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How to play the test-taking game

By Joan Herman
Of the Emerald

University students A) adore essay exams, B) love multiple-choice tests, C) perform impeccably on problem-solving tests, D) all of the above, E) some of the above or E) none of the above.

Although most students have difficulty with tests, the above question is easy to answer. None of the above. They universally despise tests, probably because they often don't perform well on them.

Yet getting an "A" is not just dependent on how well a student knows the answers to test questions. Success on tests means knowing the game of test-taking, according to Dave Hubin, director of the learning resources center.

One of the biggest problems students have with tests is knowing how to study for them, he says. Many students put a lot of energy into tasks that get mental wheels spinning, memorizing names, dates, and places — without understanding the significance of those facts.

Even good students sometimes do not work out an analytical approach to test taking, which Hubin says is one of the first steps towards success.

"They don't think about what ideas are subordinate to what, what is being stressed in the course, what are the important themes," he says.

"Instead, they'll treat each idea as being relatively even in importance and think, 'I've got 200 ideas to know,' instead of thinking 'I've got five general themes that are illustrated by subordinate detail."

Students may view studying as a game of roulette, hoping they'll review just what the professor asks on a test, but Hubin says students should realize professors organize courses and write tests around themes.

If students are attentive in class and review their notes, they will see emphasis put on several major ideas repeated throughout the course.

Most students Hubin advises have more problems taking essay exams than objective tests with multiple-choice or problem-solving questions.

"I think there's a feeling among students that there's more latitude to go wrong (on essay exams), and there's more possibility of being absolutely shot out of the water," he says.

"A problem encountered by people who are not experienced in writing essay exams is that they have all this material in their heads, and it just comes spewing out. Focus is incredibly important. Take five minutes to direct your ideas on a track."

Test essays don't need the elegance of a term essay. In fact, spending time striving for elegance can be counterproductive. A good essay exam starts immediately on topic, often with some interesting generalizations, and then supports those generalizations in specific ways, usually with direct evidence from the text, Stevenson says.

Graphic by Shawn Bird

"With a multiple-choice question, there are only five options, and a computer doesn't say 'you idiot,' but a professor can tell if a student has not even read the text."

After the first paragraph or two of a student's essay answer, English professor Richard Stevenson says he can tell if a student has adequately read the text.

"You can write a very good essay in limited time, but in order to do that, you have to be extremely selective about what's significant," he says. "You need to zero in on the topic and use that as your selector, ruling out extraneous material that may be fascinating but irrelevant.

"When I read an essay exam that begins, elegantly or not, with an overview of Western civilization, I know that the student is in trouble, because there's no time for an overview of Western civilization and besides, that's not what I'm going to be looking for."

In a compare-and-contrast question, Hubin says professors want students to analyze differences and similarities of two ideas simultaneously, not compare one and then the other, as with an outline.

Although students generally find essay exams more difficult, objective tests pose unique problems for students because multiple-choice questions tend to test only surface knowledge of a subject.

Biology professor Michael Menaker says the more a student knows about a subject, the more frustrating multiple-choice questions can be, because they are oversimplified.

"If you know a great deal about a subject," Menaker says, "you know why all the answers are wrong."

Yet in a class of 275 students, Menaker says professors have no choice but to give objective tests. Although multiple-choice questions do test factual knowledge, Menaker says this level of comprehension is not the most important one, and it's possible for a student to get an "A" in a course without really understanding "the meat of it."

For study techniques, Menaker suggests students devise questions for themselves, placing emphasis on not just knowing facts but understanding their relationships to one another.

When students are taking a multiple-choice exam, Hubin suggests they read the stem of the question, paying close attention to negations or pivotal phrases like "In every case."

Another common test, especially in math, accounting and statistics classes is the problem-solving exam.

Occassionally students ma "blank out" on a test, even though they may have known and understood the material before they sat down. Don't panic, Hubin says.

"When you start to awfulize, you'll never come up with the answer," he says. "Once you start to feel anxious, the hardest thing to do but the best thing to do is put your pencil down, stop for a moment, take a deep breath and say 'I've studied this.'"

Photo by Bob Baker

Assistant law school dean Peggy Nagae is helping overturn a World War II conviction of a Japanese American who violated curfew more than 40 years ago.

Law dean to help Japanese

By Frank Shaw
Of the Emerald

A University law school assistant dean is one of the attorneys involved in an attempt to clear a Japanese American convicted of curfew violation during World War II.

Peggy Nagae, assistant dean of academic affairs at the law school, is one of the attorneys representing Minoru Yasui, a law school graduate.

Yasui was one of the Japanese Americans convicted of violating curfews and refusing to report to assembly areas during World War II.

Yasui graduated from the University law school in 1939 and was Oregon's first Japanese-American lawyer. He was a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserves and a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

On March 28, 1942, Yasui walked through the streets of downtown Portland, twice telephoning the FBI that a Japanese was wandering after hours in violation of an order issued by the Western Defense Command.

He eventually walked into the central police station and requested his own arrest.

Yasui deliberately defied the order to test its constitutionality.

U.S. Attorney Carl Donaugh then issued an order charging Yasui with violating a curfew based on Public Law 503, passed by Congress the week before.

That charge set off a series of legal contests in which Yasui contended that as an American citizen he was not subject to the curfew.

The final outcome was a U.S. Supreme Court decison that allowed the United States to detain or evacuate a portion of the population as a matter of military necessity.

Yasui served nine months in solitary confinement in a Multnomah County Jail.

A writ of error corum nobis, which attempts to nullify a conviction due to an error during the trial, was filed in the Federal District Court in San Francisco on behalf of Fred Korematsu earlier this year. A similar writ on behalf of Yasui will be filed in Portland on Feb. 1.

Some documents, disclosed recently under the Freedom of Information Act, cite newly discovered evidence that shows high government offcials and lawyers suppressed, altered and destroyed key evidence to influence the case's verdict.

Nagae streses the petition is not an appeal and does not request monetary damages. Instead, the remedy requested is a reversal of his criminal conviction.