

How to Write Tests

Lightly adapted from François Pitt's CSC165 Syllabus

Read the questions! If you answer the wrong question, even if it's because you were nervous and you misread it, there is nothing that we can do. If something is unclear, *please ask*.

Manage your time! Be disciplined. Leave most of your time free for solving problems. In particular, it's fine to give point-form answers with the key elements, instead of spending time writing long, complete sentences.

Be precise! For this course in particular, it is very important to use the correct terms and notation. Say what you mean carefully and precisely.

Show what you know! Your strategy during the test should be:

- Identify the questions that you know how to answer (this means that you must read EVERY question **before** you start answering any of them).
- Answer those questions right away.
- Go back to the questions you're not sure about, and work on them.
- If you get stuck on a question, to move on to the next one and come back later (don't waste your time) — you can figure out ahead of time how much time to devote to each question (based on how much it's worth), and stick to that estimate as much as possible.

If you have an idea how to solve a question but no time to do it in detail, then of course you should write down your idea. You will get part marks for any question where you have the correct structure (i.e., clearly showing that you know what you are supposed to do), even if you cannot fill in the details. So, it always pays off to take a minute to write down a correct outline for your answer — it's worth marks, even if you are unable to do more.

Explain what you're doing! When you give an answer, make sure that you give at least a short statement of what you're doing before giving us the answer: if your answer is incorrect, this can make the difference between getting NO mark (because we can't tell if you understand what you're doing) or getting part marks (if we see that you have the right idea but simply made a small error, or that you have the wrong idea but wrote it up correctly).

Don't ramble! Write concise, to-the-point answers. Also, be aware that if you give us a correct answer followed by explanations that are clearly wrong or irrelevant, you will lose marks!

On the other hand, if you start writing down an answer and you realize that it's wrong, SAY SO! You'll get more part marks for showing that you understand your mistake, even if you're not sure how to fix it, than if you simply leave it like that (which gives the impression that you don't even realize that what you did was wrong).

A related tip from a student: trying to “force yourself to be calm” may not work well, or may even backfire, because you’re trying to suppress your body’s natural response to stress. Instead, trick your brain into thinking that what you’re feeling is not stress — it’s excitement! The two feelings are similar enough, you can think of it as looking forward to the challenge — the way a trained athlete is primed for a competition and turning their nervousness into positive stress.