

Tips on Taking Multiple-Choice Tests or Exams

A multiple-choice test or exam requires students to select correct answers from a series of options. Multiple-choice tests or exams are sometimes referred to as objective tests or recognition tests and are a common form of evaluation for many university courses, including math, science, economics, psychology, anthropology, or sociology. At the university level multiple-choice tests or exams will assess learning far beyond simple recognition and recall.

Before the Exam

Find out about the exam format: how many questions, the weight or worth of each question, if there is a penalty for incorrect answers, and the length of the exam. Knowing the format of the exam allows you to prepare accordingly.

If there is a penalty for incorrect answers, do not guess at answers that you do not know.

Plan the time you are going to spend per question and include time for revision. If you have 50 minutes to answer 50 multiple choice questions (each worth 1 mark) and would like 10 minutes of revision at the end of the exam, then you have approximately **50 seconds per answer**. Stay on course!

Plan how you will treat difficult questions. Do the easy questions first; then cycle back to do more difficult items. On the first pass through the test, mark the questions you did not attempt with a check mark or a negative sign. On the second pass through, as you answer these more difficult questions, change one check mark to two, or the negative sign to a positive one.

Forced order tests or exams may prevent revision of submitted answers. For instance, in computerized adaptive testing (CAT), you are unable to go back once you have submitted a response. This can be a challenge! Acknowledge your feelings, be kind to yourself, and try to redirect your focus to the next question.

Practice your test plan. To find out if you need to tweak your exam plan, try practicing it in exam-like conditions answering exam-like practice questions (i.e., practice testing). Practice testing is an effective study strategy, it helps with long-term memory retention and clarifies what you know and do not know.

During the Exam

Read the whole item, processing the information carefully. Make sure that you do not overlook any part of the question. Watch for negatives, double negatives, and two-part statements in the stem. Take the items at face value and avoid reading too much into the question. Do not waste time looking for tricks and traps. Usually, they are not there.

Do not read the whole item first, for problem solving tests. Instead, read the question only and solve the problem. Then look for your answer among the possible responses. Otherwise, an incorrect answer may influence your problem-solving techniques and lead you astray.

Recall a concept from memory before picking out or reading the responses. You may know an answer and then be confused by the responses. If you know what you are looking for, you will have an easier time picking it out.

Read the lead of an item together with each response. Having a complete sentence to think about may jog your memory more than leaving the parts in fragments.

Watch for absolutes; these are words that make a universal statement. They tend to make an answer false. Be wary of words such as always, never, none, and every, which may indicate a false response.

Be systematic when facing answers such as “all of the above”, “none of the above”, “three of the above”, or other sets or ranges of answers (i.e. “A and E are correct”, or “A-C are correct”). Do not get overwhelmed by the choices and answer impulsively. **work out a process of elimination from simpler to more complex responses** (see below exercise).

Check your paper. With the time that you have left, go over your paper and make any necessary changes. The myth that your answers should never be changed and that your first answer is always the right one is just that --- a myth! If you know one of your answers is wrong or realize that you misread an item, then change your answer. Sometimes you may have been reminded of the answer to a question by another question.

Ignore superstitions when doing multiple-choice tests or exams. Do not waste time looking for patterns in your answers. Do not become worried if you find you have produced four “C” answers in a row. Tests are usually constructed with the answers in a random order and the instructor has not viewed the pattern of answers the same way that you have.

Review your bubble sheet for errors. Circling two answers for the same question or not erasing stray pencil marks on your answer page count as errors when the page is machine scored.

Systematic Approach Exercise

Practice using the systematic approach with this example:

- a) Resting the injured part of the body
- b) Protection of the wound from further injury
- c) Adequate nutrition
- d) Emotional support from friends and family
- e) Depriving the patient of fluids
- f) a, b, d, e
- g) a, b, c, d
- h) a, c, d, e
- i) All of the above
- j) None of the above

First, separate the single answers from the combination answers.

Second, deal with the single answers, read and decide which answers are true and which of those are false.

Third, eliminate combination answers that contain false answers.