

HOW TO STUDY FOR STANDARDIZED TESTS

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Table of Contents

Reviewers ix
 About the Authors xi
 Roadmap of This Book xiii
 Introduction xv

Part		
1		Preparing for Your Test (Developing Test-Wiseness) 1
Section		
I		Understanding Your Opponent (The Test)..... 3 You Need a Game Plan! 3 How <i>Do</i> Elite Athletes Prepare for a Sporting Event? 4
Chapter		
1		Standardized Tests 5 There is No Such Thing as a “Poor Standardized Test-Taker” 5 Teacher-Generated Tests versus Standardized Tests 7 Test Validity and Reliability 9 How Are Standardized Tests Scored? 10 How Do Pilot Items Impact Your Final Reported Score? 10 Summary 13 Chapter 1 Activity 13

iv TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		
	2	Test-Wisness..... 15
		How Can You Give Yourself the Best Possible Chance to Answer Tough Test Questions? 15
		What Is Test-Wisness? How Can You Become a Test-Wise Individual?..... 16
		How Can You Find Out What Will Be On the Test?..... 18
		Summary 19
		Chapter 2 Activity 19
Chapter		
	3	Test Blueprints 21
		How Are Tests Constructed? Why is This Information Important to You?..... 21
		Section I Summary and Next Steps..... 23
		Chapter 3 Activity 24
Section		
	II	Developing Your T.E.A.M.S..... 27
		It's Not Just About the Test; It's About You Too!..... 27
Chapter		
	4	Your Will..... 29
		Human Agency..... 30
		Recommendation #1—Believe You Are Capable of Obtaining a High Score 33
		Why is it Useful for You to Be Aware of Your Self-Efficacy Beliefs? 34
		What is the Optimal Level of Self-Efficacy?..... 35

	Recommendation #2—Take Responsibility for the Outcome of the Exam.....	36
	Why Should the Concept of Locus of Control Matter to You?	37
	Recommendation #3—Develop and Maintain a Positive Attitude.....	38
	Summary	43
	Chapter 4 Activity	44
Chapter		
5	Your Resources	47
	Personality and Preferences Affect Learning.....	48
	What Does This Mean For You?.....	51
	Selecting Your Best Study Resources.....	52
	Summary	57
	Chapter 5 Activity	58
Chapter		
6	Your Time	59
	Habitual versus Goal-Directed Behaviors.....	60
	Time Management—The Tools of the Trade.....	61
	Planning	62
	Prioritizing	64
	Scheduling.....	66
	How Much Time Should You Spend Studying for An Exam?	67
	What Should My Study Schedule Look Like?	69
	Overcoming Barriers to Accomplishment	73
	Maintaining a Healthy Balance.....	76
	Summary	79
	Section II Summary and Next Steps.....	80
	Chapter 6 Activity	80

vi TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	
III	Practicing Your Skills 83
Chapter	
7	Learning to Perform 85
	How Does Memory Work and Why Does It Matter? 86
	Pay Attention! 88
	Study to Improve Recall 93
	Revisiting Study Resources with Memory in Mind 96
	Summary 100
	Chapter 7 Activity 102
Chapter	
8	From Tactics to Strategy 103
	Self-Regulation Through Metacognition 103
	Learn to Get and Use Feedback 106
	Summary 110
	Chapter 8 Activity 111
Chapter	
9	Performance Enhancers 113
	Reading Skills 115
	Self-Testing Techniques 120
	Writing Your Own Test Questions 122
	Practicing Using Prepared Question-and-Answer (Q&A) Resources 125
	Group Studying 131
	Summary 133
	Section III Summary and Next Steps 133
	Chapter 9 Activity A 134
	Chapter 9 Activity B 136
	Chapter 9 Activity C 137

Part		
2		Taking Your Test (Applying Test-Taking Skills)..... 139
Section		
IV		Executing Your Game Plan (Test Day) 141
		It's Time to Show What You Know!..... 141
Chapter		
10		Managing the Time Clock 143
		Working in a Timed Environment: Keys to Success..... 144
		Summary 151
		Chapter 10 Activity 152
Chapter		
11		Maximizing Your Points..... 155
		How Can You Improve Your Test-Taking Skills? 156
		Under What Conditions Should You Change Your Answer? 164
		Summary 164
		Chapter 11 Activity 165
Chapter		
12		Minimizing Test Anxiety..... 167
		Step 1: Recognizing the Signs and Effects of Test Anxiety 168
		Step 2: Understanding the Mechanisms Underlying Test Anxiety..... 171
		Step 3: Overcoming Test Anxiety Through Interventions 180
		Testing as an Aversive Stimulus: Interventions 183

