

Study & Test Preparation:

A Teacher's Guide

This reference guide presents valuable information to help classroom teachers better prepare students for taking all types of tests, especially the growing trend of high stakes assessments. Additionally, it provides strategies in three critical areas of test preparation which: (1) improve study skills, (2) enhance test-taking skills, and (3) reduce test-related anxiety.

High Stakes Tests

High stakes tests measure progress (achievement or ability) against national standards or norms. These types of tests are utilised for accountability purposes as a means of looking at funding, educational policy and individual school practices. In Australia, high stakes testing is growing, having begun in 2008 with the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test, which is used every year to assess year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students. NAPLAN is being used as a means to compare the performance of students, schools and regions. Therefore, the need for effective and proactive test preparation strategies is becoming critically important to students, teachers and parents.

Teaching to the Test

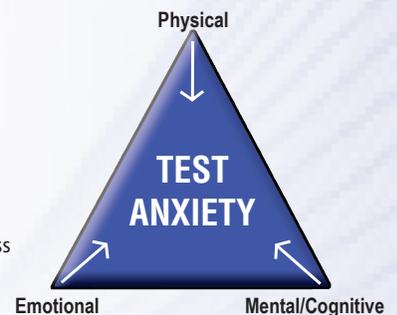
Although the goal of instruction is to help students prepare for examinations, that does not mean that classrooms should be turned into test-prep centres where students are constantly taking practice tests and are incessantly drilled on exam questions. In fact, such an approach can actually be counterproductive by making learning a painful process and increasing anxiety about the importance of testing. Teaching to the test, in the best sense, prepares students in a meaningful way by ensuring that the curriculum and instruction are appropriately aligned with the standards that will be assessed on the test. It also provides strategies, skills and techniques to help students study and effectively handle the test-taking experience.

The Role of Test Anxiety

Physical Component – Response to stress manifests itself through the body's increases in temperature, breathing and heart rate, or other symptoms such as muscular and abdominal discomfort, light-headedness and/or other physical complaints.

Emotional Component – Changes in mood, increases in emotional reactions (such as crying), feelings of loss of control and/or panic attacks.

Mental/Cognitive Component – Symptoms of forgetfulness and memory loss, loss of concentration and focus, as well as irrational thinking which can interfere with the ability to process and recall previously learned material.



The Four Keys to Test Performance

Key #1

Mastery of Content – Students cannot pass tests if they have not learned the necessary content. The more effective and skilled teachers are at “teaching”, the more successful students will be at “learning”. Increasing the understanding of academic content is the first step in the process of improving test performance. Differentiate instruction, build on the Multiple Intelligences and multiple pathways to learning, and employ a wide range of instructional strategies to increase understanding and engagement.

Key #3

Useful Test-Taking Strategies – Teachers need to provide students with skills to manage the test-taking process itself (e.g., helping students understand the different types of questions they will encounter, providing strategies to assist answering multiple choice questions, organising and outlining essay questions, etc.). Skills of time management and how to best select answers when students need to guess should also be taught.

Key #2

Effective Study Skills & Habits – Mastering content knowledge alone is not sufficient for achieving high test scores if students have difficulty recalling the material learned. Students must not only learn to understand the content, but they must also learn strategies to help them study and remember the content. Students also need to learn effective habits that address issues like when, where and how to study.

Key #4

Techniques for Regulating Emotions – One of the most ignored, yet most important keys to success is regulating emotions during test-taking. Test anxiety can significantly interfere with the ability to retrieve and recall information. What good is it if students master the content, study hard, but become so anxious and confused that they are literally immobilised during the test-taking situation? Teach stress-reducing strategies and techniques to reduce test-related anxiety as an integral part of test preparation.