asking your teacher or even asking a friend that got it correct.

This is important, because in the Common Core—especially in math—new knowledge build on previous knowledge. This means, what you learn today will directly help you understand what you will learn tomorrow. So—even if you don't get "credit" for fixing your answers—figure out the correct answers for yourself. It will directly pay off later on!

Just remember—even though they are changing the test and a lot of what you study in school—the more you practice these skills, the better you will do on the new Common Core tests, and that means better placement in classes, and more opportunities for you!

GETTING INTO THE STUDYING PLACE

Earlier we talked about studying in the best way possible in order to receive higher grades. Whereas up to now we've been concentrating on the process, the actual study environment is also very important.

Too often students feel that studying time is also "relaxing" time. Lying around, playing music, watching television while studying may be fun, and it may turn a boring activity into an enjoyable one. Unfortunately, it also isn't efficient studying. You end up spending more hours trying to cover the same material (and not as well) than if you created a real study environment.

Let's look at it another way, using our first skill-based examples.

The baseball player needs an outdoor baseball diamond to practice well.

The dancer needs a clean, smooth dance floor to practice well.

The basketball player needs a court and a basketball hoop to practice well.

The gymnast needs gym apparatus to practice well.

The runner needs a smooth track or cross-country field to practice well.

The actor needs a stage area and appropriate props and scenery to practice well.

The singer needs a source of music to practice well.

All of these skill-driven activities need an environment similar to the one in which they perform their skill in order to practice well.

The same with studying.

When was the last time you took a test lying down? When was the last time the teacher had a popular music station playing on the radio during a test? Or had the television on in front of the class? When was the last time you were allowed to listen to an iPod® while working on an exam?

The answer is probably "never."

Then why would you want to practice your studying and test taking skills in an environment totally different than the one in which you will eventually perform?

Creating a good studying environment

Okay—these ideas for creating a good environment for studying are not really enjoyable. They're probably not even comfortable. However, go back and read the first page of this booklet.

Why are you studying?

If you are putting in all of this effort to do better on your tests, why not go all out and really get the most out of your studying?

In other words, would you rather spend three hours of good, serious studying to learn the material you need to know, or would you rather spend five hours trying to concentrate on the same material lying down, or with the radio or television distracting you? Wouldn't you rather spend the two hours you save on something more fun?

It is important to create an atmosphere that best matches the atmosphere of your testing situation. This way, when you sit during the test, you will be more comfortable and more attentive to the test itself, rather than feeling uncomfortable with the testing environment because you are not really used to it.

The two aspects of your study environment that you need to fix are:

- ***Where you study***
- ***What's going on around you***

Very simple—you should be studying at a location similar to that in your testing situation. This means sitting in a hard-back chair at a desk or table. It may not be real comfortable, but it's the closest thing you'll have to a true study environment.

Even more important, you should have nothing but quiet going on around you. No television, no radio, no little brothers or sisters (show this page to your mom or dad if you need their cooperation with this). This may mean finding a quiet room in your house. This may mean going to your neighborhood library for a few hours before a big test. Regardless, you want to create an environment that most matches that in which you are studying.

Remember, studying and testing well is a skill. And like any other skill you need to recreate an environment similar to that in which you want to succeed.

MAKING YOUR BODY HELP YOUR TEST SCORES

Athletes, actors, singers—they all need to have healthy bodies in order to succeed at their tasks. Athletes don't eat a heavy meal before a big game—it makes their bodies drowsy and less apt to do what it needs to do. Singers don't drink milk products the day of a show—it produces phlegm in the throat which hurts their singing ability. Besides the physical aspect, all of these people also take time to get mentally prepared for their performances.

A healthy body and mind are also necessary for doing well during testing situations. If you are sleepy or lack energy, all of the studying and preparation you did ahead of time will be wasted, because there is no way that you will perform at the required level you need to perform to be successful.

Here are some basic physical and mental health tips to follow during the twenty-four hours before a big test:

Eat a good breakfast or lunch, and limit your sugar intake.

Eat a well-balanced meal—protein, starch, fruit, vegetable, for the meal before a test. Whether it's breakfast or lunch, eat just enough to be satisfied, but don't stuff yourself.

Above all, severely limit your sugar intake. That means sugared baked goods such as donuts, candy, soda and other items high in sugar. This is critical! True, the sugar gives your body quick energy which you may feel you need before a test. Unfortunately, that sugar high is immediately followed by a sugar low. And that low is often lower than the energy you had before you ate the sugar.

Get a good night's sleep before the test.

The night before a test is not the time to show off how late you can stay up. It is also not the time to cram for a test. First of all, if you don't know the material by the night before the test, you might as well get a good night's sleep since you probably won't do real well anyway. However, even if there's material that you want to review the night before the test, whatever you learn will be erased the more tired that you are.

In other words, by staying up an hour past your normal bed time may help you learn an extra 5% of material on the test. However, the fatigue that you'll have the next day may cause you to forget 10% of the material on the test. In the long run, you lose.

