

Test Taking Tips & Learning Strategies

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One of the things that may delay the decision of going through the naturalization process is the fact that you will need to study for the tests. Many adults haven't sat down to study in such a long time! They may wonder: How do people study, anyway? What are the techniques or strategies to remember information? Well, we can help you here with a few tips that will make your learning successful.

And the other thing that has made you wait until now is...the stress that can come with the whole naturalization process! In this book, we also want to help you with that. Here are a few suggestions that will help you calm down before you take your tests.

How To Calm Your Nerves On Test Day

Box Breathing

You've heard so many times that breathing deeply can help you out of a stressful situation. They tell you: "Take a deep breath!" Words, words...Have you actually ever done it? Sometimes you do it once just to show the person in front of you that you are following their advice. And you feel there is no change and go on with your stressful life. Now, if you've ever done it while really focusing on your breathing, maybe you noticed that it did calm you down!

But what exactly is "box" breathing? For a change, it's a yoga thing. If you practice yoga, you may already know about the benefits of deep, focused breathing. This technique is called "box breathing" because it has 4 steps. And you count to 4 in each step.

This is how it works:

- Breathe in through your nose while you count to 4 in your head.
- Hold your breath for a count of 4.
- Exhale for a count of 4.

- Hold your breath again for a count of 4.

While you do this, try to visualize a square (a box) and be aware of how the air fills and then leaves your body. Repeat between 3 and 5 times. Do it once or twice a day, not only the day before your interview with USCIS, but also at times when you are not feeling particularly stressed, so that you make it a habit. Practice, after all, makes perfect! How simple is that? In fact, box breathing's straightforwardness is what makes it so accessible — and so impactful.

“Box breathing's simplicity is its greatest strength,” Integrative medicine specialist Melissa Young, MD, says. “When you start out with other forms of breathwork, you can almost get more anxious by overthinking it. But this is just very simple breathing and counting.”¹ She recommends practicing one or two times a day, regardless of how you're feeling. Try it out first thing in the morning or after a stressful day of work. Box breathing has been proven to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and calm the mind.

Visualization

Did you know that you can trick your brain into thinking something has already happened? You did? And how about this: did you know that if you make your brain believe that something has already taken place, the effects in your body are the same as if the event really took place? When you visualize something, you picture in your mind the outcome before it happens. It's a technique used by artists and athletes like swimmer Michael Phelps that has been proven to increase their performance ². Now, does this technique work on its own? Can you visualize that everything goes well during your citizenship interview and not prepare for your tests? Well, it doesn't quite work that way: it isn't magic.

There are many ways to practice visualization. Here's one way to use this technique that we believe will help you clear your thoughts, visualize your goals, and improve your self-confidence by making your brain believe that the goal is achievable. And even though when we say “visualization” it seems that we're mainly referring to something you see, if you engage your 5 senses, the exercise will be even more powerful.

We mentioned swimmer Michael Phelps before. In his case, what he visualizes is a race. He rehearses it in his mind many times, thinking about all the things that could go wrong. He carefully considers his actions and choices to overcome mishaps. The idea is that, after having visualized all the things that could possibly happen, nothing will take you by surprise, and you will know how to react because, in a way, you've already “been there, done that.”

By now we all know that body and mind are a whole. If you put things in your mind, your brain doesn't always distinguish what is really happening and what is just a thought, and the emotions in your brain affect you even if what you are thinking is not a reality. Imagine visualizing daily that you are taking the citizenship test, that you are listening to the USCIS official's questions, who speaks to you in a clear tone of voice. Visualization is very powerful and can impact your self-confidence in a way that will help you be more productive when the day of the interview comes around.

Prep Before Test Day

The day before the citizenship interview is not the time to do anything new. You have already studied all the content: adding new concepts the day right before your test might increase your anxiety. If, during your preparation for the test, you highlighted key concepts and put emphasis on your weakest points (for example, by writing on index cards the answer to that Civics test question that you kept forgetting), the day before should be devoted to reviewing only that. Study time the day before shouldn't take more than 2 hours. If you work, it may be worth it taking the day off, or at least, leaving early. As we already mentioned when we talked about the documents that

you need to take with you on the day of the interview, one of the things to do the day before is to make sure you have all the things that you need. It helps laying them out in front of you on a table, going over your checklist and making sure you are not missing anything. If you follow these tips, when you wake up the next morning, you will feel refreshed and ready to give your best.

