



Fort Hays State University – Health and Wellness Services

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How to Take an Exam

On the Day of the Exam

- Taking care of yourself is likely to be more important and effective than trying to do some last minute cramming. Make sure you get enough rest, eat reasonably, etc.
- Think about whether or not getting up very early is likely to make you more tired.
- Eat breakfast if you can.
- If you have spare time, would doing something you find relaxing be helpful (i.e. showering/bathing or going for a walk)?
- Keep away from anyone whose stress level is contagious.
- Rather than trying to learn any new material, perhaps just look over a few key points.
- Arrive at the exam location comfortably in time but not too early. The tension hanging over this short period of waiting just before the exam can feel contagious. It can often be helpful to minimize your exposure to it.
- It's natural to feel some anxiety when you go into the exam room. Use the few minutes before you are allowed to begin to do some simple relaxation and breathing exercises. Sit back and separate yourself mentally from those who are getting stressed.
- Read through the exam paper slowly. When you've chosen the questions you're ready to answer, read them through twice to make sure you've understood and not misread the questions. If you're allowed to do so, underline key words or phrases in the questions.
- Answer all the questions and divide your time equally between them—or according to the points they are worth. As an example, let's say you have three essay questions. You'll often get more points overall by doing three average answers than by doing two brilliant ones but leaving the third question unanswered.
- Some people write out plans to all the essay questions they need to answer at the beginning so they can add things as they occur to them while working on other answers. Others take each question in order. Think about which method works best for you or is most appropriate to the format of your exam. After doing your plan, look back at the question and check to ensure you're answering the question asked.
- Take regular “micro-breaks.” Whenever you pause at the end of writing a paragraph or stop to think for a moment, put your pen down and sit back—even if just for a moment.

If You Start to Panic During an Exam

In an exam situation it's not uncommon for one's mind to go blank for a moment or to be confused by a question put in an unfamiliar way. It's easy to begin to panic. This can take the form of doom-laden thoughts as well as physical symptoms such as feeling your heart racing, feeling faint, or feeling hot or sweaty.

Although these symptoms are disturbing, perhaps even frightening, they are, in fact, very common and not at all dangerous.

Here are some tips to help minimize feelings of panic:

- First, pause for a few moments—put your pen down and sit back.
- Next, slow your breathing down a little. Let your body relax. Relaxation and breathing exercises will help to reduce these symptoms.
- Reassure yourself that you're not going to collapse or lose control.
- Try to consciously push upsetting thoughts to the back of your mind and refocus your attention on relaxing and then back on the exam itself.
- No matter how bad the anxiety feels, aim not to leave the exam. Anxiety levels usually fall within a short space of time. Panic is always time limited and the symptoms do reduce in a short while.
- When you're able, get back to work. Remember that it's better to try on the test than to do nothing at all.

After the Examination

Try to avoid an exam "post-mortem." If you're meeting up with someone and "have to" talk about the exam, agree that you'll only do so for five minutes. Eat something, sleep, or do something physical (talk a walk, run, or swim) if you have a lot of adrenaline.