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Learning Objectives

- Identify strategies for learning from mistakes and from doing poorly on tests or exams

Two of the most important messages that students hear from teachers is “Don’t be afraid to fail” and “Learn from your mistakes—yours, mine, and ours.” The following TedEd talk explores these familiar ideas. The speaker, Diana Laufenberg, makes the case for why learning through experience, feeling empowered, and embracing failure are all so important to students—so much more so than just going to school to get information.



[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

You can view the [transcript for “Diana Laufenberg: How to learn? From mistakes” here \(opens in new window\)](#).

The idea of “learning from one’s mistakes” seems straightforward enough . . . but how does one actually do it? After all, who isn’t disappointed to get a low grade on anything—a test, a quiz, a paper, a project? We all want to do well. Consider the following college students evaluating their own performance:

I recently took a general biology exam and I was so certain that I got all questions right—that I got a 100 percent on the exam. Then I found out this morning that I got a 94 percent! And what annoys me more than the grade is the fact that my mistakes were dumb. Why did I make dumb mistakes? The tests are timed and I don’t have much time to check my answers.^[1]

I'm so mad at myself. I've tried everything, I come back to look at the answer after I've completed the rest of the test. I go over the answers carefully. It seems as though no matter what I do I can't catch my mistakes. I just did it on an accounting test. I missed one question because I didn't notice the answer was "All of the above." I have the same problem in another class.

At times we can be hard on ourselves, especially if we feel we could have done better. Learning from mistakes takes practice and reinforcement. As Diana Laufenberg pointed out in her Ted Talk, mistakes can be one of the most important events that happen in a classroom, because they tell you where you need to focus next.^[2]

After you get over the disappointment of making a mistake in the first place, the next step is to home in on why you made it. That's the learning opportunity. Below are some tips for following up on—and addressing—a range of errors that students commonly make on exams and other assessments.

Tips for Test Follow-up^[3]

TEST-TAKING ERROR	WHERE TO FOCUS NEXT
I didn't read the directions correctly.	Read all directions slowly and carefully. Underline or highlight key words so that you affirm your clear understanding.
I didn't read the question properly.	Sometimes the brain sees what it wants to see rather than what is actually written or presented. This can happen if you didn't study the right material or if you wanted to answer a question that isn't quite the question you are being asked. If you are in a high-pressure situation, mistakes can be all the more an issue. Read each question thoroughly, then read it again. Underline or highlight key words.
I was careless.	Watch carefully for simple mistakes as you work each problem. Save time to review each problem step-by-step. Check again before you submit.
I just didn't understand.	Go back to your study materials, textbook, or media and learn why you missed the problems. Talk with your instructor.
I knew the concept but I didn't apply it properly to the problem.	When you are studying, practice predicting the type of problems that will be on the test. Ask in advance.
I messed up on the last part of the test. This	If you find that you consistently miss more

seems to be a recurring problem.	questions in a certain part of a test, use your remaining test time to review that part of the test first.
I didn't complete the full problem.	When you review your test before turning it in, review the last step of a problem first. When the last steps are checked, then you can do a review of the full test.
I changed a few test answers from the correct ones to incorrect ones.	If you find this happening regularly, try not to second-guess yourself. You can write on your test "Don't change answers." Only change answers if you have double-checked and if you can prove to yourself that the changed answer is correct.
I got stuck on one problem and spent too much time on it.	Set a time limit for each problem before moving to the next one.
I have a tendency to rush through the easiest part of the test, and then I make silly errors.	After finishing the test, review the easy problems first, then review the harder problems. But do try to answer the easiest questions first; this way you get good points right off the bat, which can also increase your confidence. Answer trickier questions after the easier ones.
I had the correct answer on my scratch sheet but I copied it wrong onto the test.	Systematically compare your last problem step on scratch paper with the answer on the test. Place your scratch paper on top of the test paper, not off to the side.
I left some answers blank.	It usually pays to write something rather than nothing. Insert minimal information or the first step, etc.
I studied the wrong type of material.	Participating in a study group can help keep individuals on the right track. Start studying well in advance of an exam. Give yourself time to discover and focus.
I left the exam room a bit early.	You may be tempted to leave the exam room as soon as you believe you are truly done, but force yourself to take a little more time to review your work. You may find areas that could use tweaking, perhaps even spelling or grammar errors. Patience pays off.
I was tired.	Your body chemistry can help or hinder you during a test. Get a good night's rest the night before an exam. Eat a solid breakfast in the morning. Avoid sugary items because they can cause your blood sugar to drop and make you sleepy or foggy brained. Some students meditate beforehand to clear and focus the mind and affirm an intention to do well.
I feel deflated by my grade.	You can learn from any mistakes and do better

	next time. Study more, review mistakes, and be sure to congratulate yourself for getting through the exam. Identify one fun thing you are proud of and happy about.
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Reflection and Further Study

For some additional guidance on what to do in the event of failure and how to proceed with your studies, watch Dr. Stephen Chew's video *I Blew The Exam—Now What?*



[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

You can view the [transcript for “How to Get the Most Out of Studying: Part 5 of 5, ‘I Blew the Exam, Now What?’” here \(opens in new window\).](#)

Chew emphasizes the following points:

What not to do:

- Don't panic
- Don't go into denial

What to do:

- Do examine how you prepared; be honest with yourself
- Do review the exam; compare errors with notes taken
- Do talk with your professor
- Do examine your study habits
- Do develop a plan

Helpful strategies to raise your grade:

- Commit time and effort
- Minimize distractions
- Attend class
- Set realistic goals
- Don't begin to slide
- Don't give away points

Don't be the student who . . .

- Keeps studying the same way, hoping to improve
- Waits until the end of the term to ask for help
- Skips class to focus on other classes
- Falls further behind waiting to find time to catch up
- Crams at the last minute
- Doesn't do assignments because they are small or late
- Panics and gives up

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1. "How to Avoid Making Stupid Mistakes on Exams?" *Student Doctor Network*. Web. 26 Apr. 2016. [__](#)
 2. "Teaching Students to Embrace Mistakes." *Edutopia*. 2014. Web. 26 Apr. 2016. [__](#)
 3. "10 Exam Mistakes That Lose Easy Marks and How to Avoid Them." *Oxford Summer School 2016 with Oxford Royale Academy*. 2014. Web. 26 Apr. 2016. [__](#)

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