viii TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Skills Deficit and Self-Merit: Interventions.....	184
	Cognitive Interference: Interventions	186
	Distorted Thinking: Interventions	188
	Trait Anxiety: Interventions	189
	Summary	191
	Section IV Summary and Next Steps.....	192
	Chapter 12 Activity	192
Epilogue		
	Executive Summary of Book.....	195
	Exercise 3	196
	Exercise 3A.....	196
Appendix		
A	Standardized Test Websites	199
Appendix		
B	Essay Questions: A Game Plan	203
	The Basics	204
	How Are Essays Graded?	209
	Avoid Common and Careless Errors	210
	References.....	211
	References	213
	Index.....	221

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xii ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Roadmap of This Book

Standardized test scores are the result of the interaction between preparation and performance. This can be expressed as the following formula:

$$\text{Score} = f(\text{preparation} + \text{performance})$$

Furthermore

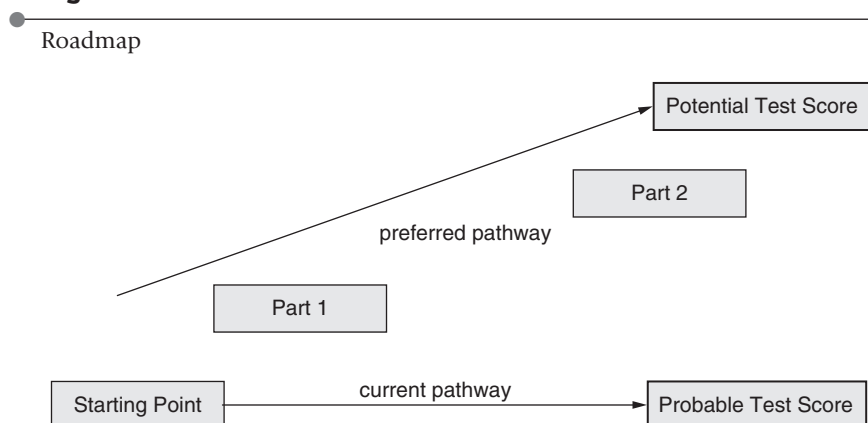
Test preparation includes all the variables and activities that define test-wiseness (TW). Test performance includes all the variables and activities that define test-taking skills (TTS).

Therefore

$$\text{Score} = f(\text{TW} + \text{TTS})$$

Part 1 of this book presents, describes, and explains TW, which focuses on three key variables: the test, you and various study resources, and methods and techniques.

Figure FM-1



xiv ROADMAP OF THIS BOOK

Part 2 of this book presents, describes, and explains TTS, which includes how to work most effectively and efficiently in a timed environment, techniques that will help you select the best answers, and ways to reduce the impact of test anxiety.

Each section and its associated chapters build on and contribute to the previous material. This book begins by presenting the basics elements of test-wiseness (Part 1) and concludes with test-taking skills (Part 2). This roadmap will help you navigate the pathway to a higher test score. We recommend reading this book from beginning to end.

Introduction

High examination scores result from two factors: optimal preparation *before* the test and optimal performance *during* the test. Perhaps that's too obvious, but it's really that simple. However, the other part of the equation is that there's frequently a wide chasm that separates what we know from what we actually do. The purpose of this book is to help you build a bridge to cross that chasm and transform your knowledge into action.

At its most basic level, this book is about two concepts: test-wiseness and test-taking skills (Lai & Waltman, 2008; Mahamed, Gregory, & Austin, 2006; Milman, Bishop, & Ebel, 1965; Morse, 1998; Samson, 1985; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1992; Slakter, Koehler, & Hampton, 1970). Test-wiseness means knowing as much as you possibly can about your upcoming test and using this information effectively and efficiently to become well prepared *prior* to test day. Having successfully done that, achieving mastery of an array of test-taking skills will allow you to perform on test day at the level of test-taking expert.

If you prepare *and* perform to the level of your capability, it is our contention that you will do quite well. Reading this book isn't sufficient—it's not a magic book—but by learning as much as you can about what it takes to perform well on standardized tests and by following our recommendations you can realize your high-scoring potential. This truly is the road less traveled. The vast majority of standardized test-takers do not avail themselves of this level of personal development, but we hope you will accept the challenge and join us on the journey.

Why should you buy a book on how to study for multiple-choice question tests?

1. You want to increase your test score.
2. You believe that although you will perform well, you can do better.
3. You want to learn how to study less and still get a high score.
4. You are committed to devoting the time and energy necessary to improve your study techniques and test-taking skills.
5. All of the above.