If you can, it is a good idea to do some light exercise so that you release endorphins: this happens at brain level and makes you feel happier and more relaxed, according to the Mayo Clinic³. Try to get physically tired (but not exhausted), so that you can sleep well...but don't overdo it or you'll be too sore the next day!

Eat a good meal (no junk food!) and avoid coffee or alcohol. Stay hydrated. Water is always a good idea: it can help you with your anxiety too.

Make sure you sleep a minimum of 8 hours. As it may be hard to relax the night before, try some deep breathing before going to bed; even a warm bath to relax your muscles and ease your mind. If you haven't done this before, look for directions to get to the USCIS office and be clear on the route you will be taking. Nowadays you can even see a picture or get a 360° of your destination. That helps a lot if you get nervous so that you don't miss the building: you already know what it looks like.

Set more than one alarm to make sure you wake up on time the next morning. Do not depend (at least exclusively) on people in your family to help you here: setting at least two alarms will help you rest assured that, at least, one of them will work! Before going to bed, your mind will appreciate a break. Read something you enjoy, watch some tv or talk to friends or family about things unrelated to your citizenship test.

Learning Techniques

We want to help you here with some learning techniques. Before we give you suggestions regarding how to learn and remember, you must bear in mind that some methods work for some individuals and not for others. Every individual has their own way to learn, and what works for you might not work for other learners. So, don't get frustrated if some of these suggestions don't work in your case. If you have other techniques that have worked well for you in the past, we encourage you to use them again. If you are at a loss because you haven't studied regularly in a long time, you might benefit from learning about these techniques. And even if you think you know all there is to know about learning, you may find something here that you haven't tried before, and you may want to see if it works for you. Or you may find that you can make some changes to one of these methods and adapt it to your needs. Let's get into it!

Learning Faster With Spaced Repetition

Spaced repetition is a technique to review material with a system. When you start your learning process, you review the material every hour, every 6 hours, every day, once a week. The intervals become longer depending on your learning pace. The point is reviewing material before you forget it. This systematic repetition helps to retain concepts in your long term memory. The opposite happens when you study for a test the night before: you have a lot of material to remember and very little time to use a more effective technique like this one. Typically, flashcards are used in this method.

You will need several boxes. When you create a new flashcard, you put it in the first box. The next day, if you remember the information on this card correctly, you move it to a second box. The content of this second box is reviewed less often. For example, instead of every day, every other day. When you do a review of items in the second box, and you recall this content correctly, you move it into a third box. You will review the cards in the third box less often. For example, every three or four days. However, if you happen to forget a card at any point,

you will move it back to the first or second box, so you can go over it more often.

These days, those cards may be electronic, and there are websites and applications that use this system, in case you think this is something that fits your learning style.

Active Recall

In this method, instead of relying on notes, you test yourself by trying to remember the information without looking. You can use flashcards here too: imagine you have a prompt or question in one of your cards. You read it and you try to remember the concept or answer the question. This method helps you create connections in your brain that lead to remembering things in the long term. It's called "active" as opposed to "passive" because you are not just reading your notes, summaries or phrases you highlighted. Looking at a question or prompt on a card and trying to remember the answer is a workout for your brain; therefore, it's more "active" than rereading notes.

There are several Active Recall techniques. For example:

Summarize in your own words: Oftentimes we repeat an answer to a question or a concept with the same exact words as in the book, especially when you study in a language that is not your native language. But trying to find synonyms or paraphrasing an idea will make you feel more confident because you will understand better. It will not matter, then, if you are unable to recall one specific word: you can paraphrase and explain the same idea with other words.

