

Reducing Test Anxiety



- **Recognizing Test Anxiety**
- **How to Cope**
- **What You Need to Succeed**

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Introduction

So you want to become a teacher, a school counselor or psychologist, a paraprofessional, or even add a field to your teaching certificate. You have discovered that in order to get a certificate or be hired in Georgia, you'll have to take a GACE® assessment. You start asking people about their experiences. Are the tests really hard? How should I prepare? What if I'm so nervous I forget everything!

This guide provides practical help for people who suffer from test anxiety. Designed specifically for GACE test takers, but useful to anyone who has to take tests, this guide reviews the major causes of test anxiety and offers practical advice for how to counter each one. Recognizing the symptoms of test anxiety is the first critical step, and this guide helps you evaluate your own warning signs. From how to organize your study schedule to how to tune out distractions at the test center, these strategies will help you in your efforts to get the score you deserve!

It's perfectly normal to feel anxious about taking a test. But there are a few things you should know up front.

Don't Believe the Rumors You Hear

Whether or not you've heard that the assessments are easy or hard, one thing is certain: You must learn for yourself what the assessment you need to take covers; then you can decide how well you know this content and thus how much studying and review you will need to do before taking the assessment. This guide is designed to dispel some of the myths about taking the assessments and to help you find the correct information you need.

Don't Waste Time on "Beat the Test" Strategies

There are a number of generic test-prep books and classes out there that advertise "short-cuts" for studying, such as methods for finding the answers to selected-response questions or "secrets" for fooling essay raters into giving you a high score. But the truth is, you can't trick your way to a high score. The best use of your study time is to make sure you know what is covered on the assessment and to review topics you don't know very well. Spending valuable time during testing trying to uncover the answer through other means will just waste time — and it won't get you to the correct answer. Believe it or not, the question writers always aim to be as clear and as direct as possible, and they don't use tricks to hide the answers from you.

Three Things You Need To Succeed

The best way to maximize your performance on your GACE assessment is to make sure you do three things:

- Prepare
- Stay organized
- Practice

Preparation

Your preparation for the assessment should include learning what the assessment covers and studying areas you don't know very well. It should also include using strategies for reducing test anxiety as part of your studying.

Organization

Staying organized includes creating a clear, targeted study plan for the weeks leading up to the assessment and sticking to that study plan.

Practice

Practice should include things such as getting accustomed to sitting for a period of time, answering practice questions, and pacing yourself; the more you practice these activities, the more comfortable you will feel when you actually sit down to take the assessment.

Most of what you'll read in this guide will sound, on some level, like common sense. But if you are like most people, you know what you should do to fight test anxiety — you just can't seem to actually do those things. So, while you might think, "I've heard it all before," it still might be very helpful to read this guide carefully.

Keeping the issue of test anxiety in the forefront of your mind is part of tackling that anxiety. Test anxiety isn't something you can take care of the night before the test with a good night's sleep and a nice dinner, or with a nutritious breakfast on the morning of the test day (though that can certainly help). It's something you need to incorporate into the earliest part of your study plan, so that the techniques for dealing with test anxiety have become second nature to you by the time you actually take the test.

How Do You Know Whether You Have Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety can affect you both mentally and physically. Here are some signs that may indicate you have test anxiety:

Mental Signs of Test Anxiety

- mental blank-out
- racing thoughts
- difficulty concentrating
- negative thoughts about:
 - past performance
 - consequences of failure
 - how everyone else is doing
- knowing the answers after the test, but not while taking it

Physical Signs of Test Anxiety

Test anxiety can manifest itself physically, just like other forms of stress and anxiety. Some of the symptoms you may experience are:

- nausea
- cramps
- faintness
- sweating
- headache
- dry mouth
- increased breathing rate
- fast heartbeat
- tense muscles

A tiny amount of anxiety isn't bad — it's actually helpful to be “up” when preparing for and taking a test — but if you are showing some of these symptoms, your level of stress may be too high. It may be at a level that can hurt your preparation and your performance.

How Can You Cope With Test Anxiety?

Causes and Cures

You can tame test anxiety by dealing with the causes. There are things you can do before the test, during the test, and after the test. The following are some main causes for test anxiety. These are things you may have a good reason to be concerned about.

CAUSE ⇒	You are unfamiliar with the test.
CURE ⇒	Learn about the test.