If you selected none of the above, then please place this book back on the shelf; purchasing this book will provide no value for you (unless you're buying it as a gift). If you selected option 5 (all of the above), then proceed to checkout. If you chose any of options 1–4, read a bit further; this might be the book for you.

How do you *feel* about taking a comprehensive, standardized test?

The thought of taking a comprehensive, standardized test is terrifying for many and can induce paralytic fear in some. The reality is that to achieve your career goals, not only will you be taking the examination, but you will likely need to do well on one or more major “gateway” exams. Whether you need to take the Graduate Record Examination, the Medical College Admissions Test, the Law School Admissions Test, or any other aptitude test, as well as comprehensive course examinations or certificate or licensure examinations, the reality is that a standardized test or two (or more) looms in your future.

Perhaps the thought doesn't put you into a state of panic—sweaty palms, racing heart, visit to the emergency room (one of us has been there, done that; another of us has been there, seen it . . . many times)—but simply a state of heightened arousal. Maybe you don't know where to start or how to begin, or you've had a prior bad experience with a standardized exam (like the ACT or the SAT). Maybe you just know you can do better and need a little boost to get you where you want to be. Whatever the reason, we're confident we can help.

Why do people fear comprehensive, standardized exams?

Why do people fail these exams or fail to perform as well as they could?

The first question is easy to answer. People fear these exams because there's generally a lot riding on them. A lot of this is psychological. Excessive anxiety about exam performance can stem from low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, fear of failure, fear of rejection by loved ones, fear of success, fear of the unknown, anxiety disorders, and a host of other reasons. However, there's also the very real fact of consequences. Failing a big exam can throw a wrench into your life plans, making it difficult or nearly impossible to progress in or toward your career, and costing you time and money in your effort to retake the exam. Thus, there are legitimate reasons to be anxious, but the point is to not allow the situation to get out of control. Furthermore, it's not necessarily the anxiety itself that is the source of the problem, but rather how you deal with it. Some anxiety is healthy and motivational, but too much is crippling.

It's important to have a realistic outlook regarding the importance of the exam and the consequence of failure, as well as a good set of coping mechanisms to deal with excessive anxiety. This book will spend a fair bit of time addressing the issue of test anxiety and how it can impact studying for and taking exams. We will help you understand the important role of emotions in test performance and offer guidance and several solutions to many of the most common obstacles to success, such as test anxiety and procrastination.

The answer to the second question—why do people fail exams or fail to perform well—is complicated, but generally there are two reasons:

1. Failure to adequately prepare
2. Failure to adequately execute

Many kinds of problems fall under the heading of “failure to adequately prepare,” including:

- Fundamental lack of content knowledge
- Bad time management
- Inadequate time to prepare
- Poor planning
- Inadequate study/learning strategies and techniques
- Inadequate type or amount of practice
- Misunderstanding the exam format or content

Even if one has adequately prepared, failure to adequately execute on exam day can produce an unacceptably low score. Poor execution can also stem from a variety of sources including:

- Inadequate reading skills
- Poor reasoning skills
- Cognitive errors and biases
- Poor time management during the exam
- Test anxiety
- Lack of test-taking skills

It is not uncommon for people who are about to sit for a potentially life-altering exam to enter the process completely unaware of the tremendous number of variables that might affect their score, or who believe that all it takes to do well on an exam is to buy the most popular review book and try to memorize its contents. You may even believe this is true because you've talked to someone who told you that's what they did. Maybe what they told you is partly or even mostly true—for them—but what you don't know is

how all the other variables came into play. Maybe this person thinks they simply memorized the review book, but they actually had more content knowledge to begin with, or maybe they have exceptional reading skills or reasoning skills. Maybe they're a "good test-taker." Perhaps they didn't tell you everything else they did to prepare, or maybe they're just plain smarter than you are. The point is everyone is different, and you need to do what is right for you, not what worked for someone else. That is precisely where this book excels and others fall flat. It's not about telling you what's the best thing for you to do; it's about helping you discover that for yourself by teaching you how to acquire the tools, skills, and strategies you will need in order to learn more and then show what you know (and maybe show more than you know) on an exam.

How does this book differ from existing test preparation resources and review courses?

Collectively, the authors have over 70 years of experience working with examinees—undergraduate, graduate, and graduate-professional students studying for a wide array of examinations—helping them achieve higher scores. Some of those we've worked with—even those with multiple failures on a national standardized exam—have increased their performance by over two standard deviations. That's equivalent to moving from a failing score to one above the 70th percentile.

