

## Taking Multiple Choice Exams

Studying for a multiple choice exam requires a special method of preparation distinctly different from an essay exam. Multiple choice exams ask a student to recognize a correct answer among a set of options that include 3 or 4 wrong answers (called *distracters*), rather than asking the student to produce a correct answer entirely from his/her own mind.

For many reasons, **students commonly consider multiple choice exams easier than essay exams**. Perhaps the most obvious reasons are that:

- The correct answer is *guaranteed* to be among the possible responses. A student can score points with a lucky guess.
- Many multiple choice exams tend to emphasize basic definitions or simple comparisons, rather than asking students to analyze new information or apply theories to new situations.
- Because multiple choice exams usually contain many more questions than essay exams, each question has a lower point value and thus offers less risk.

Despite these factors, however, **multiple choice exams can actually be very difficult**. Consider that:

- Because multiple choice exams contain many questions, they force students to be familiar with a much broader range of material than essay exams do.
- Multiple choice exams also usually expect students to have a greater familiarity with details such as specific dates, names, or vocabulary than most essay exams do. Students cannot easily "bluff" on a multiple choice exam.
- Finally, because it is much more difficult for a teacher or test writer to write good multiple choice questions than to design essay questions, students often face higher risks due to unintended ambiguity.

To prepare for a multiple choice exam, consider the following steps:

- **Begin studying early**  
*Multiple choice exams tend to focus on details, and you cannot retain many details effectively in short-term memory. If you learn a little bit each day and allow plenty of time for repeated reviews, you will build a much more reliable long-term memory.*
- Make sure that you identify and **understand thoroughly everything that your instructor emphasized in class**.  
*Pay particular attention to fundamental terms and concepts that describe important events or features, or that tie related ideas and observations together. These are the items that most commonly appear on multiple choice exams.*
- As you study your class notes and your assigned readings, **make lists and tables**.  
*Concentrate on understanding multi-step processes, and on ideas, events, or objects that form natural sequences or groupings. Look for similarities and differences that might be used to distinguish correct choices from distracters on an exam.*

If your textbook highlights new vocabulary or key definitions, be sure that you understand them. Sometimes new words and concepts are collected at the end of a chapter. Check to be sure that you have not left any out by mistake.

*Do not simply memorize the book's definitions. Most instructors or test writers will rephrase things in their own words as they write exam questions, so you must be sure that you really know what the definitions mean.*

- Brainstorm possible questions with several other students who are also taking the course.
- Practice on sample questions, if you have access to a study guide or old exams.

### Answering Multiple Choice Questions

There are many strategies for maximizing your success on multiple choice exams. The best way to improve your chances, of course, is to study carefully before the exam. There is no good substitute for knowing the right answer. Even a well-prepared student can make silly mistakes on a multiple choice exam, however, or can fall prey to distracters that look very similar to the correct answer.

Here are a few **tips to help reduce perils**:

- Always cover up the possible responses with a piece of paper or with your hand while you read the *stem*, or body of the question.

*Try to anticipate the correct response before you are distracted by seeing the options that your instructor has provided. Then, uncover the responses.*

- If you see the response that you anticipated, circle it and then check to be sure that none of the other responses is better.
- If you do not see a response that you expected, then consider some of the following strategies to eliminate responses that are probably wrong.

*None of these strategies is infallible. A smart test writer will avoid writing questions for which these strategies work, but you can always hope for a lapse of attention.*

1. Responses that use absolute words, such as "always" or "never" are less likely to be correct than ones that use conditional words like "usually" or "probably."
2. "Funny" responses are usually wrong.
3. "All of the above" is often a correct response. If you can verify that more than one of the other responses is probably correct, then choose "all of the above."
4. "None of the above" is usually an incorrect response, but this is less reliable than the "all of the above" rule. Be very careful not to be trapped by double negatives.
5. Look for grammatical clues. If the stem ends with the indefinite article "an," for example, then the correct response probably begins with a vowel.
6. The longest response is often the correct one, because a test writer tends to load it with qualifying adjectives or phrases.
7. Look for verbal associations. A response that repeats key words that are in the stem is likely to be correct.
8. If all else fails, choose a response that is always your "go to". As an example always choose (b) if you cannot narrow down distractors.

*If you cannot answer a question within a minute or less, skip it and plan to come back later. Transfer all responses to the answer sheet at the same time, once you have marked all questions on your exam. (If you try to do several things at once, you increase the probability of making a mistake. Saving the relatively mindless job of filling in bubbles until the last step reduces the probability of making silly errors.)*

- Be sure that you have filled the appropriate bubbles carefully **IN PENCIL**.

*Your answer sheet will not be looked at closely, so if you fail to fill in bubbles completely or if you make stray marks, only the computer will notice, and you will be penalized. Erase any accidental marks completely.*

- Take the time to check your work before you hand in the answer sheet.

*A multiple choice exam offers you, obviously, no opportunity for "partial credit." If you filled the wrong bubble, your answer is 100% wrong. Check to make sure everything is bubbled correctly, but avoid second guessing your answers if you have time left over. There's a reason you chose an answer to begin with and your mind was less shot when you chose that answer than it is by the end of the test when you're checking answers!*