

Precalc Panic

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It was a cold Thursday morning. I stared into the grey abyss, watching the cold raindrops pattering on the front window of my AP Physics C class, contemplating my impending doom. The others in the class bore the same ghastly pallor. Today was not a regular Thursday. We were waiting for the ellipse exam in precalculus.

We were allowed to use a one-sided, half-page reference sheet on our ellipse exam to spare us from complete failure. No one found it necessary to study for the test because they had this false sense of security. Strangely enough, however, with only hours left before the test, no one had completed a reference sheet. We all awaited the 7th period when the impact of our procrastination would come to full fruition.

I reached inside my backpack to take out my physics notebook, when I realized my precalculus notebook was missing! How was I supposed to make a reference sheet now? I had planned to make it during lunch!

David, a junior who was also going to take the test this afternoon, sat next to me. I explained to him that I had lost my precalculus notes and asked if I could borrow his.

“Are you kidding me?” he said, “you take notes in class?”

“Well, do you have a reference sheet?” I asked.

“Nope,” he replied.

“Did you study for the test then?”

“Who actually studies before the test? I study for my tests during the test. I just learn everything by reading the questions. The only thing I prepared beforehand today is a favorite donut flavor to put down for the extra credit question.”

“Well, I can’t learn everything just by reading the questions,” I said, “and it’s unlikely the extra credit question will be about donuts of all things anyway; I have no time to be studying that.”

Mr. Thomas stood at the front of the class and asked, “Can someone recite Kepler’s first law of planetary motion?”

Jeremy, who wants to let you know that he is a wickedly brilliant junior taking precalculus and AP Calculus BC, and can jump 40 inches off the ground, raised his hand. “It states that a planet’s orbit is elliptical, with the sun as one of its foci.”

“Just make your reference sheet right now,” suggested David.

“In the middle of class?” I asked.

“Yeah, physics is basically precalculus.”

“No it’s not.”

“Physics and precalculus both start with the letter ‘p’ and end in the letter ‘s’. Coincidence? I think not.”

Reluctantly, I took out a piece of looseleaf and began copying everything about Kepler's laws.

"I really hope Kepler's law ends up on my precalculus test," I said sarcastically.



Hearing this, Abhijeet, a self proclaimed 17-year-old, turned to me and said, "No, this is perfect because it is about elliptical orbits and foci and stuff."

Jeremy heard the conversation and decided to join in as well, "Exactly, there's a lot of math you can learn in this class."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's why I'm so smart. After we studied stars, I learned the stars and bars theorem. After the unit about power, I learned the power rule." People around the room soon overheard this ingenious plan of using physics notes for a precalculus test.

I glanced around the room to see some people cramming microscopic text onto a poor, tiny piece of paper. A test-environment atmosphere had pervaded the

room. Some people were already placing bets on whether the test would be typed or hand-written.

Soon, physics class was over. We dispersed around the school, reciting to ourselves the information we learned in physics class, which we hope is versatile enough to be used in our exam. As I walked down the hallways reciting to myself Kepler's Laws, people would ask me, "Physics test today?"

"No, precalc test."

Throughout the day, I would see the hands on my watch turn faster and faster, and before I knew it, it was 7th period. I nervously wait on my desk for the teacher to arrive. The bell is about to ring any moment now. Suddenly, a substitute teacher walks in.

Everyone has a sigh of relief.

"Alright, free period guys. Time to play CSGO."

"Your teacher wanted me to hand this test out to you," the substitute teacher said.

The test was soon distributed by column. Anyone taking longer than two and a half seconds to pass the pile back would receive death stares, while anyone taking longer than four seconds would be mobbed by the students behind them.

Skimming through it, I could not find anything about sliding boxes, pulleys, gravity, $mg \sin(\theta)$, and whatnot. Soon, I completely disregarded my reference sheet.

Even though I bombed every question on the test, I reassured myself, "there's always the extra credit question."

When I flipped to it, the question asked, "What is your favorite donut flavor?"

I really hope Kepler donuts are a thing.