It sounds obvious enough, but a lot of people who have test anxiety deal with it by avoidance. They hope that if they avoid confronting the thing that is worrying them, it will go away. Of course, it doesn't go away, so the first thing you can do to deal with your anxiety is to make sure you know the basic facts about the test.

Free GACE Study Companions are available for download in the “Test Preparation Resources” section of the GACE website at www.gace.ets.org/prepare. Each study companion contains all of the basic information you need to know about the assessment:

- Assessment name, grade level, and test code
- Brief description of the assessment
- Number of tests within the assessment
- Number of questions in each test

- Content specifications for all tests in the assessment
- The format of the questions (for example, selected-response or constructed-response)
- How much time you have to take the test
- Sample questions with answers and rationales
- Additional study resources

The first time you read the study companions, don't worry about answering the practice questions. Simply browse through them to get a feel for what they look like. Note the length of the questions and the variety of topics they cover. If you are unfamiliar with some of the topics covered in the practice questions, keep in mind that the test will cover a much broader range of topics, including those that are probably more familiar to you. These practice questions are designed to familiarize you with the types of questions you will see on the test. Read each question carefully to make sure you understand what is being asked.

CAUSE ⇒	You feel you haven't mastered the subject being tested.
CURE ⇒	Make an organized study schedule and stick to it.

Each test in an assessment is organized into content subareas. Each subarea is further defined by a set of objectives and their knowledge statements. If you look at the content specifications for your test and start to worry that you haven't mastered this material, first take a deep breath and remember that worrying really doesn't help. Keep in mind that you are not expected to answer every question correctly to pass the test. Every test taker has a unique educational background and a more thorough knowledge of some topics than others.

If you feel you need to review some of the subareas covered on the test, you should create an organized study schedule and stick to it. Stay organized by creating a study plan that outlines what you're going to work on, where you're going to find helpful resources, and when you're going to undertake each step. As you review the content subareas and improve your mastery of them, you should use the various resources that are available to you: textbooks and notes from your courses, and perhaps knowledgeable people you can talk to, such as professors. Make sure your study schedule sets manageable tasks for you to accomplish within a reasonable period of time.

Remember that studying means more than just highlighting words in a textbook. For the test, you should have a good understanding of the important terms and concepts as described in the test objectives and knowledge statements. You should be able to define them in your own words and be able to explain why they are important. Look for ideas that are similar and ask yourself whether you can explain the differences. When you have accomplished each study task you have planned, cross it off your schedule so you experience a sense of accomplishment.

If you feel you are unfamiliar with most or all of the subareas covered on the test, you should consider whether you are ready to take the test. If possible, delay your testing date until you have had more time for review. Rushing into taking the test will not help you succeed. You may also need to consider whether you have received enough training in your field for you to succeed on the test. Have you taken the necessary courses? Did you retain most of the knowledge you gained in those courses? If you're not sure whether you are ready to take the test, seek out advice from an advisor or a professor at your college or university.

Try very hard to stick to your study schedule. If you find you are procrastinating, that can be a sign of negative thoughts, one of the important causes of test anxiety.

CAUSE ⇒	You have negative thoughts.
CURE ⇒	Counter them with positive thoughts and actions.

Negative thoughts can throw you off your study schedule, and they can also distract you or make you freeze up during the test. Do you ever find yourself troubled with thoughts like these?

- I always do poorly on tests.
- I'm going to flunk this test.
- I won't be able to keep my job.

The time to deal with negative thoughts is now, before the test. Take out a piece of paper and write your negative thoughts in a column. Then, for each one, write a positive thought that argues against it. Here are some examples:

NEGATIVE THOUGHT	POSITIVE THOUGHT
I always do poorly on tests.	I've got a better study plan for this test than I ever had before.
If I don't pass this test, I'm a failure.	I'm going to pass, but if I don't, I can bounce back.
The test is going to have trick questions.	The test is designed to let me show what I know, and I know all the formats of the questions.

Save this list (and add to it when necessary). Whenever you find those negative thoughts coming back, remind yourself of all the positive things you have going for you.

One particular kind of negative thinking that affects many people is perfectionism. Do you find yourself procrastinating when you should be studying for the test? It may be that you've set an unrealistic goal for yourself. It may also be that you are waiting until the last minute to study so that you can give yourself an excuse for not doing well. Here are some examples of perfectionist thoughts and the realistic thoughts that argue against them:

PERFECTIONIST THOUGHT	REALISTIC THOUGHT
There's an impossible amount of things to learn for this test!	I don't need to know the answer to every question; I just need to pass.
My knowledge of one of the topics is really shaky.	I don't need to know everything about every topic. Also, if I start now, I can learn more about the topics in which I know I'm weak.

