



Test-Taking Strategies

Test-Taking Strategies: Powerful Tools for Test Success

Test taking is a skill. When faced with tests, many high school students believe those who do well on tests are either part of the “genius” crowd at school or they study all the time. Sure, every high school has its group of “super students,” and studying is certainly better than not studying, but the truth of the matter is learning to be an effective test taker is an important part of student performance. It’s fine to have knowledge, but you also need to have the ability to show what you know. There are people with minds like encyclopedias who have a difficult time answering test questions correctly. All students can succeed on tests by taking school seriously and improving their test-taking strategies.

When students use test-taking strategies, they are sharpening the way they think so they can show what they know on tests. Using test strategies is not cheating, and it is not an easy way out. No test strategy is going to replace paying attention in school, working hard in your classes, and learning basic reading, writing, science, social studies, and mathematics skills. However, feeling comfortable and confident in using test-taking strategies can make a huge difference in test-taking success for many students on the OGT as well as other tests students face throughout their schooling.

What Test-Taking Strategies Will Help Me on the OGT?

1. Know How to Fill in Those Answer Bubbles

On the OGT, you will complete multiple-choice questions, which require you to fill in answer bubbles. Although it might seem boring at first, practicing how to fill in answer bubbles can boost your test-taking success. Obviously, if you do not know how to fill in the bubbles correctly, your responses will be counted as incorrect. If you practice now, you'll be prepared to answer these questions on the OGT.

2. Formulate a Plan

Any challenge is best met by a well thought-out plan of action. While some plans are better than others, looking at the whole picture before you proceed and thinking about the steps you will take to solve a problem or to respond to a challenge will help lead to success.

Planning is an important test-taking strategy. You may not realize it, but you create simple plans on a daily basis. Many people make plans to solve problems, even though they might not think they are actually creating plans.

Successful test taking also requires a plan. Successful students do not just open up the test booklet and "go for broke." Instead, they take a few minutes to survey the test and get a general idea as to how they will tackle this challenge.

- ***Begin by looking over the entire test.*** Open your test booklet and briefly look at every page. How many pages are there? How many questions? Knowing this basic information can help you with your plan.
- ***Read all directions.*** Before you start answering test items and before you start your writing pieces, read all the directions given in your OGT booklet. This is a very important step. The directions tell you what you're supposed to do. If you rush in without paying attention to these details, you could make careless mistakes. By reading directions, your task becomes clear in your head. Once you know what you're expected to complete, you can use your test-taking strategies to succeed.
- ***Read all test information carefully.*** Reading the directions is important, but so is reading each passage, each chart or diagram, each question, and all the answer choices. Particularly with multiple-choice items, you may be tempted to stop reading the choices when you think you've found the correct answer. Don't stop; read each choice. You might find your first guess was wrong. By surveying all the information, you make the best possible selection. If you go with your first guess without reading all the choices, you make a decision without knowing all the facts.

- **Ignore information and details that are not important.** Pay careful attention to details given in both the question and the answer choices. Some questions may contain irrelevant information, but reading all the information gives you the best chance of success.
- **Read the entire passage.** You might also be tempted to skip details in the reading passages. Some of the passages are long, and you may get bored. Don't let your mind get off track. You need to understand the information in order to answer the test items. If you need to take a brief pause, do so. It's better to stop for a moment and take a short break than to think about everything but the test as you read a passage. You don't want to come to the end of a selection and think, "What did I just read?"
- **Pay attention to all test information.** Reading through the details gives you all the material you need to make all the best choices. You will be on your way to test-taking success!

3. Do Not Get Stuck on One Question

The OGT was developed to allow students enough time to read the questions and to solve the problems without feeling rushed. Almost every student should have enough time to carefully consider each question. If you survey the OGT and plan out how you will use the available time, you will be able to finish the test without feeling rushed or stressed.

The OGT was not designed to measure how fast you can solve problems and answer questions. However, it is still important not to get "stuck" on a particular question. What causes the feeling of getting "stuck"? Some possible reasons include:

- you feel as though you have never seen the material before.
- you figure and refigure, but none of the choices seems correct.
- your mind suddenly goes "blank."
- you temporarily forget a fact or procedure you thought you knew.

These "stuck" feelings can oftentimes lead to panic. This can interfere with your performance on the rest of the test. If you get "stuck" on one question, you might not have enough time to finish all the questions on the test.

