



Examination Retakes in Accounting: Increasing Learning by Writing After the Exam

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Realizing the increased importance of good communication skills to success in the profession, how can today's curriculum help students gain vital skills? One method of combining the need to learn from errors, to increase retention, and to improve writing skills is the *examination retake*.

The examination retake is a learning strategy that can be used on any exam or assignment in any discipline where the professor determines that such an assignment would be beneficial to the class. This procedure involves allowing the student to redo some or all questions missed on his/her graded examination. On the retake the student gives details of the correct formula for problem-type questions or written explanations for non-problem type questions. Retakes are optional and available to all students regardless of their original grade.

Many students freely admit that they never review returned exams. Consequently, they do not utilize, or even recognize, the returned exam as an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. This can result in a failure to retain much of what has been studied previously, or to the retention of incorrect material. This practice is especially detrimental in a discipline such as accounting where content is cumulative.

The accounting discipline requires students to keep current in their work. Given the sequential progression of courses, the accounting curriculum, by its very nature, should provide an incentive for students to learn and retain as much as possible from each course. However, students typically are not aware of the importance of each segment of the accounting curriculum as a building block until it is too late.

The primary goal of teaching is to increase student knowledge. Although there are a number of ways to measure the resultant learning, undoubtedly the most frequently used are tests and examinations where high grades are considered indicative of appropriate learning. However, given the time and effort involved on the parts of both student and fac-

ulty, a test or an examination should be more than a way of evaluating learning and assigning a grade; it also should be a method of furthering student learning.

In addition to the importance of learning the content of a particular course, most educators would agree that students in all academic disciplines need to have frequent opportunities to utilize and improve their written communication skills. However, it is often difficult to determine appropriate writing assignments in disciplines such as accounting where foundation work consists primarily of numbers and calculations. Yet today's business environment demands that accounting professionals utilize oral and written communication skills daily in a variety of ways. The technically knowledgeable accountant fails in the workplace if he or she cannot communicate relevant information to others (See for example: Accounting Education Change Commission, 1990; Big 8, 1989; Messmer, 1999; Stowers and White, 1999; Gingras, 1987; Henry and Razzouk, 1988).

Nonetheless, the traditional accounting curriculum has been, and often still is, based more on a model of "how to prepare" rather than "how to communicate." Accounting instructors must begin to include more emphasis on communications skills in their curriculum because recruiters base their hiring decisions on both technical expertise and interpersonal skills.

The old stereotype of the number-cruncher hovering over a desk reflects the profession before the introduction of computers. In today's world of more advanced technology, the basic bookkeeping function is performed primarily by computers. Even though the accounting professional is still required to understand the concepts and to know how to perform these functions, his or her more important roles are that of administrator, supervisor, consultant, and advisor. These roles demand good communication skills. Unfortunately, the accounting student often doesn't realize the importance until he or she reports for that first job (Accounting Education Change Commission, 1990).

Accounting students typically select a career in either public or private accounting. Certified Public Accountants act as consultants for their clients, perform audits, prepare tax returns and participate in other consulting engagements. Private industry positions range from that of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) who is the primary financial decision-maker of a business, to the controller who supervises the organization's daily financial accounting activities.

Procedures for Administering an Exam Retake

Examination retakes can be relatively simple to manage. While grading the original exams, the instructor determines the need for a retake and the number of potential points to be given for accurate completion of the

retake. (Ultimately, these additional points add only minimally to the final course grade. For example, a fifteen-point retake on an exam that represents 20% of the course grade only adds three points to the end-of-the-semester average.) Points should be prorated for the number of problems missed originally and the number corrected accurately on the retake. Points should be based on the accuracy of objective answers *combined* with the clarity of the written explanations. Students who do poorly on the retake are targets for additional assistance and tutoring. Students whose writing is substandard should be referred to the school's writing center for further aid.

For the effect to be most beneficial, the original exam papers should be graded and returned as soon as possible to ensure that material is still somewhat fresh in the student's mind. The retake can be done either in class or out, and either with or without text and notes, depending upon the professor's perception of needed research. Students look at the completed, graded exam and learn from their mistakes by redoing all missed problems—hence the term *examination retake*.

Students are instructed to focus on either their original incorrect answer or the correct answer. Calculations must be clearly labeled and discussed. If students choose to concentrate on the original answers, they explain WHY their answer was incorrect. Students who focus on the correct answer explain the correct answer and present the appropriate theory behind the solution. In either case, students write as if they are "teaching" someone else. This gives the professor some insight into the student's thinking and insures that the student does not get the right answer for the wrong reason!

As an example, suppose an introductory accounting exam question is as follows:

The Unearned Revenue account is classified as a(n)

- (a) Asset
- (b) Liability
- (c) Revenue
- (d) Expense

The correct answer is **B** - Unearned Revenue is classified as a liability account. Assume the student chooses **C** and misses the problem. The student's retake should explain the correct answer or the reason why his answer was wrong. One student might write: *Answer C is not correct. Due to the matching principle, revenues cannot be recognized until they are earned. An unearned revenue is one that is not earned and therefore cannot be classified as a revenue. This means that the money has been*

received but the services have not been rendered (or the product has not been delivered). Unearned revenue should be classified as a liability.

