Integrating History/Social Science Content
With Successful Test Taking Strategies

During the School Year:
Don't wait until the week before the test to begin preparing students! Knowledge of test-taking strategies doesn't replace knowledge of content, but can help students learn how to use the test to demonstrate what they really know. The following tips provide general suggestions on how to approach a test and maximize students ability to demonstrate their content learning.

• Master the history/social science content identified in the California History/Social Science Content Standards. Unpacking the standards will help you identify the "enduring understandings" and achievement targets needed to help students learn and retain knowledge over long periods of time. Memorizing lists of discrete facts out of context does not help students make meaning of content or remember information over long periods of time. Teach for "understanding."

• Practice using testing vocabulary. Help students understand particular meanings of words that frequently occur in standardized tests (e.g. affect, analyze, contribute, evaluate, infer). Embed these words into class work, homework assignments, and assessments.

• Practice taking other multiple choice tests. Provide opportunities for students to practice taking multiple choice tests with time limits. Learning how to effectively use time is an important test-taking skill, even if tests are theoretically, untimed.

• Build stamina for long testing sessions. Brainstorm appropriate ways for students to take short breaks during a timed session (e.g. deep breathing, stretching).
• **Learn to skim materials.** Train students to run their eyes quickly over texts, look at headings, graphic features, and highlighted words. Focus on key words and phrases.

• **Learn to analyze test questions.** Test questions are often difficult to understand because language and/or formats are unfamiliar or uncommon. This is often a challenge for English Learners. Help students learn to paraphrase a question or identify the type of information asked for in each question.

• **Practice reading and interpreting visual representations of information.** Visuals may be present in the standards test. Help students become familiar with using and interpreting charts, graphs, maps, political cartoons, and graphic organizers.

• **Discuss testing experiences immediately after each test.** Engage students in dialogue about the types of strategies they used to respond to test questions. Encourage students to share and experiment with different test taking strategies. Emphasize that everyone misses some questions so that students are not discouraged. Help students learn from their mistakes.
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Several Weeks Before the Test
As the testing date approaches, you can continue to prepare students in a number of ways that will help them be successful test takers.

• Discuss the importance of the test. Many students do not take the test seriously because they don't recognize the significance of the accountability systems that are now being put in place. Help students understand that the test:
  • Provides an opportunity to demonstrate their learning and is a reflection of their ability to master important history/social science understandings. Individual scores may effect course placement, grade level advancement, and/or college placement.
  • Provides important information to their teacher, their school, and their school district about the teaching and learning of history/social science. Assessment data is a powerful tool for designing effective instruction in standards-based programs.
  • Affects the overall evaluation of their school and school district. Test scores often effect funding, school reputation, contributions, support services, and staffing positions.

• Review the "big ideas." It is impossible to review three years of history/social science content learning in a short period of time. Review the "big ideas" (e.g. enduring understandings, themes) that are present in the grade 6-8 standards. If students can recall these "understandings" they are more likely to recall discrete pieces of information as they are called upon in multiple choice test items.

• Practice multiple-choice test taking strategies. There are a number of strategies that are effective in helping students successfully answer multiple choice test questions.
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The Day of the Test
There are a number of research-based tips to improve student performance on testing days. Encourage students to:

• **Drink water.**
• **Eat balanced, nutritious meals.**
• **Exercise** (2 minutes before testing).
• **Keep the lights on** (do not dim lights).
• **Practice relaxation techniques.**
• **Be positive!**
• **Try your best!**
Ten Multiple-choice Test Taking Strategies

1. **Read the directions carefully.** There may be slight differences among similar directions that could impact responses.

2. **Skim the entire question and answers.** Look for key vocabulary, graphic features, and highlighted words.

3. **Re-read the question (i.e. stem) carefully before re-reading the alternative answers.** Focus on key vocabulary and summarize the intent of the question and thinking skill required before considering alternative answers.
   a) **Compare and Contrast:** Look for key words such as *according to, classify, correspond, define, describe, determine, explain, generalize, identify, indicate, relate.*
      • Look for similarities and differences when asked to compare or contrast alternative answers and stems.
   b) **Cause and Effect:** Look for key words such as *affected, analyze, contributed to, depended upon, determined, impacted, inferred, resulted in.*
      Cause and effect questions often require the ability to use common sense and the ability to make inferences.
      • Try to think of events chronologically for these types of questions.
      • Determine the answer to cause and effect questions before looking at the alternative answers.
   c) **Interpreting documents, political cartoons, time lines, charts, maps, and graphs.**
      • Be familiar with elements of the documents or visuals (i.e. quotes, titles, column headings, legends, keys).
      • All information needed to answer the question is usually included in the document or visual provided.
      • Dates and symbols provide valuable clues about the historical context of the question.
• Alternative answers that are not supported by the information provided can be eliminated.

4. **Anticipate the answer.** After reading the stem, anticipate the correct response *before* considering the alternatives.

5. **Consider all alternatives before making a choice.**

6. **Use the Process of Elimination Technique:**
   - Eliminate any answers that you *know* are wrong.
   - Look for two choices that appear to represent the same idea. Both must be wrong.
   - Read the stem and each answer as a sentence. Does this sentence make grammatical and logical sense? Eliminate alternatives that do not "read" logically or are not grammatically correct. Watch for the use of *a* and *an* and the use of singular and plural verbs and nouns.
   - Answers that are "over qualified" are often incorrect. Watch for words like *always, never, none, all, and only.*

7. **Strongly consider an alternative answer to be correct, if…**
   - One choice is much longer and more detailed than the others.
   - A word in a choice also appears in the question.
   - One choice includes one or more of the other choices.
   - The word *some or often* is used in a choice.
   - One choice is more precise or technical.
   - BUT, do not rely on these points for answers, as well-designed tests usually avoid these tendencies.

8. **Ration your time during the test.** Answering all the questions will increase your chances for a better score. Pay attention to the time, and work to maintain an appropriate pace. Calculate in advance the number of questions to be answered by the halfway mark. Keep in mind, however, that some question
formats may take longer than others. If a test is untimed, it is still important not to get "bogged down" on individual items. You can come back to them later.

9. **Pay special attention when using a separate answer sheet.** Experiment with the following techniques to prevent mistakes when transferring answers to separate answer sheets or forms.

- Use a guide or ruler on the answer sheet to keep from marking answers on the wrong line.
- Check every five answers to make sure the appropriate line is filled in for each answer.
- Fill in blanks carefully and neatly.
- Erase any stray pencil marks.
- Fold the test booklet, revealing only one page at a time.

10. **As a last resort…trust your instincts.** It is better to make an educated guess than to leave an answer blank. Your first instinct is often correct.
Resources


