

Learning From Your Exam Performance

“F” doesn’t stand for ‘failure’. It stands for ‘feedback’. – anon.

When students earn a lower than expected grade on an evaluation, the last thing they want to do is spend time with the test, quiz, paper, or lab report. The low grade is perceived as who they are, rather than as a result they produced. They are ‘F’s, rather than their preparation created an ‘F’.

In reality, if their goal is to improve their performance, students need to review the evaluation carefully, and not just for **content** (the right answers), but more importantly for what was not effective about the **process** that they used to prepare for the exam.

How does a student know what to ‘fix’ if they do not know what is ‘broken’ in their test preparation process? Developing an appreciation for the fact that they lost points as the result of how, what, and when they studied, all elements within their control, will suggest the changes necessary to produce a satisfactory grade on the next evaluation.

Try the following approach which uses techniques that athletes, musicians, actors, and other performers regularly employ to improve their results. Using an objective exam as an example

1) Look at the first question you got wrong. Determine:

- a. **What** is the topic of the question? (i.e., It is about supply and demand)
- b. Did I **recognize** the topic when I was taking the test? (i.e., yes)
- c. **Where** did the information come from? (i.e., It was in my notes, text or readings)
- d. **When** did I study this material? (i.e., I studied it a little the night before the exam)
- e. Did I **understand** the concept when I studied it? (i.e., Kind of)
- f. **Why** did I get this question wrong? (i.e., I couldn’t quite remember the answer)
- g. **What** would I have needed to do to get this question right? (i.e., I needed to begin studying sooner so that I could review all materials more thoroughly)
- h. **What** will I do differently for the next exam? (i.e., begin sooner and try some different memory techniques)

When students break their performance on this question down, as it is above, they begin to see how they could have produced a different result by preparing differently. Students might observe that they need to explore different study techniques which would allow them to begin studying earlier in the process. They didn’t get this question wrong because they are not smart enough, but because they need to raise their game so to speak, in regard to studying in a way that is effective in a research-extensive environment.

This, then, is the goal of evaluating each wrong answer. Students are not simply noting the right answer, but are identifying the process that would have produced the right answer. When utilized, this technique can dramatically improve grades, while creating a more realistic, hopeful perception that they can alter their grades by altering their preparation process.

Remember: they are as smart as they are ever going to be, and, I would argue, they are smart enough, but they can radically alter how they prepare, thus positively impacting their grades and their view of their ability to be successful.