Highlights of Test Preparation

Test-taking is a skill that has to be learned, just like driving a car or learning to play a musical instrument. It takes much practice to learn to parallel park or to play a minuet by Mozart on the piano, but with daily practice, the skill can be honed to perfection. The novice driver can become a race car driver, and the piano student eventually can become a concert pianist. It requires talent to do these two tasks, of course, but more importantly, it takes a lifetime of practice.

**Overlearn the material**—*Overlearning* means being able to recall information both accurately and quickly. Because students are often nervous when taking an exam, their anxiety affects their ability to retrieve information from long-term memory. Also, exams are usually timed, and students need more time to retrieve information under pressure if they haven't over-learned the material. By learning the material so well that students can recall information under pressure, they will be able to complete the test in a timely manner with reduced stress.

**Use Elaborate Rehearsal**—Elaborate rehearsal involves using many senses and connections to encode information in long-term memory: *read it, write it, say it, think it, do it*. If students merely hear information in a lecture, they will forget most of this material within 24 hours. Note-taking requires students to use another sense—the sense of touch, as well as the process, *thinking*. As we record notes, we put the information down on paper in a way that makes sense to us: an outline, a classification chart, or in a web. If along with hearing and writing new information a student practices the new process or concept by working in a group in class, the student has used an even deeper learning process to embed this new knowledge in long-term memory.

**Using Retrieval and Application Processes**

We want to hit the target on test day, remembering information quickly and precisely. To score a bull’s eye, we need to practice using all the different levels of critical thinking that will be on the exam, meaning we need to apply, analyze, and evaluate the concepts and processes, not just practice remembering them.

Often students reread chapters and highlighted phrases, reciting keywords as they reread. This technique is *shallow learning*, meaning that we merely skim the surface of all there is to know about a concept or process. Rereading accomplishes little preparation for recalling information quickly on test day while enduring the emotional pressures of an exam. Instead, students need to practice deep-learning strategies.
To practice *deep-learning*, try these things:

- Close your textbook and class notes to see if you can recall the information without looking at it
- Use flashcards to do practice quizzes and keep repeating the vocabulary words you miss
- Create real-life stories or scenarios that illustrate the concept or step-by-step process you are trying to remember

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**Use the Seven Theory to “Chunk” Information** — Trying to learn pages and pages of information for an exam can be frustrating and nonproductive. Memory has difficulty storing information that isn’t organized into clear units; using labels, or *retrieval cues*, that organize information into units of around seven pieces of information is an effective package for storage in memory.

If, for instance, you are trying to memorize the order of the levels of critical thinking in Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy, create a mnemonic device to remember the stages, such as a sentence that uses the first letter of each word.

R – Remember: *(Remembering)*

U – Understanding *(Understanding)*

A – applied *(Applying)*

A – aids *(Analyzing)*

E – every *(Evaluating)*

C – Creature *(Creating)*