

Developing Student Test-wiseness¹

“[Research shows] there is a positive relationship between test performance and skill in taking tests”²

Being test-wise is about having appropriate test-taking skills and strategies. These skills and strategies can be learned. Students who lack test-wiseness will perform relatively less well than they should on a test, because they do not know how to take a test. Training students in these skills and strategies improves students’ chances of showing their actual knowledge and capability on the content of the test.

Some general advice

1. Develop test-wiseness as part of a long-term process embedded in normal teaching and learning, not as something separate.
2. Focus on developing problem-solving skills, not coaching specific techniques.
3. Being test-wise is not a panacea if the student lacks content knowledge and skill—it merely removes one extraneous factor affecting student performance.
4. Greater benefit is possible with lower-performing students, students from poorer backgrounds, and students with disabilities.



Strategies for developing Student Test-wiseness

Some specific strategies for you to teach your students

Test format (knowing what to expect)

- How to read and follow test directions.
- What different item types look like, what they typically ask you to do, and where and how to record your answers.
- It is OK to put marks (e.g., underline key words) and make notes on the test paper.

Coverage (doing the whole test)

- Answer every question, even if this means making a guess or estimation.
- It is OK not to know everything—all tests have some challenging items—just do your best—you may be able to work out a possible answer.
- Do easier questions first and come back to any difficult ones later.
- Watch out for questions that have more than one part to them.

Test language and terminology

- Treat a test as another form of text whose language needs to be decoded.
- Learn specialised test vocabulary (e.g., describe, explain, compare, identify).
- Be careful to notice any negatives, such as ‘not’ and ‘except’.

Focus and persistence

- Read all questions carefully so that you understand what is being asked.
- Relax: reduce any anxiety by closing eyes and breathing deeply for a while.
- Keep ‘on task’ and ‘focussed’—don’t be distracted or daydream.
- Avoid negative self-evaluations (keep saying ‘I can do this’).
- Don’t worry if other students finish early—stay focussed on the test.

1 Please consult the Brief *Preparing Students to Take a Test* before reading this Brief.

2 Ritter and Idol-Maestas, 1986, p. 350.

3 See Raphael and Au (2000): ‘in the text’ questions require extracting relevant information from the text; ‘in my head’ questions require going beyond the text using other knowledge or reasoning.

Strategies for developing Student Test-wiseness

Some specific strategies for you to teach your students cont...

Time management

- Initially, scan the test to get a sense of what it asks you to do.
- Budget time: work out how much time to give each question.
- Pace yourself—do easy items first—skip difficult questions—return to these later.
- Put a mark on the skipped questions to find them again later.
- If you skip a question remember to skip that item's answer spot.
- Do not spend too much time on one question—do your best and move on.
- Watch the time—you should be about half way through the test by half time.
- If you finish early, check back over the test (have you answered all questions?).

Strategies for reading comprehension tests

Use smart strategies:

- Look for key words and ideas in the passage and underline them.
- For words you don't know, look for context clues to work out the meaning.
- Read the options then look back over the passage—don't rely on memory.
- Learn to recognise when the answer is 'in the text' versus 'in my head'³.



Strategies for developing Student Test-wiseness

Strategies for multiple-choice tests

Use smart strategies:

- Try to work out an answer before looking at the options.
- Read all options before choosing; delete answers you know are wrong.
- Delete any options that say the same thing different ways (because there is only one right answer).
- Choose among remaining options.
- Stick to your first choice unless absolutely sure that your first answer was wrong (first answers are usually right).

Use your deductive reasoning and problem solving skills:

- Start with what you know—think, analyse, work it out.
- If necessary make a best-guess or most-right choice.

Informing literature:

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