Wadsworth’s
Quick Guide
To Test Anxiety

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Many things will change as you begin your life as a college student, but one thing will remain the same: your college term will be punctuated with tests. Tests play an important role in your growth as a scholar and a professional, and allow both you and your instructor to measure your progress in reaching shared goals. Since exams play a pervasive and critical role in college education, you will need to address any anxiety that would threaten your ability to perform at your best.

On the one hand, anxiety can be a good thing. By heightening your alertness and sharpening your focus, it can direct your energy to the task of test preparation and test taking. You will perform better than you would have performed without that incentive. On the other hand, test anxiety can become so intense that it interferes with an accurate demonstration of what you know and what you can do. Test anxiety left unchecked can consume mental processing space you need when reviewing your notes. It can also put up mental roadblocks that hinder your access to data you need when answering essay questions.

Given the harm test anxiety can cause, this Wadsworth Quick Guide offers with ten useful ideas you can use to diminish this problem. If your test performance is being compromised by test anxiety, we invite you to experiment with one or more of the following suggestions. But one word of caution is in order before you read the rest of this booklet. The following suggestions are not meant as a substitute for
professional assistance, rather they are designed to help students overcome mild to moderate forms of test anxiety. If you are experiencing more serious forms of anxiety, time with a professional counselor combined with these suggestions should quiet your nerves and support your improvement.

Test Anxiety is Normal

The first step in diminishing test anxiety may sound somewhat strange to you. Acknowledge that test anxiety is normal. Think about it in this way. If you regard test anxiety as abnormal in the life of a college student, you will only add to your anxiety by worrying that there is something wrong with you. The fact of the matter is that virtually everyone experiences test anxiety to one degree or another. It is the natural response to a perceived threat. Muscles may tighten in preparation to battle or flee from your perceived opponent. Your focus narrows to capture every detail of the challenge before you. Of course, symptoms vary from one person to the next, and not everyone will experience the same degree of anxiety. Still, in the face of an important exam, many students report such symptoms as: butterflies in the stomach, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, diarrhea, headaches, and sweaty palms. So an anxious response to the approaching exam is something normal and expected. It is the same sort of anxiety being experienced by other students around you. Thus the goal is not to completely rid yourself of physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms of anxiety, but to manage them in
a way that prevents them from interfering with your well-being, or from harming the demonstration of your abilities.

✔ Determine What You Can Control

Test anxiety can increase dramatically in the days before an exam if you focus on what you do not control rather than on what you do control. To get this dimension of your anxiety under control, begin by acknowledging that there are a number of things you do not control about the process of taking a college test. You do not control how effectively the instructor has taught the class in the days before the test. You do not control what questions will be asked or how long the test period will last. And you have no control over unexpected personal tragedies that can interrupt and disturb the regular flow of your week. Since there is a long list of things you do not control, the key is to identify those parts of the process and set them aside. Worrying about them will not change the fact that these lie outside your power of influence. To spend time on them will only leave you frustrated and with less time to spend on those things you can control.

Instead, determine what you can control in the days leading up to the test. For example, you control how frequently you attend class. You can control the level of attentiveness you bring into the class session. You control the system you use to review your notes in preparation for the test. And you control your decision to get supportive tutoring on those concepts that are more difficult for you. Focusing on those things you control will leave you more empowered and will help diminish anxiety.
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✔ Check Your Perspective

Tests play an important role in helping you assess yourself and develop as a college student. However, you will experience an unjustified amount of tension if you give the test more power than it is due. Tests are corrected and grades are assigned to tell you how close you have come to accomplishing the goals of the course. They measure your knowledge and skills on a particular day, at a particular time, under a particular set of circumstances. Testing can give you feedback both on your abilities and on the quality of the preparation process. However, by empowering an exam to do more than that, you risk unnecessary worry. For example, a test and the grade that comes with it do not define your worth as a person. You may get a “C” on a test but that does not mean that you are a “C” person. A single test has no ability to measure your complexity and uniqueness and so a grade is never capable of defining all that you are. Furthermore, an exam does not have the absolute authority to define your future success. While it is possible a failing grade on an exam may indicate you are not cut out to be an accountant, or nurse, or history teacher, it is much more likely to be an indication you had a bad day or that you need to change your preparation strategy. If you are facing unwanted exam anxiety, check your perspective on the power of the exam.

