

# TIPS ON TEST TAKING

Richard M. Felder  
North Carolina State University

James E. Stice  
University of Texas at Austin

## I. PREPARATION

- **Study in small groups**
  - Make sure your study group contains only students who are serious about studying. At least some of them should be at your level of ability or better.
  - Go over as many different problems as you can (like old homework problems, unassigned problems in the course text, and problems on old exams). Set up the solutions, but don't crunch numbers. Don't leave a problem until you're convinced you could do it by yourself.
  - Brainstorm possible things you could be asked and answers you might give.
  - Leave the beer in the refrigerator until you're done studying.
- **Make up a one-page summary sheet** of the key ideas, equations, procedures, etc., that you might need to know on the test. If the test is closed-book, know what's on the sheet. If it's open-book, bring the sheet with you.
- **Don't stay up all night studying.** Try to get a reasonable amount of sleep the night before the exam. If that's not possible, try to get a nap before the exam, or at least a short rest.
- **Set up a backup system for your alarm clock.** Set a second alarm, or arrange for a wake-up call from a friend.
- **Arrange for backup transportation to campus.**
- **Bring everything you need to the exam:**
  - textbook/lecture notes if the exam is open book
  - paper and several pencils with erasers
  - calculator with extra batteries
  - allowed handbooks and tables (such as steam tables)
  - allowed class handouts
  - summary sheet (if allowed)

## II. TAKING THE TEST

- **Read over the whole exam before beginning to write anything.**

- **Choose the problem or question that seems easiest to you and do it first.** Continue to do the problems in order of increasing difficulty.
- **STAY IN MOTION!!!** Work on a problem until you get stuck. Think about it for a minute or two, and if nothing comes to you then drop it and go on to another problem. *Don't spend 30 minutes sweating out an additional five points on a problem and run out of time, leaving a 40-point problem untouched.* You may later have time to return to the first one and you're much more likely to think of how to do it then.
- **Show your work.** Give enough detail so that both you and the grader can tell what you're trying to do. *Even if you can do the problem in your head, don't.* If you're wrong, you get a zero; if you're right, you could be suspected of cheating.
- **Watch out for significant figures.** Some instructors don't appreciate answers like 23.694028, even if that's what the calculator says.
- **Think partial credit.** Try to put something down for each part of every problem/question. If you don't have time to solve a problem completely, tell what you'd do if you had more time.
- **Keep your work legible.** If an instructor can't read what you wrote, you aren't likely to get full credit and you may not get any.
- **If you don't understand a question, ask the instructor/proctor for help.** You might get some, and it never hurts to try.
- **Don't panic.** If you feel yourself sweating or hyperventilating, put down your pencil, close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and consciously relax any muscles that you're clenching (jaw, neck, stomach). When you're calmer, go back to work.
- **If you have time at the end, check your solutions.** Did you answer each part of every question? Did you answer the question(s) asked? Do your answers look reasonable? Do your calculations check out? (Save this one for last.)
- **Hand in your paper when time is called.** Nothing makes an instructor/proctor more homicidal than having to wrestle you to the floor to get your paper.