Myths vs. Reality

Studying with friends can be very helpful, but sometimes friends can also be the source of a lot of false information about the tests. There are many myths that circulate about tests, but they are just that — myths.

CAUSE ⇨	You believe certain myths about tests.
CURE ⇨	Learn the truth about tests.

Here are a few myths you may have heard, and the realities (from the test experts at ETS):

Myth: The first question is always a “trick” question to throw you off.

Reality: No question is ever written to throw you off. The test makers analyze how people have responded to each question, and if there is ample evidence that a question is confusing, the question is not scored and is removed from future tests.

Myth: The same answer choice never appears more than three times in a row.

Reality: There are no rules about answer choices. Simply answer the questions to the best of your ability and don't worry about answer choice patterns.

Myth: The questions are written to test how well you take standardized tests, not to test what you actually know.

Reality: Every question is written to test a specific skill or piece of knowledge.

Myth: Tests are designed so you have to answer each question really quickly, and you're not likely to have time to answer them all.

Reality: Tests are designed so that most test takers will have enough time to answer every question.

Myth: Hard questions are worth more points than easy questions.

Reality: In any one section of a selected-response test, all of the questions count for an equal number of points. Therefore, if you find a question very difficult, you should skip it (save it for later), because the easy questions are worth just as much.

Myth: Tests are full of biased questions.

Reality: Test makers do everything they can to ensure that biased questions are kept off tests. Every question is reviewed carefully to ensure that it does not contain biased subject matter, overly specialized language, or something that might be upsetting or distracting. After tests are given, researchers analyze the way different groups of people answered different questions. If they find, for example, that female test takers tend to answer a certain question differently from male test takers, the question is not scored and is removed from future tests.

You have probably heard many other myths about standardized tests, but the important thing to do is find out the reality and ignore the myths. You need to answer each question on the test based on your knowledge of the topic being tested. If you pause to worry about myths instead, you're not going to answer the questions to the best of your ability.

CAUSE ⇨	Your body shows signs of anxiety.
CURE ⇨	Take care of your body, and your mind will benefit.

If you start to see physical signs of test anxiety, you may need to take better care of your body.

- **Eat well and exercise.** Don't disrupt your regular eating and exercise schedule to study for the test. Continuing your activities as usual will help you maintain your emotional and physical well-being.
- **Get plenty of sleep.** Studies have shown that lack of sleep can contribute to memory loss and lack of concentration, so be sure to get enough sleep throughout your studying schedule, and especially the night before the test.
- **Continue to socialize with friends and family.** Your emotional health is as important as your physical health for minimizing anxiety, so be sure to take time for social interaction.
- **Take regular study breaks.**
- **Surround yourself with positive people who support your studying.** Avoid friends and acquaintances with negative attitudes, especially negative attitudes about the test itself.

CAUSE ⇨	Tension reinforces itself and builds up.
CURE ⇨	Practice tension-release exercises.

When you are feeling anxious, the tense feelings in your body can build up. You can learn how to break the cycle of anxiety by teaching your body how to release tension. Like most of the other tips in this booklet, this is not something to work on the night before the test. It would be helpful to practice the following techniques for several weeks or months:

- When you start feeling anxious, take a few long, deep breaths and exhale slowly. While you do this, it may help you to close your eyes and imagine a peaceful setting, such as a quiet, tree-lined pond or a quiet park on a sunny, spring day.
- When you feel your body tensing up, focus on a particular group of muscles (e.g., the shoulders or the legs), and first contract them for about 10 seconds and then let them relax. Concentrate on the difference in the feelings and repeat the exercise, trying to get the muscles to relax more each time.

When you've become proficient in these techniques through practice, you'll be able to use them during the test whenever you feel anxiety creeping up on you. They take only a few seconds to do and can make the test session a lot less stressful.

CAUSE ⇨	You allow the test environment to get on your nerves.
CURE ⇨	Tune out distractions.

The test administrator will try to make the environment conducive for taking a test. However, the reality is that not all aspects of the environment can be controlled. Another test taker may have a cough or the sniffles, or the room may be crowded, or the temperature may be warmer or cooler than you like. Dress in comfortable clothing so you are ready for either warm or cool rooms. You can't control everything that will happen there, but you can help minimize the distractions you might encounter.