✔ Learn What You Can About the Test

We all have a tendency to fear the unknown. The more you can learn about an upcoming test, the more empowered you will feel. Start with the scope of the exam. Consult your class syllabus, listen carefully to the instructor’s description of the test, and ask for all available
details. Will the test be comprehensive from the start of the term or will it focus only on more recent material? Will the test include your experiences with the textbook or only those learning experiences you had during the class sessions?

Secondly, learn all you can about the type of questions that will be on the test. As evaluation tools, different types of tests are used to measure different types of skills. Some exams will inquire more aggressively into your competence with facts. A matching exam, a true/false exam, or a multiple-choice exam give your instructor the opportunity to see your skill in recalling dates, names, places, vocabulary, and concepts. In contrast, other exams will ask you to work with fewer facts but measure your thinking skills as you compare, contrast, and integrate the facts. An essay exam is often used in just this way to measure your creative and critical thinking skills. Such an exam will ask you to compose an original essay that weaves in the dates, names, places, and concepts. By learning all you can about the types of questions that you will encounter on the test, you will be able to match your preparation more closely to the type of demonstration that lies ahead. Knowledge is power, and feeling empowered will lower anxiety. Learn all you can about the scope and type of test ahead of you.

**Prepare a Schedule**

Another way to achieve a greater sense of control is by establishing a schedule that will guide your test preparation. Since college courses address topics that are more difficult than those in high school, and since college exams cover more material than a high school exam, it is
unwise to assume you will be able to do all your preparation for such an exam the prior day. If you leave all the preparation to the night before the test, your anxiety will peak as you recognize there is more to do than time allows. You will enter the exam period feeling uncertain about your level of preparation.

The way around this dilemma is to create a preparation schedule extending back several days prior to the test. Consider designing a schedule that allows for one hour of review time each day in the six days leading up to an exam. This allows you to encounter, reencounter and digest information at a slower rate. It also allows you to practice important skills many times instead of just once, and you will be able to review and consolidate data for effective essay writing. Compare designing a test preparation schedule to the way you plan your food intake for a week. Just as you would not think of getting all your nutrition for the week from just one big meal, so it would be unwise to “force feed” yourself all the data you need for a test in less than one day. And staying up all night the day before the exam is no substitute. Five hours of preparation that is distributed over the week prior to the exam and scheduled during the day when you are at your best is completely different from five hours of study time spent between midnight and five the morning of the exam. Design a preparation schedule that honors the physical and intellectual limitations you have. This will decrease anxiety from trying to do too much in too little time.

**Strategic First Minutes**

Once you arrive in the classroom and the test is on your desk, the first minutes of an exam period are critical.
Some students rush wildly through the exam, hoping to disgorge all they were able to cram into their short-term memory just moments before. However, you can use the first five minutes of an exam in a more strategic way. First, listen carefully to any guidance the instructor has to offer after distributing the test. You will likely get clarification or clues on how to be more successful. Before answering the first question, take several minutes to survey the entire test. Read all the directions carefully, noting anything unusual. For example, the instructor may have designed the multiple-choice questions in a way that permits you to provide more than one right answer. In the true/false questions, the directions may require that you edit every answer you mark as false to make it a true statement. In the section of the exam housing the essay questions, the directions may tell you to answer just two of the three essay questions offered. Careful reading of the directions will prevent you from investing unnecessary time or losing points because of an unexpected turn in the wording of the directions.

As you survey the exam, plan the amount of time you are willing to invest in any one portion of the exam. Of course, the amount of time you spend on any type of question will vary according to your own preferences and strengths. But by planning 20 minutes of your time for the multiple-choice questions and saving 50 minutes for work on the essay questions, you can diminish both the risk and the fear of running out of time.
At first glance, this kind of preliminary survey may seem to be wasting the first precious minutes of an exam period. In reality, however, you are developing a plan that will allow you to use the remaining time more efficiently and with greater confidence. You will not worry about what kinds of questions are on the next page, nor will you worry about running out of time. Being strategic about the first five minutes puts you in greater control of the process.