The rule of thumb is that getting a normal night's sleep before a test will be more productive than cramming in an extra hour or two of studying.

Avoid stress

Your mental health is also a critical component for success in taking tests. Stress is a killer before a test. The more you are stressed, the more you will be distracted and forget the tested material, and the worse you will do on the test!

Have you ever looked at your incorrect answers on a test you got back and thought "I knew that answer!" The reason for forgetting the material is often because of the stress you had before and during the test.

The human body has not changed much since caveman days. When the body feels stress, the hormone adrenaline is released. This chemical causes the heart to beat faster, pumping more blood to the muscles, causing them to work better, faster and stronger. Unfortunately, it does one more thing—it basically stops your brain from thinking too much.

This was very important in caveman days. If you came across a saber-tooth tiger in a field, your body didn't want your mind to start thinking, "Hmm, can I outrun this tiger?" or "Should I stay and try to outsmart or fight the tiger?" No. The body wanted the brain to stop thinking and get itself out of there NOW. So the adrenaline started pumping, thinking stopped, and the muscles moved the body out of harm's way immediately.

That same chemical, adrenaline, is still released by the body today in stressful situations. And it still shuts off your thinking. Unfortunately, for most teenagers, that stressful situation is often before a test—the exact time you need your brain to work at full capacity.

Therefore, avoid stress at all costs. This entails:

Don't be late for school.

Being tardy is always stress-producing, because you have to put in the mental effort to try to get out of trouble, and/or you have to deal with the stress of the consequences of being tardy. This can throw off your entire day, and you need to use your mental energy to do well on that day's test. Get to school on time, especially on test days.

Avoid controversial issues at home.

Avoid issues with your parents, siblings, boyfriends, or girlfriends that you know will result in an argument. That leads to stress, which you're trying to avoid. These issues will very often stay on your mind for most of the day, again, distracting you from your task of doing well on your test.

Although this is significantly more difficult, if one of them raise an issue or start an argument, try to get them to postpone it until after school. Remind them you have to concentrate on your test, and would like to discuss it later, if possible. It may not work, but it's worth a shot.

***Avoid stress on test days.
It always will distract
you from the job
you need to do.***

Use stress reduction techniques.

As mentioned earlier, stress can manifest itself both physically and mentally. However, reducing stress is also a skill that you can perfect. The following exercises can be used to help reduce your stress. By practicing them on a regular basis, you can reduce your overall stress levels. Most important, they can also be used on test days to reduce your stress in the hours before a big test.

For Physical Stress

Close your eyes. Take five deep cleansing breaths (breath deep through your nose, hold it for the count of five, then exhale through your mouth). Tighten all of the muscles in your toes as tight as you can. Hold it for the count of five, then release. Then tighten all of the muscles in your feet as tight as you can. Hold it for the count of five, then release. Continue up your body through each of the following body parts:

- **Ankles**
- **Calves**
- **Thighs**
- **Buttocks**
- **Back**
- **Fingers**
- **Forearms**
- **Upper arms**
- **Shoulders**
- **Neck**
- **Face**
- **Forehead**

Finally, tighten every muscle in your body for the count of ten. Open your eyes. You should feel very relaxed.

For Mental Stress

Close your eyes. Take five deep cleansing breaths (breath deep through your nose, hold it for the count of five, then exhale through your mouth). Picture the number "1" in your mind. It doesn't matter what it looks like, just picture a "1" in your mind and concentrate on it. Then say over and over in your mind, each time you exhale, "one...one...one...one...." Do this for five to ten minutes quietly in your mind while you concentrate on the "1." Then open your eyes. You'll be shocked at how relaxed you are.

One note, if you're sitting or lying down by yourself, you might want to set an alarm watch. Once you get used to this exercise, you may find that you put yourself to sleep! (And you definitely do not want to sleep through the beginning of your test).

A STUDYING CHECKLIST

Make copies of this page, and go through this checklist every time you have a major test. No one has to see this but you! As you go through it, you will find that your studying is more organized and (surprisingly) you begin to get better grades on your tests (which will make you and hopefully your parents happy).

- ☐ Set up a quiet place to study (table/desk, chair)
- ☐ Make flash cards of all key terms and concepts. Go over the cards so you get each one correct at least once
- ☐ Go over textbook review questions, pages: _____

- ☐ Review all textbook pictures, maps, graphs and charts.
List pages to key in on: _____

STUDY SCHEDULE

Plan out your study schedule and cross out as you go through it:

_____	START TIME
_____	BREAK TIME
<i>(45–90 minutes after start time, depending on the subject)</i>	
_____	START TIME
_____	BREAK TIME
_____	START TIME
_____	BREAK TIME
_____	START TIME

FINAL TEST REVIEW

What type of test is it? Review these pages before you take the test:

MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST: see pages 4–6

SHORT OR LONG ESSAY TEST: see pages 7–8

Notes

Handwriting practice lines consisting of 20 horizontal dotted lines.