SOME HINTS ON TAKING MATH EXAMS

Before the exam

1. Start studying early. Review as you go along. You’ll find that as you look back at earlier work, problems may clear up. Some subjects, especially mathematics, can’t be “crammed”! Study every day or several dedicated blocks of study time rather than in one marathon study session.

2. Review and practice old homework, quizzes, and end-of-chapter review sections in the text.

3. Practice, practice, practice. You are aiming towards fluency and familiarity. If you can do it once, slowly, that’s not enough. Repeat until you can do the problem at an easy, steady pace. Make sure you do some practice without looking back in the book for an example to follow.

4. A repetition of 3: Make sure you conclude each study session by doing at least one problem without looking back in the book for an example.

5. Pick some problems out of the book, and do them with the book closed. This is the only way you can be sure you can perform under exam conditions.

6. Don’t gloss over material that you don’t understand - it will come back to haunt you. Ask your classmates, ask your instructor, ask a tutor.

7. Get good rest and food before the exam - don’t come to an exam exhausted from an all-night cram session, hungry and jumpy from excess caffeine.

During the exam

1. Begin by reading through the exam quickly, picking off easy problems as you go. An easy problem is one you can do right away. Find out as much as you can about the format of the exam from your instructor, so you’ll have a “game plan” going in.

2. SLOW DOWN! Read each problem carefully. If a particular solution method is required make sure you use it. Copy out or translate into algebra any “given” data. Make sure you know what question you must answer, the required form of the answer and for problems with numerical answers, how many decimal places are required.

3. Now start working on harder problems, but don’t let yourself get hung up. If you get stuck, go on to the next problem.

4. Many instructors give partial credit but little weight to routine arithmetic (check this with your instructor). If you are hanging up on computation, go on to the next problem. You may earn more points setting up the next problem than by completing arithmetic.

5. It is better to get 3 points for trying to start a problem than a zero for trying nothing. Don’t leave blank problems!

6. DO NOT ERASE!! Cross out work that you think is incorrect. Allow it to be legible. I have seen cases where students have erased correct work (ouch!). Erasing also takes time that is better spent on problem solutions. Put away those erasers!!

7. Don’t rush. While practicing and studying you should establish a comfortable steady pace at which you can work accurately. Don’t go much faster on the exam; it’ll just lead careless mistakes.

After the exam:

Restudy the exam and use solution sets if provided by your instructor. If no solution sets are available, work through the exam with the instructor, a tutor, or another student until you can do all problems correctly. If possible keep your exam and solutions, if not make notes on the problems and solutions for final exam review. The 3-Step Process (prepare/exam/review) is a big part of learning the subject and is crucial in preparing for courses that give the final exam double weight. Reviewing an exam with your instructor, especially of exams you did poorly on, can help you salvage a passing grade from a difficult class by improving your performance on subsequent exams.