When you feel yourself becoming frustrated with a particular question, circle the number of that question and move on to another item. Keep in mind that no student is expected to answer all questions on the OGT correctly. Missing a few questions is normal. If you waste time trying to solve a frustrating problem, you will have less time to complete the rest of the test successfully.

Many students find that when they come back to frustrating questions later on in the test, they are suddenly able to find the correct answers. This does not happen by luck or magic. Moving on from a “stuck” question and then coming back to that question later can result in success for two reasons:

- ***Remove yourself from the stressful situation.*** Removing oneself from a stressful situation (the “stuck” question) and then finding success on other items can reduce a student’s anxiety and boost self-confidence. Studies have shown that feeling calm and sure of oneself can be a big boost for success on tests and in schoolwork.
- ***The mind works in amazing ways!*** By moving on to other test questions, you may trigger your mind into remembering information. Have you ever forgotten something, like someone’s name? Imagine it’s the first day at your new after-school job. The assistant manager walks in and you cannot remember her name. This is embarrassing. After a few hours, your mom’s best friend, Ms. Garza, comes into the restaurant. Suddenly, your mind awakens! The supervisor’s name is Ms. Garcia! How did you remember this? Ms. Garza’s name begins with “G” and ends with “A.” Recognizing Ms. Garza triggered your memory to remember your supervisor’s name. On tests, you might find certain questions or answers will trigger your memory to other problems you thought were impossible.

4. Answer Every Question

You are given several lines for open-response questions, which include short answers and extended responses. A complete response not only utilizes the space given but also answers the question asked. Note, however, that incomplete but accurate and sensible answers may receive partial credit on the OGT. It might be necessary to give a partial or an incomplete answer due to time limitations or not fully understanding the material. Giving a partial response is always better than not responding at all. Just as you will not lose points for answering multiple-choice questions incorrectly, you also will not lose points for making an attempt to answer short-answer or extended-response questions on the OGT.

It is very important to answer as many multiple-choice questions as possible, even if you make an educated guess. On multiple-choice questions, you have a one in four chance of getting a question right, even if you just close your eyes and guess! This means for every four questions you guess, the odds are you will get about one (25%) of the answers right. Guessing alone is not going to make you a star on the OGT, but leaving multiple-choice questions blank is not going to help you either.

5. Use “Codes” to Make Better Guesses

You might find it helpful to use “codes” to rate multiple-choice answers. You can use your pencil to mark the following codes beside each multiple-choice response in the test booklet to see which is the best choice. An example of a code used by a high school student is given below:

- (+) Put a plus sign by an answer choice if you are not sure it is correct, but you think it might be correct.
- (?) Put a question mark by an answer choice if you are not sure if it is the correct answer, but you don’t want to rule it out completely.
- (–) Put a minus sign by an answer choice if you are sure it is the wrong answer. (You then would chose from the other answers to make an educated guess.)

Remember, it is fine to write in your test booklet. The space in the booklet is yours to use to help you do better on the OGT. You will not have points counted off for using this coding system or creating your own system to help you on multiple-choice questions.

6. Learn How to “Power Guess”

Not everything you know was learned in a classroom. Part of what you know comes from just living your day-to-day life. When you take the OGT, you should use everything you have learned in school, but you should also use your experiences outside of the classroom to help you answer questions correctly. Using “common sense,” as well as your past experiences, will help you do especially well on the OGT.

Power guessing is not cheating. The purpose of education is to help us use what we have learned in school as well as what we have discovered in our lives outside of school. This is called “power guessing.”

7. Always, and This Mean Always, Recheck Your Work

Careless errors can get in the way of doing well on a test. Even for students who feel fairly confident about tests, a test can present a stressful situation. The more stress you feel, the greater the chance for careless errors. Especially in the mathematics section of the OGT, checking work is important. Students sometimes think rechecking work takes too much time in a test situation and they could better use that time answering other questions. Actually, when you learn simple ways to recheck your work, it hardly takes any time at all. Studies have shown that rechecking work takes only about 5% of the total test time. Even if you only find one or two errors, this is a worthwhile investment of your efforts.