- **Avoid arriving too early or too late.** Make sure you know how to get to the test center and how much time it will take you to get there. (Be sure to consider the likely amount of traffic on the day of the test.)
- **Don't chat with others.** Even if you know other people taking the test, nervousness and anxiety can be contagious. By now you should know everything you need to know about the test, so if you learn anything new from your friends at the test site, it's likely to be a myth — and the worst time for you to hear a myth is right before the test begins.

You should also arrive with a ready-to-use strategy for dealing with any distractions that may come up. One strategy is mentally repeating a word or phrase (such as “Remain calm”) as a tool for focusing your mind. You may have some other strategy that works for you. Whatever strategy you choose, try to use it while you're studying for the test. Not only will it help you feel better, but it will also be second nature by the time you arrive to take the test.

CAUSE ⇨	Your mind goes blank or it wanders.
CURE ⇨	Stay focused.

Many people get so nervous when they first begin their test that their minds “go blank” or start to race with unrelated thoughts. To avoid this, arrive at the test with a plan for how you will start the test. When the test administrator tells you that you can begin, read through the introductory screens carefully; don't race through them to get to the first question. The time you take to read the directions is not considered part of the testing time; however, it is recommended that you take no more than 15 minutes.

There are screens built into each test with instructions on how to answer specific types of questions. These can all be accessed by selecting “Help.” Some tests also include reference documents (e.g., Periodic table of the Elements). You can become familiar with these functions before the day of the test. An interactive computer-delivered test demonstration video is available in the “Test Preparation Resources” section of the GACE website at www.gace.ets.org/prepare/videos.

It often makes sense to start with the first question, but you can start with any question you wish. To answer a question, click on a response. To move on to the next question, click on “Next.” To return to a previous question, click on “Back.” Also remember that you can skip difficult questions and return to them later if there is time. To mark a question to review or return to later, click on “Mark.” Remember that you are not expected to answer every question correctly, so go into the test mentally prepared to encounter questions for which you do not know the answer.

For selected-response tests, your score is based on the number of questions you answer correctly; therefore, skipped questions and wrong answers will not count against you. Work as rapidly as you can without sacrificing accuracy. Do not spend too much time puzzling over a question that seems too difficult for you. Answer the easier questions first, then return to the harder ones. Try to answer every question even if you have to guess.

If you “go blank” when facing a constructed-response question (one that asks for an essay or a few sentences or diagrams), remember that action fights anxiety. You will receive scratch paper at the test center, so you can start by jotting down your thoughts. Once you start writing, you are more likely to find ideas taking shape in your head. Then you can start to organize your actual response.

Final Words...

Practice, Practice, Practice

Remember the three things you need to succeed — preparation, organization, and practice? Well, if you have test anxiety, practice is especially important. The more you become accustomed to taking the test, the better control you will have over your anxiety when you take the actual test. Even practicing just sitting and focusing for a long period of time is important.

Use the GACE test preparation resources for your assessment that are available in the “Test Preparation Resources” section of the GACE website at www.gace.ets.org/prepare. Both the study companion and the Interactive Practice Test (IPT) for your assessment contain practice questions. Try answering the practice questions several times; doing so may help you identify areas in which you need more studying. You should also answer the practice questions with the goal of simply answering the questions to get used to taking the test. Time yourself, and get accustomed to the amount of concentration you need to stay focused on the test for the duration of the testing period. Discover the level of pacing that works best for you, and take the test until that pacing starts to feel natural.

Make sure that all of your studying and practicing is finished several days before the test. Try to set aside the day before the test for rest and anxiety-free activities, such as exercise or socializing. Don’t use that last day for more studying or taking a practice test.

Find a Coach

If your level of test anxiety is high — that is, your mental or physical symptoms prevent you from preparing for the test — you should consider finding a coach to help you work through your anxiety. Your coach could be a supportive friend or family member, or it could be someone you find through your school or tutoring center. With your coach, make a list of your fears about the particular test you will take and about your fears of test taking in general. Next to each fear, write down the specific steps you will take to help conquer each fear. For example, if your fear is that you will “freeze up” during the test, some specific steps you might take could include (1) taking the practice test, timed, and (2) using your relaxation techniques to help you fight tension during the test. You should even consider making a separate “study schedule” for working through your anxieties, so that you work on each fear methodically and regularly.

And remember...

Test anxiety feeds on the unknown; the more you know about the test, and the more you know about your own anxieties and how to conquer them, the less test anxiety can control you.

Good luck!