Far too many review books and courses focus on content alone. Many others rely on gimmicks; their focus is more on marketing a product that purports to increase your test score and make studying easier rather than helping you understand how to learn and develop the transferable skills you need to achieve a higher score, not just on one specific exam but all exams. We're not going to sugarcoat it. It takes work. It takes time. It takes planning. It's not easy and there are no shortcuts (but there are evidence-based methods and strategies demonstrated to improve efficiency and effectiveness!).

What factors account for people who routinely tend to score high versus low on exams?

Some of the factors that account for differences between high and low scorers include:

- Dynamic/strategic planning versus "winging it"
- Frequent self-assessment with appropriate strategic adjustments
- Use of active versus passive learning techniques

- Studying to problem solve versus memorizing (i.e., use of deep versus superficial learning techniques)
- Use of effective and efficient study techniques and avoidance of time wasters
- Preparing for the type of exam to be taken (i.e., a comprehensive, standardized multiple-choice exam)

Preparing for a high-stakes, comprehensive examination requires you to actively and simultaneously manage several variables:

- *Time*: You will need to prioritize and schedule (e.g., when you will study, for how long, and how your studying will interface with your other obligations, needs, and desires).
- *Effort*: You will need to allocate the appropriate level of effort into areas that will maximize your test score.
- *Attitude*: You will need to develop a positive outlook in approaching the exam.
- *Motivation*: You will need to develop effective techniques to keep your motivation level as high as possible throughout the process. Most everyone experiences periods of time in which studying seems nearly impossible because their emotional reserves are on “empty.” Emotional and physical well-being cannot be overrated—they are simply vital to maintaining higher cognitive functioning.
- *Selections*: You will need to choose your study aids (determine what you will study) and your study behaviors (determine how you will study).

Notice that when you combine the first letters of each of the variables it spells out the word TEAMS.

Before delving further, let’s revisit our first question: Why buy a book on how to study for multiple-choice question tests? If you chose option 1 (because you want to increase your test score), then you recognize you can be more effective. That’s great, you have a goal. If you chose option 2 (because you believe that although you will perform well, you can do better), then you possess a quality known as self-efficacy. Good—examinees that possess this trait can learn to study better and score higher on examinations! If you chose option 3 (you want to learn how you can study less and still get a high score), then you are interested in learning to be more efficient. We can help with that! If you chose option 4 (you are committed to devoting the time and energy necessary to improve your study techniques and

XX INTRODUCTION

test-taking skills), then you are motivated and ready to become a more self-regulated learner. If you chose option 6 (all of the above), then this is the book for you.

By following the advice in this book, you will be better prepared for your examination. This book is our invitation to you to change or enhance your current study techniques. This book will help you understand what you can, should, and must do, which, in a nutshell, is to become a more effective learner. This book was written for one purpose—to increase the test scores of everyone that takes a multiple-choice test.

To accomplish this goal, the book is divided into two parts and four sections:

- Part 1: Preparing for Your Test (Developing Test-Wiseness)
 - Section I: Understanding Your Opponent (The Test)
 - Section II: Developing Your T.E.A.M.S.
 - Section III: Practicing Your Skills
- Part 2: Taking Your Test (Applying Test-Taking Skills)
 - Section IV: Executing Your Game Plan (Test Day)

Where should you focus your studying?

How much time should you allocate to studying?

How should you begin studying?

What are the best study techniques to use to increase your test scores?

How can you improve your ability to remember facts?

How do you know if your plan is working?

The answers to these questions and many more can be found in the chapters that follow.

To help guide and promote improvement in your study techniques and test scores, we included a series of *Exercises* and *Activities* throughout this book. Prior to reading Chapter 1, please complete Exercises 1 and 2.

EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES

Becoming competent in the performance of any skill is based on two key elements: knowledge and practice. First, you have to know what it is you need to do (i.e., you need *knowledge*). Once you know what is required, then you

need to *practice* doing it until you do it well. Once you are competent, the challenge shifts from being able to do it to doing it at the appropriate times. Sounds so simple, right? Then why is it so difficult to do?

Speizer (2005) reported that 80–90% of traditional training programs result in little to no change in overall performance. Rackham (1979) reported that almost 90% of new skills gained in training programs are lost just four weeks after the training program ends. We want you to do much better. We want you to improve your performance and continue to do so after you have gained the new skill. To help you accomplish this we created a series of exercises and activities that are presented throughout this book.

We define exercises and activities as follows:

- **Exercises** are mental challenges. Exercises will be found prior to a section or chapter. They are designed to engage your mind and cause you to think about a concept.
 - o What do you know or believe?
 - o What do you value?
 - o How would you approach a situation?
- **Activities** are practice opportunities. Activities will be found after a chapter or section. They are designed to reinforce a principle or concept through reflection and some action or actions.
 - o Did you appreciate the key concepts in the chapter?
 - o Where will you apply the discussed concepts to practice them?
 - o How will you internalize what you learned?
 - o What will your next steps be?

