## 18 – VI | Taking Exams

For the most part, I am about to reiterate what has already been said about practice exams, writing neatly, and providing clear solutions.

Why spend so much time discussing this? Well, it's worth nearly all your grades, so it should have the most time spent on it.

Stress, anxiety, fear, hopelessness, loss of passion, distractions, love, hate, anger, pain, uncomfortableness, desire, fantasies, illness, … the list goes on and on. These words describe distractions, distractions that must be overcome.

College isn't just about learning a skill or gaining knowledge; it is also about becoming a responsible, functioning member of society. When you miss class, do half-ass homework, complain about the professor, drop courses, are unprepared, troll the internet, obsessively push your incorrect outlook of life on people, show up late, are disrespectful, and think you are above other people in society, you are failing at college. You can have a doctorate, which doesn't make you any more special than the person cleaning your toilet. If they had not been there to clean the bathroom, you would have had to clean it, and you would not have had time to get your doctorate. High-horse syndrome is not a good quality.

"Independence is a recipe for loneliness."—@authorjond

Why rant on about this? It is because we are all equally important pieces in the puzzle of life. These thoughts cause distractions and derail us from our purpose in college—to become functioning members of society who progress, not digress.

### *i. Point Maximization*

First, assume that getting 100s on exams is impossible. In fact, the better you do, the more points you'll lose. Professors will grade those with the best understanding of the material much more harshly than those who barely got through the questions. Especially if the material is related to one's field.

On my first calculus exam, I got a 78 out of 100, but I got every solution correct and every answer right. So why did I get a C+? It is because I was a math major and misused a single symbol incorrectly. I used $\rightarrow$ instead of $\Rightarrow$.

Unfair? Absolutely! But, if it weren't for that grade and its reasoning, I may never have buckled down and become so good at math notations. The professor did me a solid even though it affected my grade. Math is a language; if you wrote, "how are you doing two days?" on an English paper, you wouldn't pass. But you still understand, "How are you doing today?" is what is being said. In math, if you have a sloppy solution with incorrect notations leading to the correct answer, the professors will grade you on the English aspect of it.

I CANNOT STRESS THIS ENOUGH: THE ANSWER IS WORTH NOTHING!!! Focus on the solution.

To maximize points on exams, you need to, first and foremost, write as neatly as possible. Secondly, structure the solution, e.g., label each part (1) [formulae] (2) part 1 of the solution, part 2 of the solution, part 3, … (4) answer. Make it easy to follow along. Even if you don't know what you are doing, you'll get a better grade than someone who knows what they are doing when writing chicken scratch. Imagine having to grade hundreds of exams written by five-year-olds in crayons. This is what it is like when it is sloppy handwriting.

It is also imperative that you don't simplify when it isn't necessary, and if you are unsure about a calculation but the solution is set up correctly, don't waste time on it. It is better to lose a point for not doing the final calculation than waste fifteen minutes on something worth hardly anything when that could be applied to another more point-worthy question.

Note: If the question does not state "simplify," DO NOT SIMPLIFY. It is a waste of time. You want to go into an exam with the thought of (1) not getting a 100% and (2) maximizing points in all areas, and (3) reducing point-loss (2 & 3 sound the same, but they are different).

Strategizing:

1) Before even opening the test and looking at any questions, write down any equations or formulas you have memorized on the test's blank side or front side. You will surely forget them the moment you see the questions.
2) Before attempting to solve any question, write (part 1) the solution for each question, simply the related formulae, theorems, and or definitions. [You do this, and you have 50% credit on the whole exam without even doing a single calculation]
3) Find the questions you absolutely 100% know how to solve. Do these first.
4) Spend more time on the questions you know how to solve than the ones you don't. Students miss more points for being overly confident than they do for winging a problem.
5) Don't waste time simplifying or doing overcomplicated, time-consuming calculations.
6) Be as neat and orderly as possible!

*ii. Clearness*

I think my point about writing clearly has been made multiple times throughout this text. But how does one get to the point of writing clearly?

When I started back in college, I wrote the alphabet over and over each night until my penmanship improved. I also began using my left hand for everything as much as possible.

Studies show that being ambidextrous enhances brain power and life longevity, so it serves a purpose beyond just showing off. I also did it due to nerve issues from a tedious, repetitive handwriting motion that is neither ergonomic nor symmetric with the body.

 

To write a straightforward solution to get the best grade(s) possible, you will need to know what a clear solution is. This is subject to the professor.

My recommendation is that each week, you take one homework problem you are confident you can solve. Write out a neat and what you think is a straightforward solution. Take it to the professor and ask them to take a minute to grade the question, treating it as an exam question. Ask them to point out where you may lose points and so forth. Have a friendly discussion about the grading process. As I mentioned earlier in the book, it isn't a mystery; they will help and respect you for asking.

You want to enter an exam knowing exactly how the professor wants a solution written. You also want to go in knowing that you have already taken this potential exam version multiple times.

Being precise and transparent is essential to the grader. Once, a student got a 68% on a test. They mainly answered everything correctly, whereas their desk neighbor got a 75% with zero correct answers, all because his writing was neater.

*iii. Errors in the Grading Process*

Teacher Assistants and Professors dread grading. Can you imagine going through a hundred-and-twenty, fifteen-question calculus exams written by a bunch of lazy college students? What a nightmare! So, make it easy on them!

1) They generally couldn't care less about your grade—both the professor and the T.A. Why? They have their own mountains of stress to deal with, and grading your paper is the last thing they want to do when they have research, graduate work, thesis, wife, husband, partner, kids, bills, … [make it easy on them]
2) They get disoriented after grading just a few exams, and they make mistakes. [make it easy on them]
3) Professors often think they know everything, and their questions are poorly posed, leading to an unsolvable problem. Yet they still provide a solution, not realizing it is entirely wrong. [Pointing this out can be tricky, as the most common characteristic of a professor is a narcissistic personality.]
4) I can't remember an exam when I didn't get an extra 5-10% boost in my grade because of the professor's lack of precision and reasoning when grading.

Objective: When you get your exam back, no matter how bad or good you did, go through every single question and reference the solutions to find any little mistakes the graders made. I guarantee you will find something on nearly every test to boost your grade. But also have integrity; if you should have lost points, point this out too.