Another student might, on the other hand, prefer to explain the correct answer as follows: *Unearned revenue is money received in advance by a business for services that have not been performed or products that are not yet delivered. Unearned revenue is often called prepaid income. The monies received must be returned unless they are earned. Therefore unearned revenue is considered a debt of the business until earned. Debts are classified as liabilities.*

A student who can articulate corrections such as those shown above demonstrates not only critical thinking skills, but also written communication skills. Additionally, he/she gains a stronger depth of understanding of the course material.

The accounting instructor needs to evaluate student writing not only on content but also on mechanics. Accountants and other professionals require proficiency in the basic tools of writing. Today's student who depends upon computer spell check and grammar check functions for mechanics often can camouflage a lack of skills with these technological aids. Failure by the instructor to consider the importance of these skills, including using the computer software correctly, may impede maximum development of student writing skills. Consequently, exam retakes include assessment of the mechanical aspects of student writing in addition to an assessment of content.

At first glance, this seems to be a tremendous additional burden to an instructor's already overloaded schedule. However, there are several "tricks" to administering the examination retakes that make the process less onerous:

- Students should have a clear idea of instructions. Several examples should be given to avoid papers being returned for rewriting, resubmission and, ultimately, a third grading by the professor.
- Not all problems missed by the student need to be corrected on every exam. Specific essays, problems and objective questions can be selected by the instructor to reduce grading time and to focus on concepts most difficult for the class as a whole.
- Students should be required to type their work, to label the correct answers clearly, and to give brief and succinct explanations.

Benefits of Using Exam Retakes

Several benefits occur with the exam retake. The student naturally focuses on the opportunity to improve a test grade. Instructors are concerned with, and see a chance to enhance, writing skills and student learning. Less obvious benefits relate to exam structuring, student motivation, knowledge retention, faculty evaluations, improved higher-level cogni-

tive skills, and a better understanding by the student of exam preparation and structure.

Most professors will confess to curving grades occasionally, typically when the overwhelming majority of the class performs below expectation. Exam retakes, on the other hand, require students to **earn** the extra points. Retakes offer an opportunity to increase an exam grade by demonstrating an increase in learning. Each student decides whether or not to exercise the option of the retake; and, because additional points earned are justified, artificially inflated grade ceases to exist.

Another benefit of the exam retake is the opportunity for the accounting student to write. While “writing to learn” may be a concept advocated by many in the more traditional writing disciplines, accounting often is still perceived as number-oriented. Some accounting students mistakenly believe they always will have a secretary available for their written communication needs. Accounting faculty must clear up this misconception, beginning in the first introductory accounting course. While term papers and other long written assignments aren’t always feasible; exam retakes provide an efficient and effective opportunity to practice writing skills.

Sometimes, students express the view that accounting exams are incomprehensible or “tricky.” Text and notes that were studied appear to be written in plain English; the accounting exam appears to be written in something worse than a foreign language. Consequently, students who perform poorly on an exam may try to justify a poor grade with the excuse that “the exam questions were not anything like what they studied.” The exam retake overcomes this misconception. When required to research their text for the theory and explanation behind a question, students begin to realize how exams are structured. Irrelevant data are no longer seen as placed in a question as a trick, but rather as a way of determining whether the student fully comprehends what is being asked and what is important in making the needed decision. This mirrors real life where the accountant frequently must ferret out irrelevant data on a tax return or in an accounting document in order to focus on the information necessary to perform the calculations.

Retakes may improve student attitudes toward studying for the dreaded exam. The “all or nothing” mindset becomes less of a factor when students receive a second chance to improve their grade. The anxious student focuses on his or her study without the feeling of being overwhelmed. Should the instructor not offer a retake or should the points given on the retake be less than hoped for, the student realizes that peers, on average, were better prepared.

Forcing the student to explain the material and his/her thought processes also benefits higher learning skills. Edgar (1969) found that we

tend to remember only 10% of what we read and only 20% of what we hear. According to *College Reading and Study Skills*, being required to teach a subject results in a 95% retention rate of the material whereas only passively reading the material has been found to result in a long-term retention rate of only 10% (McWhorter, 1995). The examination retake, by requiring students to explain as if they were teaching someone else, pushes student toward the highest long-term retention rate.

Disciplines outside of accounting can reap similar benefits with the exam retake. Randy Boehm and John L. Gland, chemistry professors at the University of Michigan, reported favorable results using what they describe as “a positive learning exercise” after the return of their exams. Boehm and Gland required students to complete a separate “follow-up” exam—one that focused on the more difficult problems from the original exam. The researchers found that students who took part in the exercises had fewer misunderstandings about material covered in the textbook, were “more confident and relaxed,” became “aware of the concepts underlying the questions,” and “developed more interest and confidence in the course” (Boehm and Gland, 1991).

Our observations indicate greater student satisfaction with the retake method because of the extra points earned and the increased understanding of the course material. Students view the retake as an opportunity for extra credit. Out-of-class time consumption is less of an issue and the text research required becomes less burdensome when students see the opportunity to increase their grades through an “open-book, open-notes” retake.

Examination retakes potentially benefit all disciplines. Writing skills and critical thinking skills represent important components of the development of students in all academic areas, regardless of the chosen profession or field of the student.

Although this learning strategy requires some additional work by the professor, overall, examination retakes are beneficial in that they offer students a maximum increase in knowledge and an opportunity to enhance written communication skills in exchange for a minimum increase in grades.

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