

THE MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAM

Often students anticipate their first multiple choice exam to be simply a matter of recognising true statements. However, experience with these exams shows students that they are often asked to do more than just recognise textbook material. Multiple choice questions, they learn, require fine distinctions between correct and nearly-correct statements. They learn that these distinctions are not only of **Recognition**, but are distinctions that involve the thinking for **Synthesis**, **Analysis**, and **Application**. These higher-order thinking questions sometimes make the content of the questions unrecognisable. Besides not being fully prepared for these types of thinking questions, students often read the questions carelessly. Therefore, it is to the students' advantage to learn about the thinking required to answer multiple choice questions and to learn how to read the questions carefully.

Preparing/study for multiple choice exams

1. *Take a Learning Skills course to learn:*
 - how to recognise the various levels of learning that are tested in multiple choice questioning;
 - how to use new strategies for learning, remembering, and thinking.
2. *Join or form a study group* to practise making and answering multiple choice questions of various levels.
3. *Study old exams.* Examine each question to determine:
 - the level or type of thinking required of you (recognition, synthesis, analysis, application);
 - the degree of difference between incorrect and correct alternatives.
4. *When studying the material consider groups of facts or groups of ideas that are similar in meaning.* While learning each group, pay special attention to the *differences* among the facts and ideas within each group. It may be effective to think of each fact or idea in terms of what each means or includes *and* what each does *not* mean or does *not* include. For a concept, consider what is *necessary* or *sufficient* to include. How do two similar concepts differ? Why is that difference important?

Writing multiple choice exams

1. *Do the multiple choice items first* if your exam has types of questions other than multiple choice. Just reading the stems and alternatives acts as a warm-up to the material. (The stem is the question and the alternatives are the choices). Also, the ideas embedded in these multiple choice questions will fuel your thinking for doing the other parts of the exam.

2. *Read the directions carefully.* The directions usually indicate that some alternatives may be partly correct or correct statements in themselves, but not when joined to the stem. The directions may say: "choose the most correct answer" or "mark the one best answer." Sometimes you may be asked to "mark *all* correct answers."
3. Often you are required to answer up to 70 multiple choice questions in an hour or less. (Some have 200 questions to answer in 3 hours). This means you may have less than a minute, on average, to spend on each question. Some questions, of course, will take you only a few seconds, while others will require more time for thought. *Plan to progress through the exam in three ways:*
 - Read every question carefully but quickly, answering only those of which you are 100% certain. Put a "?" on those that need more thought.
 - Then, examine/study the questions not yet answered. Answer those you are reasonably sure of without pondering too long on each. Erase the "?"
 - Finally, study read the remaining unanswered questions. If you cannot come to a decision by reasoning or if you run out of time, guess. Erase the "?". Note that some examinations penalize "guessing" by subtracting points for incorrect answers. Check with your instructor. If there is no penalty, then a guess is better than a blank.
4. *Use the process of elimination procedure.* Eliminate the obviously incorrect alternatives.
5. *Read **all** of the stem and **every** alternative.*
 - Read the stem with each alternative to take advantage of the correct sound or flow that the correct answer often produces. Also, you can eliminate any alternatives that do not agree grammatically with the stem.
 - Some students find it effective to read the stem and anticipate the correct alternative before actually looking at the alternatives. If you generally do better on essay exams, this strategy may help you a great deal. Our research shows that one in three students scores better with this strategy alone!
6. *Consider "all of the above" and "none of the above."* Examine the "above" alternatives to see if all of them or none of them apply *totally*. If even one does not apply totally, do not consider "all of the above" or "none of the above" as the correct answer. Make sure that a statement applies to the question since it can be true, but not be relevant to the question at hand!
7. *Note negatives.* If a negative such as "none", "not", "never", or "neither" occurs in the stem, know that the correct alternative must be a fact or absolute and that the other alternatives could be true statements, but not the correct answer.
8. *Note superlatives.* Words such as "every", "all", "none", "always", and "only" are superlatives that indicate the correct answer must be an undisputed fact. In the social sciences, absolutes are rare.
9. *Note qualifying words.* "Usually", "often", "generally", "may", and "seldom" are qualifiers that *could* indicate a true statement.