✔ Strategic First Questions

After you have used the first five minutes of the test period strategically, it is time to answer the first question. Typically, there is no requirement for you to begin with the first question on the first page, though this is where many students start. Even if you have prepared carefully, you will still find some questions easier to answer than others. As you look through the exam, identify a question you feel confident answering. This may be the first question on the first page, but it is just as likely to be buried more deeply within the test. It may be a set of multiple-choice questions or the essay question that you were expecting. The goal is start with questions you feel prepared to answer. In the early stages of the exam period, it is critical to build confidence. This will diminish unwanted anxiety and give you momentum for those portions of the test that may be more challenging. Rather than simply starting with the first question on the first page, be strategic about the first question you answer. Make it one that leaves you feeling empowered and energized rather than worried.
✔️ **Keep Good Company**

Another way to address test anxiety is to be cautious about the kind of company you keep in the days before the exam. There will always be members of your class who are the “Prophets of Doom.” They walk the hallways preaching their discouraging sermon to all who will listen: “There is way too much material to learn” or, “The questions will be impossible to answer” or, “Essay questions are always unfairly graded in this class”. Since we are prone to pick up and reflect the attitudes and emotions of those around us, it is best to avoid individuals who view the testing process in such a negative way. In the days before the exam, search out those relationships that leave you with positive energy and improve your confidence. Let the company of those individuals complement the other good things you are doing. “Prophets of Doom” can increase your test anxiety, but good company can fill you with energy and confidence.

✔️ **Commit to Complete Honesty**

Students who feel pressure to perform well on a test may be willing to compromise their integrity with a plan to cheat. Of course, this kind of academic dishonesty has no place among college students. Not only that, such dishonesty can contribute to your anxiety. Students who plan to cheat need to deal with the fear of being caught, the threat of the consequences they will face. Your school will see cheating as a very serious matter and will have empowered the faculty to respond to cheating in a variety of ways. In some instances, the student may receive a failing grade on his or her exam. Alternatively, the
instructor may elect to fail that student in the course. And if a student is caught cheating more than once, he may well be expelled from the school. But perhaps the greatest penalty for cheating comes even to those who are not caught. For everyone who cheats on an exam will feel the discomfort of knowing that they have claimed to be someone they are not. Such shortcuts are only pathways to failure. By following the suggestions in this booklet, you will have prepared yourself to take an exam in a way that eliminates your need to cheat. And by making a commitment to complete honesty throughout the entire testing process, you will subdue a potential source of worry.

✔ Interventions to Diminish Anxiety

While some anxiety associated with test taking is natural, it can be diminished through various forms of intervention. When we face a threatening challenge, the focus of our attention narrows to the perceived threat, and our awareness of other potentially calming thoughts is blocked. You can intentionally reverse that process with psychological intervention. First, allow your focus to reside completely on the threatening specter of the test. Then remove the test from your mind and replace that image with one associated with peaceful, positive feelings. Mentally go to a favorite vacation spot and hear the laughter, feel the breeze, or smell the flowers. New images can quickly work to quiet anxiety. Many find that this sort of visualization can further lead to a productive time in meditation or prayer. As you quiet the inner voice of anxiety, using visualization, meditation, quiet time and prayer, do not feel the urge to rush. You will accomplish much more in the same amount of time after you quiet the tension within you.
You may wish to add physical intervention to psychological intervention. When faced by a threat, our respiration increases and our muscles tighten. You can consciously reverse this physical response to stress by noticing the rapid nature of your breathing and then increasing the length of time for each breath. Breathe more slowly and more deeply as a signal to your body that it can relax. As you edit your breathing rate, begin to address the tension in your muscles. Work through progressive relaxation exercises to incrementally tighten and then relax muscle groups, further signaling your body to relax. Start by clenching your toes as tightly as you can and holding the tension for 20 seconds. Then, slowly release that tension from your feet as you slowly exhale. Next move up through the muscles in your legs, abdomen, and arms following the same procedure. As you tighten and slowly release the tension within your muscles, you will find yourself abandoning that unwanted anxiety.

Many things will be different for you this term as a college student, but you will continue to encounter tests and the need for test anxiety coping skills. If that anxiety is reaching harmful proportions, preventing you from enjoying life, or is compromising your success as a college student, now is the time to do something about it. Experiment with one or more of the recommendations above and you will be on your way to managing test anxiety in a healthy way. The sources below may be of further assistance to you in your quest.
Internet Sources

www.hsc.edu/counseling/selfhelp/test_anxiety.html

www.miracosta.edu/tutoring/StudySkills/testanxiety.htm

www.studentlife.villanova.edu/counselingcenter/studyskills/testanxiety.html

www.potsdam.edu/COUN/brochures/test.html

www.campusblues.com/test.asp

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/index.cfm

www.counsel.ufl.edu/selfHelp/testAnxiety.asp

www.wright-counseling.com/checklists/testanxietyassessment.html

Research Sources


