Even the best students learn quickly that college exams are not like the tests you took in high school. Not only do college exams test your understanding of a lot more information at once, but they also ask you to go beyond memorization and do different things with the information you've learned.

Have you had the experience of studying hard, learning a lot and then taking an exam with questions you didn't recognize or understand how to answer? A tough test can make you feel like you've suddenly forgotten everything you studied and throw off your ability to think as well as you need.

Everyone experiences test anxiety to one degree or another. It's natural. When something makes you nervous, it becomes harder to think and remember. While test anxiety affects us all, good students learn how to minimize its impact.

With knowledge and practice, you can become a more skillful and confident student and test-taker. Try to integrate the following tried-and-true strategies into your study routine. You'll find yourself studying with more focus, more calm and more confidence.

**PACE YOURSELF**

The best way to prepare for tests is to learn the material day-to-day, and week-to-week, reviewing it at regular intervals throughout the semester. Regular repetition, started early, helps you retain information much better than longer studying in the days before the test.

Cramming means just what it says—you're trying to put too much information into your brain too quickly. Most of your tests are designed to test the depth of your studying—how you use information you've learned. Your brain just doesn't have the processing power to memorize and think effectively when there is too much input and not enough time for processing.

Stay on top of coursework by meeting once or twice a week with friends, a professor, a TA or a tutor to review notes, quiz each other or solve problems. Don't wait until you're struggling—working with others is the best way to learn.

Re-write your notes from a lecture as soon as you can—the same day, if possible. You'll be sure to understand them, and additional facts you didn't jot down will still be fresh in your mind.
KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT

Most tests expect you to not only know a lot of new information, but to be able to use that information to answer questions or solve problems. Studying to memorize is important, but it’s almost never enough. Ask your professor what kind of questions you will be asked and how you should prepare for the test.

After you’ve taken a test with a professor, ask to have the test back so that you can review it. By going through each question and studying why you answered the way you did, you can learn a lot about what the professor's tests ask you to do—and how you can better prepare next time.

Some professors make a policy of not returning tests. If so, ask to review the test in the professor's office.

USE DIFFERENT STRATEGIES FOR DIFFERENT TESTS

Multiple-choice tests generally demand that you memorize facts or problem types and apply them to new, unique situations or problems. Essay questions require you to place information in a larger conceptual or theoretical context. If you're not sure about the format of a test, the amount of material it will cover, or what your professor expects you do, ask your professor.

Once you know what kind of test you'll be getting, prepare for that test by creating your own practice questions. Go through your notes, convert information into questions or essays, or new problems, and answer the questions.

STUDY WITH OTHER PEOPLE

Statistics show that people who regularly study with friends or in groups do better on exams than those who don't. There are several good reasons why this is true. For starters, in groups you have the power of multiple sets of notes, multiple opinions and multiple levels of understanding. Not sure about a concept, what to expect from a test or how to best study something? Your professor, your TA, an AEC tutor or your classmates can all help.

Test preparation can be stressful. Preparing in groups can help ease stress. Study group members support one another—they talk about the test, the professor, the class. They share tips for relaxing or answering questions.

Finally, group study is often more effective for learning. People who study actively with one another do more mental work with the information they're learning. When you explain, ask questions about or do anything else with information, you understand and remember better.

PRACTICE TESTING

A test is a performance. As with any performance, you need to rehearse to perform well. Studying helps you develop what you need, but you still need to rehearse what you've studied to perform well on the test. Professors often provide practice tests, and textbooks have review questions. Tutors can often give you extra practice.
A FEW MORE TIPS...

- **Study more.** There is actually no such thing as over-learning. Knowing that you know it all will make you much more confident when test time comes around, and the confidence will make stress less likely.

- **Take care of your body.** Your body and your mind work together—when stress affects your body, it also affects your concentration and memory. Try to keep to healthy routines with sleeping, eating and exercise. The challenges of time management and of college-level work in general can really take a toll on your body—it is more important than ever that you care for it well.

- **Take care of your brain.** Your brain will need to be in top thinking condition on test day. Make sure that you give it plenty of rest the two nights before a test. Get regular sleep, eat well and don't drink or smoke.

- **Practice relaxation.** Make regular relaxation exercises a part of your study regimen. Any kind of exercise that focuses on steadying your breathing and heart rate—forms of meditation or yoga, for example—can help bring your nervous system under control.

- **Be your own coach.** You can help build your own confidence. Remind yourself about how much you've studied and learned. On the day of the test, tell yourself, "I've done everything I can do to prepare. I have nothing to worry about." This kind of confidence-building talk can convince your brain not to feel anxious.

MORE TEST TAKING SKILLS TO TAKE TO HEART

- **Relax.** If test-taking makes you nervous, practice relaxation techniques. Breathing and meditation exercises can help clear your mind of disturbing thoughts.

- **Respect your pace.** Don't compare your study time with that of your classmates—it's irrelevant, and it tends to increase anxiety. Students require different amounts of prep time for tests.

- **Read instructions.** You'd be surprised at the number of students who fail to follow the instructions written on a test. Read through the entire exam to get a sense of all the questions and how they relate to one another.

- **Make notes.** Make a list of the ideas and key points hovering in the forefront of your mind, which you can refer to as needed.

- **Manage your time.** Some questions may be worth more than others. Don't spend half of your allotted time working on an essay or problem that amounts to a small percentage of your grade.

- **Focus on certain questions first.** In short, look at those you feel best prepared to answer. In some exams, one question or problem builds upon another, in which case you should complete the exam in the suggested order.

GO TO THE AEC

Every new student could use help to improve study technique. Nearly every new student can use help planning how to work and use his or her time. And nearly everyone experiences stress and anxiety about studying and taking tests. The people at the Academic Enhancement Center know how to work with each person individually, to create a plan that is best for you.