

The Multiple Choice Exam



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Often students anticipate their first multiple choice exam to be simply a matter of recognizing true statements. However, experience with these exams shows students that they are often asked to do more than just recognize 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 unrecognizable. 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

- Join or form a study group to practice making and answering multiple choice questions of various levels.
- 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.
- 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?

Taking 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 and 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 score 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."