Blurting: This technique combines active recall with the use of cursive (handwriting), which has been proven to help process your thoughts differently and more effectively than typing because of the brain connections you need to make to put your thoughts on paper. This technique can also help as a pre-writing activity, but that's not your goal in this case. When you "blurt", you write down everything you can remember on a topic. Don't worry too much about the order, the spelling or the grammar. You'll have time later to go over those notes and fix those issues if you want to. This is free writing. Once you believe you have written everything you remember about that question or topic, go over what you wrote and compare it with your study material. Did you forget anything? Was anything wrong? If you answer "yes" to those two questions, study that again. Repeat the process until you are happy with the results.

Teach What You Learn, or The Feynman method

This is actually an active recall technique and also involves writing things down. Again, you might combine it with the blurring method. Write everything you remember about a topic. Once you think you have included everything about the concept and you think you understand it, write it again with words a 12-year-old would understand. The idea behind this is that you can't say you understand something fully if you can't explain it in simple words. When you explain something you studied to someone who doesn't have the basic background that you do, you are going through a mental process that helps your understanding. Again, it's a big challenge to have to explain something using a language that is not your native language. But if you find a way to teach someone what you know using different words, you will get a better grasp of the topic. Many times, people go to the citizenship test with other members of the family. In that case, trying to explain things to each other can be a great way to remember, clarify, and understand concepts.

Chunking

This is such a proven technique that is used in everyday life more often than you would think. Take credit card or telephone numbers, for example. Have you noticed the way they are grouped? That is because our brain can re-

member small groups of numbers rather than 11 or 14 numbers at a time. We naturally pair words of things that usually go together: salt and pepper, knife and fork, pen and paper. Maybe you're already chunking when you try to remember what you should take with you when you leave home. You want to make sure that you carry your wallet, your phone, your keys...

Have you made up a word to repeat to yourself before you leave every morning to make sure nothing is left behind? If you have, you are using an acronym: in this case, the first letter of the words for the objects you don't want to forget. Sometimes people make up their own acronyms or mnemonic rules (a memory aid to help you remember something) in order to remember words. Your English teacher may have taught you that, for you to remember the 7 coordinating conjunctions, you should remember "Fanboys": For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So. Elementary school kids are taught words or phrases like this to group words: for example, to remember the colors of the rainbow, they may choose a history lesson: "Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain" or the name "Roy G. Biv" (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet). If you find that you are having a hard time remembering some names of objects or people in the civics questions, use the chunking technique to group words and create your own rules to activate your memory.

Don't Just Memorize, Understand

Sometimes memorizing gets a bad rap. You may remember teachers saying: "I don't want you to just memorize this, I want you to understand it!" We have focused more on memory than understanding in the above mentioned techniques. However, memorizing something that you previously understood will help you remember it in the long term. And this is something that you need when preparing for this exam. You don't want to prepare the day before: you will start enough time in advance so that your knowledge sticks by repetition and review.

One way to make sure you understand first and memorize later is:

Read a sentence. Rephrase it.

Teach yourself. Imagine you have to teach what you just read. You'll try to explain it with other words several times until all your students understand. You may need gesturing, drawing: all this will help you understand the concept better.

Connect new information to something you already know. You will read about how the U.S. government system works. You can compare with the system in your country of origin. What's similar? What's different?

As we have said, everyone has a different learning style. Some people say they remember things better if they write them down; others may prefer listening to a podcast or watching a video. Or you may want to combine several of these techniques. Do what feels more comfortable to you and make sure you feel confident with your choice. If you start well in advance as we recommend, you may even change your method midway.

1 Cleveland Clinic (2021, August 17) How Box Breathing Can Help you Destress <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/box-breathing-benefits>

2 Swimming World. (2022, May 2) The Power of the Mind Through Visualization <https://www.swimmingworld-magazine.com/news/the-power-of-the-mind-through-visualization/>

3 Mayo Clinic (2025, March 26) Exercise and Stress. Get moving to manage stress.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/exercise-and-stress/art-20044469>

4 Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Spaced Repetitions to Improve Memory <https://www.kpu.ca/learningcentres/learning-aids#ThinkingAndMemory>