10. *Study Qualifications.* Break the stem down into grammatical parts. Pull out the *bare subject* and *verb* (if it is in the stem), and then examine all the modifiers (qualifiers) to the subject and verb. This process ensures that you will examine every part of the stem.
11. *Changing Answers.* Research has shown that changing answers on a multiple choice or true-false exam is neither good nor bad: if you have a good reason for changing your answer, change it. The origin of the myth that people always change from "right" to "wrong" is that those (i.e. the wrong ones) are the only ones you will see when you review your exam – you won't notice the ones you changed from "wrong" to "right."

Following-up after your exam has been returned

Study your marked and returned exam in order to learn from your successes and mistakes, and to improve your performance on the next exam. This will pay dividends on future exams.

1. *Examine each question you did get correct.* Remember how you knew that the information was important when you studied. How did you study?
2. *Examine each question you did not get correct* in order to understand the distinction between the correct alternative and the incorrect alternatives. Ask yourself why the correct answer is correct and why the other alternatives are incorrect.
3. *Determine the level of thought your instructor expects of you* by reading through all of the questions. Are you expected to recognise, analyse, synthesise and/or apply the material that has been presented to you? Study accordingly for the next exam.

Multiple choice questions usually include a phrase or stem followed by three to five options:

Test strategies:

- Read the directions carefully
Know if each question has one or more correct option
Know if you are penalized for guessing
Know how much time is allowed (this governs your strategy)
- Preview the test
Read through the test quickly and answer the easiest questions first
Mark those you think you know in some way that is appropriate
- Read through the test a second time and answer more difficult questions
You may pick up cues for answers from the first reading, or become more comfortable in the testing situation
- If time allows, review both questions and answers
It is possible you mis-read questions the first time

Answering options

Improve your odds, think critically:

Cover the options, read the stem, and try to answer

Select the option that most closely matches your answer

Read the stem with each option

Treat each option as a true-false question, and choose the "most true"

Strategies to answer difficult questions:

- **Eliminate options you know to be incorrect**
If allowed, mark words or alternatives in questions that eliminate the option
- **Give each option of a question the "true-false test:"**
This may reduce your selection to the best answer
- **Question options that grammatically don't fit with the stem**
- **Question options that are totally unfamiliar to you**
- **Question options that contain negative or absolute words.**
Try substituting a qualified term for the absolute one, like *frequently* for *always*; or *typical* for *every* to see if you can eliminate it
- **"All of the above:"**
If you know two of three options seem correct, "all of the above" is a strong possibility
- **Number answers:**
toss out the high and low and consider the middle range numbers
- **"Look alike options"**
probably one is correct; choose the best but eliminate choices that mean basically the same thing, and thus cancel each other out

- **Double negatives:**
Create the equivalent positive statement and consider
- **Echo options:**
If two options are opposite each other, chances are one of them is correct
- **Favor options that contain qualifiers**
The result is longer, more inclusive items that better fill the role of the answer
- **If two alternatives seem correct,**
compare them for differences,
then refer to the stem to find your best answer

Guessing:

- **Always guess when there is no penalty**
for guessing or you can eliminate options
- **Don't guess if you are penalized for guessing**
and if you have no basis for your choice
- **Use hints from questions you know**
to answer questions you do not.
- **Change your first answers**
when you are sure of the correction, or other cues in the test cue you to change.

Multiple choice strategies

Answer Questions Systematically

Careless mistakes are often made when students rush through the "stem," or first part of the question, and miss important information. Try this approach to make sure you read each question thoroughly.

1. Cover up the alternatives before you read the stem (the first part of the question).
2. Read the stem carefully.
3. Process the stem:
 1. underline key words
 2. translate the question into your own words
 3. watch for small but important words, such as not or always.
4. Predict an answer.
5. Uncover the alternatives and read all of them carefully, even if the first choice seems correct.
6. Identify the best response.

Skip Difficult Questions

If you've followed the steps above and you're still not sure of an answer, it's tempting to keep rereading and reworking the question until you select one. However, you may be wasting valuable time as you "worry through" these questions. If you're unsure of an answer, skip the question and keep going. If you run out of time, it's better to have answered all of the easier questions than to have missed some of them because of your attempts to answer the more difficult ones.