Here are easy ways to recheck your work:

- ***Look at the neatness of your work.*** Neatness is especially important for short-answer and extended-response questions. For open-response questions, your written work will count as part of the answer, so make sure it is readable. But even on multiple-choice questions, you should make sure you have filled in all circles completely.
- ***Ask yourself, “Does my answer make sense?”*** In the Reading, Writing Processes, Social Studies, and Science sections, reread the question. Does your response answer the question being asked? In the Mathematics section, check over your figures. Did you perform all operations correctly? Does your solution seem like a reasonable answer for the problem? By reviewing items a second time, you may find a few errors.
- ***Review what you have written.*** It is important to review your responses on the writing test as well. One of the primary reasons students lose points is they don't address the prompt. This means that they don't answer the question being asked or they don't write about the topic given. As you complete each paragraph of your writing piece, reread it. Are you staying on topic? Does your response make sense? If it doesn't make sense to you, it won't make sense to those scoring the test. So, remember to ask yourself, “Am I writing about the topic given by the test?” If you can answer, “yes,” you will succeed on the OGT.

8. Take Care of Yourself

There are many things you can do to get your body ready for test day. You may not think about these things at other times, but around test time, it's a good idea to get yourself ready. If your body is ready, there is one less thing you have to think about, and you can focus on showing what you know.

- ***Eat right and don't skip breakfast.*** If there is anything parents nag high schoolers about, it is getting enough sleep and eating right. Staying away from pizza and chips is not going to make you a genius, but eating an appropriate breakfast on the morning of the OGT will help more than you realize. (In fact, eating a reasonable breakfast every day will help you in your school work overall.) Eating a good breakfast does not mean eating a large breakfast or making anything complicated or time consuming. Most important is having a breakfast high in protein and low in sugar. Sugar quickly raises blood sugar levels, which then drop quickly, causing a student to feel tired and irritable and to lose concentration. Protein and foods lower in sugar provide more constant energy over the course of the day. Instead of going without breakfast or eating a bowl of sugary cereal, think about eating toast with "natural" peanut butter. This tastes good and is good for you, too. Even leftover pizza would not be a bad choice. Remember, you will not do your best if you are hungry or have low blood sugar.
- ***Get to bed on time.*** Getting to bed on time is a problem for most teenagers. School starts quite early in the morning, and most teens like to stay up late. Try to get yourself into a different sleep schedule a few days before the OGT. For example, if you usually stay in your room listening to music until 11:30 p.m., try turning off your CD player at 11:15 p.m. seven days before the test. Turn it off at 11:00 p.m. on the sixth day and fifth day before the test, 10:45 p.m. on the fourth day and third day before the test, and try to get to sleep not much later than 10:00 p.m. on the days before the OGT. You will be surprised at the difference a couple of hours of extra sleep makes in your performance.
- ***Dress for comfort, not for style, on test day.*** Comfort is a must! Everybody wants to look "cool in school," but the day of the OGT is not the time to wear clothes that are uncomfortable. You want to look sharp and feel good about yourself, but don't wear that itchy sweater, tight pair of pants, or new pair of shoes.

9. Pay Attention to Yourself

When you become “stuck” on a question, are worried about time, or are concerned about how you are doing, it is easy to become curious about how others around you are doing. Looking around the room, thinking about the progress of other students, and letting your mind wander is a waste of your time. It is much more productive to pay attention to yourself than to others.

10. Take a Little Break

While it’s important not to let your mind wander too far off track, it’s OK to take short breaks if necessary. If you feel you are getting tense or worried, or find yourself becoming tired, give yourself a break between test questions. Perhaps you’ve read a long passage and have finished the corresponding questions. It’s OK to sit for a minute before moving on. You may want stretch your arms and legs, think a positive thought, put down your pencil and pick it up again, close your eyes and concentrate, or do something that will reduce your anxiety and make you feel more calm or restful. You may find by moving around in your chair that you will “get your blood flowing again” and increase your concentration and focus on the next questions to come.

11. Control Your Anxiety

Every student feels some degree of anxiety while taking a test. For some students, this anxiety helps them focus and gets them “psyched up” for a test-taking challenge. For other students, anxiety gets in the way of doing their best.

The “Test Anxiety” chapter in this book provides ways of dealing with stress during tests. If you feel that anxiety is a stumbling block on your way to test success, it is important that you read the test anxiety chapter carefully and practice stress-reducing techniques.