



In-test Reference Sheets: What's the Score?

by Michael Griffith, TFS Partner Author

I encourage my students to come for certain tests with a self-made reference sheet in hand. This surprises and delights them when I inform them of this a few class sessions before the test is to be given.

This practice has surprised some of my colleagues. They expressed their concerns to me, but were quite satisfied upon hearing my reasons for encouraging students to bring a memory aid for specific tests.



Rationale

Why allow students to have a reference sheet while being tested? First, in order to prepare the reference sheet, they must carefully consider what information is important and distill it to an abbreviated, compact form.

I have found that students will actually study more not less when a reference sheet is allowed. Their individual approaches to creating a reference reflect their unique understanding of the material. In addition, they may compose test aids individually or in groups.

Students also may work together to identify concepts or pieces of information they think will be covered on the test. I've observed that even when students work together to construct test aids, their responses to test questions are different.

And, as Toni Brem notes, “Gone is the perception that some students have an advantage of some type [when taking tests]: all students have the same opportunities. All students are satisfied because the [reference] option is available to them.”

Rules

I establish strict rules that apply to the construction of the reference sheets. For my classes, it works best when students create one sheet to be no more than 8½ by 11 inches in size and that students only write on one side of the paper. The documents must be hand-written, no computer-printed sheets with a 4-point condensed font used as the typeface.

In addition to the aid, students are allowed to bring pens or pencils. Notebooks and textbooks are not allowed. Of course, you may find other rules more appropriate to your situation.

One more thing, students are not allowed to talk to each other or compare test aids once the test has started. For security and fairness, I check the reference sheets before the test begins to ensure they conform to the rules. While not always appropriate, the use of in-test reference sheets do promote study and detailed reviews, lower test anxiety, and enhance learning and retention.