

Avoid Common Mistakes on In-Class Exams

In-class exams are performances that depend on time. For each concept or idea that you will be tested on, there are three learning activities that you need to complete:

1. Understand the idea (Create highly valuable lesson notes and address questions that arise)
2. Remember the idea (Use the green-yellow-red daily testing system)
3. Recognize when to apply the idea in practice (Practice problem solving using in-class examples, quizzes, suggested problems, and practice exams with a focus on the reasoning process behind the solution. Specifically, each time you apply a concept from the class, ask yourself: why did I apply that concept in this situation? How would I have known to do this? What trigger might I recognize?)

These three steps are necessary but not sufficient for high performance. In other words, for each concept you will be tested on, if you don't do these steps, you will likely not do well on the exam. However, just because you complete all three of these steps for each idea does not guarantee that you will do well on the exam. This cruel reality results from the fact that to do well on exams, you need to build strong exam skills in addition to strong conceptual understanding of the content on the exam.

As we have discussed before, one of the best ways to improve your test-taking skills is to focus on learning from your mistakes. To learn from your mistakes, you need to be able to do the following three things

- Have the self-confidence and determination to identify and admit that you made a mistake
- Correct your mistakes by finding the proper solution to the problems that you missed
- Be courageous and strategic about making changes in your routines to avoid making these mistakes in the future

By completing the exam correction process, you identified your mistakes and wrote the correct answer. You also brainstormed about how you might make changes to your study routines to improve your next exam score.

This document is designed to further inspire enhanced performance in on future exams. We do so by discussing common exam mistakes and making specific suggestions on what you might do to correct each mistake.

TYPE 1: MISREAD DIRECTIONS ERRORS

These errors occur when you do not fully read the directions or misunderstand the some crucial part of the problem statement but you answer the question or attempt to solve the problem anyway. Examples of errors in this category include:

- I didn't read the entire problem.
- I didn't pay attention to a key condition in the problem statement.
- I didn't address all parts of the problem.

To avoid this type of error, make a pre-commitment to read all the directions carefully before you start the problem. Practice this habit on the nightly homework assignments, daily quizzes and on all sample exams.

TYPE 2: CARELESS ERRORS

These are errors that you would have caught immediately had you just reviewed your work. Examples of these type of errors include:

- I made a silly arithmetic or algebra error.
- I knew how to solve this problem, made a mistake in my work and I didn't check my answer.

TYPE 3: CONCEPT ERRORS

These are mistakes you make because at the time you took the test, you did not fully understand the properties, principles, and techniques required to work through the problem. Examples of these type of errors include:

- A. I had a difficult time connecting the ideas I studied to this problem statement.
- B. I didn't know a definition, key term of theorem related to this problem.
- C. I didn't understand the concept(s) behind this problem well. I didn't fully learn this material.

TYPE 4: APPLICATION ERRORS

These are mistakes you make because at the time you took the test, you did not fully understand the properties, principles, and techniques required to work through the problem. Examples of these type of errors include:

- A. I had a difficult time connecting the ideas I studied to this problem statement.
- B. I didn't think of the proper method to solve this problem.

TYPE 5: TEST PROCEDURE ERRORS

These are mistakes you make due the specific way you take your tests. These include:

- A. Missing more questions in the first-third, second-third, of last third of the exam.
- B. Not completing a problem through the last step
- C. I forgot to finish this problem. I left this problem partially complete.
- D. I rushed through this problem and skipped steps.
- E. Getting stuck on one problem and spending too much time.
- F. Rushing through the easiest part of the test and making careless errors.
- G. Miscopying an answer from your scratch work to the test.
- H. Leaving blank answers on the exam.
- I. Trying to solve all problems on the test in the order they are written (start with the first problem, then move on to problem 2, then go to problem 3, and so on.)
- J. Attempting to finish every problem before moving on to the next problem.

TYPE 6: EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT ERRORS

These are mistakes you make because you are nervous and didn't deal with your nerves prior to the exam. These include:

- A. I became emotionally overwhelmed with the stress of the exam.
- B. I had the right answer but second-guessed myself.
- C. I wasn't confident in my answer, overthought myself, and changed a correct answer to a wrong one.
- D. I ran out of time on this problem.
- E. I skipped this problem and forgot to come back at the end of the exam.
- F. I panicked and forgot what I know about this problem

TYPE 6: STUDY ROUTINE ERRORS

These mistakes result from the study habits that you wielded prior to this exam. Perhaps you studied the wrong material or did not spend enough time studying pertinent material.

- A. I had a difficult time connecting the ideas I studied to this problem statement.
- B. I didn't get enough sleep the night before the exam.
- C. I still don't know what I did wrong.
- D. I still don't know what the correct solution should be.

Finally, in some situations, you might think you actually deserve full credit on this problem, even though the instructor graded you down for your response. In this case, you'll want to have a rewritten version of your answer with a well-articulated argument that demonstrates that your written answer is legitimate.