

Taking an in-class exam in science:

1. First thing, put your name on the test and take a deep breath.
2. State of mind: If you are not coming into the exam reasonably *confident* that you can deal with almost any question in the area at hand, then your preparation is not yet where it should be. Learn from this, and make adjustments (see study suggestions) before the next exam.
3. Whether you are a person who likes to start right in or you prefer to do a skim read over the questions first, some questions will inevitably jump out at you - because you know the answer. Because there is no compelling reason for answering test questions in numerical order, *answer the ones you know first*, for three reasons: 1) You can do these quickly and get them out of the way, 2) You gain significant confidence and peace of mind just by this early positive experience, and 3) this leaves you the bulk of your time to wrestle with the questions of which you are less sure.
4. Read each question carefully and *underline* or *circle* key words. This helps to focus and engage your brain around this concept. While doing this, ask yourself, "What is required to fully answer this question?"
5. Be sure that you identify *all parts* of the question that require an answer. So often, in the heat of the moment, students read a question like, "Identify this, and explain what it does," and they forget to explain the function.
6. If you are really uncertain what the question is asking of you, ask the proctor. It will cost you a few seconds of time, and the person might say, "The question is perfectly clear, so go back to your seat," - but then you're no worse off. On the other hand, maybe the proctor will say, "this is all about energy usage," and the light bulb in your head will suddenly turn on! An un-named Goucher student once walked away from a 30 point question on the final exam in Bio 105 because they couldn't bring themselves to ask the meaning of the term *integument*. It means *skin*, and I would have happily revealed that information. True story – it cost them a letter grade in the course!
7. For questions that are long and complicated (especially if a well constructed essay is requested) make a small outline of the concepts you want to put into your answer at the side of the page. Then as you write, you will have some organized thinking to work from.
8. Of course, try to keep the "*bull*" to a minimum, except where applicable. In this vein, try to avoid just vomiting out everything you know related to this subject. You will seriously irritate your teacher if they have to read endless paragraphs of marginally relevant material just to see that you know the answer is, "microtubules!"



9. When you face a question to which your brain responds, “**no clue!**,” (and we have *all* been there), start by writing down anything relevant you can think of that might be close. This has two important benefits: 1) It gets at least something down, and even if way off, it might garner a few partial credit points, but 2) Sometimes this process of *talking around the crux of the issue* is enough to stimulate your memory and help you regain an idea that had previously flown out of your mind. Think of the times we have looked back on a poor test experience and said, “Ackkk! I knew that!” This process sometimes helps you get it out of your head and down on paper.
10. **Never, ever, even consider** committing the worst of all possible exam sins - **Leaving the answer blank**. It should be forever obvious that *no partial credit* can be given for a *blank* answer. Almost all teachers are hopeful, even eager, to give at least some partial credit points. Any guess, or sketch, or even a Limerick is better than a blank (if you can’t be informative, at least be entertaining!). But whatever else you do, never leave the space blank!!!!
11. Do pay attention to the clock. You must budget your time so that you can get *something* down for every question. As mentioned above, I recommend doing the ones you know fast, and then taking more time over the others. Another recommended way to handle this is budgeting your time based on the point value of the question. For example: In a 50 minute test period, and a 100 point exam, give a 30 point question 15 minutes, a ten point question 5 minutes, etc. It is critical to pay attention to this so you are not caught by surprise with 1/3 to go and hear, “Time’s up!”
12. Time permitting, re-read the questions and review all answers before you turn in your test. This is not about changing answers necessarily; it’s mostly about double checking for completeness and accuracy. *Many* points are lost simply for failure to do this.
13. Every test, regardless of the outcome, can and should be turned into a learning experience. Do take the time to track down and fully understand the correct answers to the questions you got wrong - as soon as possible after the test is returned. Beyond the fact that you are presumably interested in the material for its own sake, two good reasons to do this are: 1) Sometimes teachers will re-ask the identical question to see who was interested enough to do this, or to convince themselves that they finally got the point across, and 2) There is a high probability that you may encounter this material again on a comprehensive final exam (expected in virtually all science classes).
14. There is obviously a certain amount of stress associated with examinations, but the experience (when it’s going well) can be very rewarding, or even fun, and provide a great sense of validation of all that hard work! This is where we want you to be.