

A TIME-EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR TAKING EXAMS

Although college exams are designed to measure how much you have learned in a particular class over a particular period of time, we all know that often the difference between an A and a B on an exam (or a B and a C) is not how much you have learned, how smart you are, or even how well prepared you are, but how well you take that exam on that day in the limited period of time available. Although taking an exam well is partially dependent on physical and mental well being, it also depends on approach and organization. Answering the questions on an exam in the order in which they appear is seldom the best approach, so I suggest the following process as a way to maximize the use of your time during an exam.

This process worked for me as a student, but you may find that you need to modify the process for yourself. The most important point of this strategy is that you do not have to limit your problem-solving skills to the problems presented on the exam, but you can also view taking the exam as a problem to be solved.

Pass 1: Quickly scan each question. Only answer if you know the question immediately.

Rationale: *Seeing every question gives you an idea of the length of the exam and how well prepared you are, allowing you to organize your time effectively. Seeing the “hard” questions before trying to answer them allows you to do “background” processing—sometimes it is easier to solve a problem or remember some knowledge without specifically concentrating on it. Finally, questions on exams are often related, and seeing (or answering) one question may prompt an answer to another question.*

1.B: Take a break. To calm your nerves, close your eyes for 5 or 10 seconds and try to think about nothing.

Pass 2: Answer the questions you feel confident with, but need time to work out.

Rationale: *This maximizes your points on the exam if you cannot finish on time by making sure you answer everything that you are confident with. Answering these questions can also build your confidence for the harder questions.*

2.B: Take a break.

Pass 3: Answer the questions you have to think about.

Rationale: *There are always questions that you cannot answer immediately, but can answer given a little careful thought. It is difficult to think clearly early in an exam, but by this time you should be relaxed and confident enough to be able to concentrate on the harder problems.*

3.B: Take a break.

Pass 4: Struggle with the remaining questions.

Rationale: *On almost every exam, there are a few questions that you are not sure you can answer. They may be questions that nobody in the class can answer well, or that the professor does not expect anybody to answer well, or they may represent information that you forgot to review. All you can do is do your best and hope for a flash of insight, luck, or easy grading. Save these questions for last because the odds are that you will get more points by giving good answers for the questions you know than by guessing at the questions you do not know.*

Pass 5: Review all answers (especially the ones you answered on pass 1 and 2).

Rationale: *Be sure to save 5 or 10 minutes for this step; leave a question incomplete if you must. Students often can pick up 5, 10, or 20 points by spotting simple mistakes; remember that careless mistakes look like serious lack of knowledge to a grader.*