The exercises and activities that you will encounter throughout the book offer you an opportunity to start to change your thinking, behaviors, and skills. Choosing not to complete them is a choice that you might make. We hope that you choose to complete them all, in order. We are confident that doing so will serve you well.

EXERCISE 1

Drafting Your Study Plan (V1)

We want you to get the highest score on your test that you can. To assist you in the development of a study plan, the first thing you need to do is identify what your current mind-set is about the task before you (i.e., the standardized

test that you will be taking). What are your current thoughts about the test? How do you plan to study? What resources will you use? This exercise is designed to make your current plan concrete—you need to write it down so that you can examine it, expand it, and improve it as you read the remaining chapters of this book. Please see Table FM-1, which contains Exercise 1.

Many examinees have strong emotional feelings about upcoming tests. We want to help you examine your feelings. We want your plan to be realistic and based on evidence, not well-intentioned opinions or intuition. You need to write your thoughts down so that as you read this book you can review, modify, and enhance your plan.

Table	
FM-1	Exercise 1
Questions	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why am I planning to take this test? 2. What study techniques will I use to prepare for this test? 3. Which books, computer programs, study aids, etc., will I use to help me prepare? 4. How much total time will I study for this test; how long will I study each day? 5. When will I start studying for this test? 6. What can I do on the day of the test to increase my score? 7. As the test approaches, how will I know that I am getting ready? 	

Answer the seven questions that follow. In the ensuing chapters, we present what the literature reports and share what our experiences have taught us about test preparation and test-taking. We offer suggestions and recommendations for you to consider as you learn more about standardized tests and how to prepare for them. Your seven answers create your first draft of a study plan (V1 = Version 1). It is our hope that your answers will change a few times before you complete this book. When you complete the book your final exercise will be the creation of your final study plan.

EXERCISE 2

What Kind of Exam-Preparer Am I?

Test scores can be divided into three simple categories: very low, average, and very high. Although not absolute, educational psychology and cognitive research have identified behaviors and skills sets that are more commonly observed in high achievers—those that get the highest test scores. How many of these characteristics do you possess? In which of these behaviors do you most commonly engage?

Table FM-2 enumerates some common study behaviors and skills sets. Each statement should be rated on the following scale: Almost never; Sometimes; Almost always. For each, select your typical behavior—*do not answer* based on what you are familiar with or what you generally intend to do. Answer each item based on what you actually do. *Be brutally honest.* Only you will review your answers.

Table FM-3 depicts the “best” selections for each item based on the literature and our experience. The rationale for each response is discussed in the chapters that follow.

xxiv INTRODUCTION

Table				
FM-2		Exercise 2, Part 1		
Behavior		Almost Always	Sometimes	Almost Never
1. I study until the last possible minute before my test starts.				
2. I highlight important material in my book so that I can find it later.				
3. I often text or answer emails during my study sessions.				
4. I study several hours only right before the test.				
5. My goal is to study as little as possible without lowering my grade.				
6. I often draw my own pictures and create tables when I study.				
7. When I study I focus on things that I need to do to avoid failing.				
8. I study material until I can reproduce it from memory.				
9. I start studying long before the test.				
10. I study with music on in the background.				
11. I use flash cards as my primary study aid.				
12. When I study, I write questions that I could be asked on the test.				
13. I use a few good study techniques for most of my studying needs.				
14. I often add notes to the margins of my books and class notes.				
15. A review book or summary guide is my primary study resource.				

Table				
FM-3		Exercise 2, Part 2		
Behavior		Almost Always	Sometimes	Almost Never
1. I study until the last possible minute before my test starts.				X
2. I highlight important material in my book so that I can find it later.			X	
3. I often text or answer emails during my study sessions.				X
4. I study several hours only right before the test.				X
5. My goal is to study as little as possible without lowering my grade.				X
6. I often draw my own pictures and create tables when I study.		X		
7. When I study I focus on things that I need to do to avoid failing.				X
8. I study material until I can reproduce it from memory.			X	
9. I start studying long before the test.		X		
10. I study with music on in the background.				X
11. I use flash cards as my primary study aid.				X
12. When I study, I write questions that I could be asked on the test.		X		
13. I use a few good study techniques for most of my studying needs.		X		
14. I often add notes to the margins of my books and class notes.		X		
15. A review book or summary guide is my primary study resource.			X	

