

# STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF TEST DELAYS

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On occasion a test or exam must be canceled due to unforeseeable circumstances. This article deals with how students feel about test delays and their perceptions of its effect on class performance. Two instances of test delays are examined which varied in class level and how the situation was resolved. Results of survey questions indicate that the lower level class (Introduction to Psychology) felt the delay hurt their performance, while the upper level class (Personnel & Industrial Psychology) felt the delay helped their performance. Alternative explanations to these conclusions are also discussed.

## Introduction

While there has been a great deal of research and study about what to test, how to test, and what testing does to college students (e.g., test anxiety), very little research addresses the effect of test delays on college students. In fact, a review of the literature on testing delays turned up topics of procrastinators and testing (Rothblum, Solomon, & Murakami, 1986), placing an intentional delay between teaching and testing (Hobbs, 1976; Otto & Rarick, 1968), and even the effects of delaying entrance into college, i.e., the nontraditional student (Brawer, 1973; Farning & Borden, 1978). The present article addresses the effects of unintentional test delays from the students' perspective.

On two occasions my midterm examination (in different classes) had to be canceled and rescheduled in some way due an unforeseeable event. During the spring 1989 semester I taught Introduction to Psychology at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. With over 1000 students in this freshman level course, half were enrolled in my lecture sections, and 514 students completed the end of semester evaluation. On the evening of the midterm examination, a bomb threat was received by campus police and the exam was

canceled. The final exam was then modified to include some items which would have appeared on the midterm exam. The format of the test was objective (multiple-choice questions).

How did students react to this event? Students were asked in the course evaluation if they felt the cancellation of the midterm had changed their performance in the course. They were also asked whether they felt they would have received a higher or lower grade if the midterm exam had been given. The results are presented in Table 1. Students clearly indicated that they felt that cancellation of the midterm changed their performance in the course, and that their grade would have been higher if the midterm had been given. That is, students felt that the test delay was detrimental to their final course grade.

During the spring 1991 semester I experienced another unintentional test delay with a midterm exam. The course was Personnel & Industrial Psychology, a senior level course with 20 students that I taught for the University of Wisconsin-Platteville at an off-campus site. Due to dangerous weather conditions, the midterm had to be canceled and was rescheduled for the following week. This

**Table 1**  
**Survey Results Spring 1989 Introduction To Psychology Course Evaluation**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe the cancellation of the midterm exam changed my performance in the course.	23 4.5%	71 13.8%	100 19.5%	156 30.4%	148 28.8%
I believe I would have received a higher grade if the midterm had been given.	21 4.0%	62 12.1%	97 18.9%	150 29.2%	167 32.5%
I believe I would have received a lower grade if the midterm had been given.	171 33.2%	155 30.2%	104 20.2%	48 9.3%	18 3.5%

**Notes.** N = 514. Number of students leaving a question blank was 16, 17, and 18 students respectively for the three questions; hence, percentages in the table will not add to 100%.

exam was also objective, containing multiple-choice, true-false, and matching questions. Students were asked before and after the exam whether they thought the one-week delay would help their performance. The results are presented in Table 2. Before the exam, students felt that the one week delay would be helpful, and afterwards this feeling continued and was slightly stronger.

So what is the effect of a testing delay? It seems that the answer depends on a number of variables. With these two experiences, the lower level class believed they were hurt by

the delay, while the upper level class believed they were helped by the delay. However, these differences may be attributed to the manner in which the situation was handled. In one instance the final exam was enlarged to include midterm exam questions; in the other instance the midterm exam was merely delayed one week. Another variable which may affect student reaction to test delays is type of test. Both of the tests reported here were objective; delaying short answer/essay tests may have different effects.

Student reaction to testing delays may be

Table 2  
Survey Results Spring 1991 Personnel & Industrial Psychology Evaluation

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>BEFORE THE TEST:</b>	1	1	66	10	1
Having a one week delay will help my performance on this test.	5.2%	5.2%	31.6%	52.6%	5.2%
<b>AFTER THE TEST:</b>	2	2	4	6	5
Having a one week delay helped my performance on this test.	10.5%	10.5%	21.1%	31.6%	26.3%

**Notes.** N = 20; however, one student did not complete the questions; percentages in the table are based on 19 students. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

influenced by a number of factors. This article suggests that the level of class and how the delay situation is resolved make a difference in student reaction, as well as other potential variables (such as test type).

Incidentally, how does an instructor avoid the bomb-threat? Tell students beforehand that if there is a bomb threat, you have another room reserved on campus that the students will go to and complete the exam as scheduled. This is what I did for the spring 1989 final exam for the Introduction to Psychology class, and it worked.

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