

Reducing Math Test Anxiety I - Preparing for Math Tests
Also refer to Reducing Math Test Anxiety II - Taking Math Tests

Test Anxiety

If you are reading this document, you probably have experienced test anxiety. Test anxiety can range from "butterflies" to nausea. It can occur during a test or just while thinking about taking a test. Many students complain of going "blank" on a test due to test anxiety.

Some amount of anxiety is positive and natural. This amount of anxiety helps keep you mentally and physically alert. Too much anxiety, however, may actually interfere with your test taking abilities. It may cause physical distress and emotional upset, block your ability to recall information, and cause a decrease in concentration as you spend more time and energy worrying about doing poorly on the test than working on the test.

What are the Causes of Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is often a learned response to negative emotions associated with a history of past failures. You may have experiences of blanking out on a test. One of the main causes of this is lack of preparation for an exam. This handout should hopefully help you better prepare for your next exam. If you have adequately prepared for the test, your anxiety may be the result of negative thinking and focusing on your past performance on tests.

Why Doing Your Homework Is Very Different From Taking Tests

Most students believe that attending class and doing all their homework ensures an "A" or "B" on tests. This is far from true. Doing all the homework and getting the correct answers is very different in many ways from taking tests:

1. While doing homework, there is little anxiety. A test situation is just the opposite.
2. You are not under a time constraint while doing your homework; you may have to complete a test in an hour or less.
3. If you get stuck on a homework problem, your textbook and notes are there to assist you. This is not true for most tests.
4. Once you learn how to do several problems in a homework assignment, the rest of the problems in that assignment are similar. In a test the problems are all in random order.
5. In doing homework, you often have the answers to at least half the problems in the back of the text. Obviously, this is not true for tests.
6. When doing homework, you can call your study buddy or ask the tutor for help, something which you cannot do on the test.

Developing Classroom Skills Will Help Reduce Overall Math Anxiety

1. **Attend class.** If an emergency or illness prevents you from attending class, take responsibility to find out what was covered in class and to learn that material soon after the missed class. The longer you wait to make up for missing a class, the harder it will be to catch up. Remember, subsequent material builds on what you've already learned, so future classes may be harder to follow if you've missed a class.
2. **Take good notes.** Do not underestimate the importance of good note-taking in math class. Copy down problems and examples presented on the board, step-by-step, and write down the instructor's words next to the material from the board. Perhaps put a "?" next to anything you don't understand in your notes so you can go back later and get your questions answered.

Preparing for Math Tests

Taking a math test is different from taking tests in other subjects. Math tests not only require you to recall the information, you must know how to apply the information. Math tests build on each other, whereas for other subjects, such as history, you are usually not tested on previous material. Finally, math tests are often considered speed tests. It is important to keep this all in mind as you prepare to take a math test.

1. **Spend twice as much time per week outside class as you do in class.** For example, if you are taking a three credit hour class, you should be devoting at least six hours a week to the course outside of class. This includes doing your homework and reviewing the material.
2. **Start reviewing for the test a week before the test.** Allow yourself plenty of time to accomplish all the things you have to do before a test. Establish study goals and take one step at a time so as not to overwhelm yourself. Remember, it will probably take you longer to study for a test in college than it did to study for a high school test. Meet with the instructor or tutor well in advance of the test if you need help - make sure you determine what you do not know (see step 4) before going to get help.
3. **Read the chapter and learn to recognize the different types of problems that will be on the test.** Many students know the method for solving different types of problems. What they have trouble with is knowing which method to apply when only a problem statement is given, such as on a test. This is something that has to be studied. You have to make the link between how a problem is worded or stated and what the method is to solving that particular problem.
4. **Determine what you do not know.** Early in the reviewing process, you should determine what you do not know, so you can focus on those topics while you study. Take a practice test or do some problems from each chapter to find out what you do not know. Look at the material you wrote "?" marks by in your class notes. Review the concept errors you made on the last test to make sure you have mastered those concepts.
5. **Create a list of information that will make up your memory data dump during the test.** During the test, you will use the margins, the back of the test, or a blank piece of paper the instructor gives you after you receive the test to do a memory data dump.

Guidelines for the Night before/Morning of the Test

1. **Sleep.** Get a good night's sleep before taking a test. You won't perform well on a test after only getting a few hours of sleep. It is important to be fresh enough to use your memory to recall information needed to answer the questions.
2. **Eat healthy.** Make sure you are not hungry during a test. Try to avoid lots of caffeine and sugar, especially right before a test.
3. **Don't cram.** Right before the test, don't look at material you haven't studied. In other words, don't cram. Seeing material you don't understand will just lead to more anxiety, and you won't have enough time to absorb the information anyway.

Reducing Feelings of Test Anxiety (other than through preparation)

If you feel anxious about an upcoming math test either while you are studying or doing something else, try these relaxation techniques.

1. Aerobic exercise can help you decrease anxiety and body tension.
2. Refer to [Reducing Math Test Anxiety II - Taking Math Tests](#) for some short-term relaxation techniques (in the "Immediately before the Test" section).