Decode Difficult Questions

The language of multiple choice questions can sometimes lead to confusion about what the question is really asking. Try these techniques when you encounter a question with difficult or confusing wording:

1. Pay attention to absolute terms, such as *never* , *always* or *none* . They often (but not always) indicate that the statement is false.
2. Pay attention to the use of negatives, such as *not* , *unless* or *none* . Some students find it helpful to rephrase stems with two negatives in positive terms.
3. Look for distractors - extraneous bits of information that might distract you from the real purpose of the question. As you read the stem, cross out the distractors and underline the key points to help you maintain focus.

4. Rephrase a stem in your own words; for example, try changing a question to a statement. Be careful, however, not to lose sight of the original meaning of the stem.
5. Treat each alternative as a true-false statement, and search for the one true statement amid the alternatives.
6. If you're debating between two similar answers, try identifying which is the worse answer, rather than which is the better one. Looking at the question from a different perspective can sometimes help to clarify the underlying purpose of the question.

Keep in mind that these techniques will not work for all questions, and that they can be time-consuming. If some of these techniques seem helpful, make sure you familiarize yourself with them in a practice exam well before the midterm or exam.

Guess Strategically

If you've tried the strategies above and you still don't know the answer:

1. Cross off any alternatives that you know are wrong.
2. Skip the question and come back to it later - a question further along may trigger your memory.
3. Reread the question carefully when you come back to it; you might have missed something the first time.
4. Guess if you still don't know the answer and if there is no penalty for wrong answers.

Multiple-Choice Tests

Many of the tests you take in school will be **multiple-choice tests**. Here are two types of items you will often find on multiple-choice tests.

1. An incomplete statement followed by several answer choices.

In this type of item, the missing part of the statement can be anywhere in the statement. You must circle the letter that represents the answer choice that correctly completes the statement. Usually there are four answer choices represented by the letters a, b, c, and d. Sometimes there are more than four answer choices.

Here is an example of this type of item:

The first president of the United States, _____, was known as the "Father of his country."

- a. Thomas Jefferson
- b. Abraham Lincoln
- c. George Washington
- d. Theodore Roosevelt

You should circle "c" to show that George Washington was the first president of the United States.

2. A question followed by several answer choices.

In this type of item, you must circle the letter that represents the answer choice that correctly answers the question.

Here is an example of this type of item:

How many states make up the United States of America?

- a. 48
- b. 52
- c. 46
- d. 50

You should circle "d" to show that 50 is the correct answer choice for this question.

Sometimes, one of the answer choices is "*all of the above*." In the following example, "e" is the correct answer choice because all of the foods shown are dairy products.

Which of the following foods are dairy products?

- a. milk
- b. ice cream
- c. yogurt

- d. cream cheese
- e. all of the above

Other times, one of the answer choices is "*none of the above*." In the following example, "b" is the correct answer choice because Argentina is the only country listed that is in South America. For "e" to be correct, none of the countries listed could be in South America.

_____ is a country in South America.

- a. Russia
- b. Argentina
- c. Mexico
- d. Japan
- e. none of the above

Guidelines When Taking Multiple-Choice Tests

Here are some guidelines that will help you correctly answer multiple-choice items.

1. *Circle or underline important words in the item.* This will help you focus on the information most needed to identify the correct answer choice.
2. *Read all the answer choices before selecting one.* It is just as likely for the last answer choice to be correct as the first.
3. *Cross out answer choices you are certain are not correct.* This will help you narrow down the correct answer choice.
4. *Look for two answer choices that are opposites.* One of these two answer choices is likely to be correct.
5. *Look for hints about the correct answer choice in other items on the test.* The correct answer choice may be part of another item on the test.
6. *Look for answer choices that contain language used by your teacher or found in your textbooks.* An answer choice that contains such language is usually correct.
7. *Do not change your initial answer unless you are sure another answer choice is correct.* More often than not, your first choice is correct.
8. *Choose "all of the above" if you are certain all other answer choices in the item are correct.* Do not choose "all of the above" if even just one of the other answer choices is not correct.
9. *Choose "none of the above" if you are certain all other answer choices in the item are incorrect.* Do not choose "none of the above" if even just one of the other answer choices is correct.

Knowing how multiple-choice items are constructed and using these guidelines will help you improve your score on a multiple-choice test.