

Multiple Choice Exams

Multiple choice exams can provoke discouragement in many students. Below are some common reasons for difficulty with multiple choice exams.

- For some students, multiple choice is an unfamiliar format for exams. If your high school emphasized homework completion, essays, or short answer exams over multiple choice, being evaluated through this format may feel frustrating. However, many students find that they quickly adjust.
- Other students do not expect the questions to have the layers of complexity found in university-level exams. This can result in focusing on the recognition of basic terminology over a thorough understanding of course concepts. Modifying exam preparation strategies can help students to prepare properly.
- Many students dislike multiple choice because they feel that the questions are phrased to trick students into choosing incorrect answers. It is true that the questions are designed to challenge students and encourage thought, but they generally do not lead deliberately to the wrong answer.

The reasons why these tests are so difficult have to do more with the structure of the exams than the level of difficulty of the material. Many students make the assumption that multiple choice exams are simple and do not require a rigorous approach to study. Studying should go beyond the material covered in class and require the application of knowledge from the course. It may be necessary to go beyond straight memorization to make an analogy or to solve a novel problem. Do not simply be familiar with the material; be able to write it down, talk about it, and analyze it

Here are some strategies when writing a multiple choice exam:

- **Preview the exam.**
Take note of which questions seem easier and which look more difficult. Set time limits, and get settled; keep to time divisions for questions as they are usually equally weighted
- **Start with easy questions.**
Don't waste time labouring over troublesome questions at the start. Get credit for items you know well.
- **Recycle through the test.**
Next, attempt the questions you could not do on the first pass. Sometimes the answer will occur to you simply because you are more relaxed after having answered other questions. Sometimes, too, your answer to one question provides a clue to the answer of another.
- **Set goals for time and pace yourself accordingly.**
Allocate your time according to the relative worth of questions. Try to save a few minutes at the end for review and revision. Remember: your first answer may not always be your best answer. Change answers, but only if you have a good reason for doing so.
- **Read the questions carefully, twice if necessary.**
Avoid jumping to conclusions about what you think the question asks.
- **Circle or underline key words in questions.**
Multiple choice tests examine your ability to read carefully and thoughtfully as much as they test your ability to recall and reason. Watch for words like *all, always, never, none, few, many, some, sometimes*.

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- **Try to recall a concept from memory or think out the answer before looking at the options.**
Doing this successfully may help you "wade through" the alternatives and find a reasonable answer.
- **Consider the cover-up strategy.**
Read the question and try to answer it by recall before looking at the alternative answers.
- **Consider the true/false label strategy**
Label the alternative answers as true or false statements and then look for a pattern in the answers
- **Sometimes alternatives differ by only one or two words or in the order of one or two terms.**
These can seem very confusing. It helps to read the stem of the question (the question) with an alternative while covering up the others. By thinking through the alternatives, you may be able to make more sense of the options by labelling them true or false and eliminating those that don't correctly complete the question.
- **Use the hint of highly similar pairs**
Often the answer is imbedded in one of two very similar pairs and the "most correct" answer is often the one that correctly uses course terminology; consider the "all /none of the above" cues — if two of the preceding alternatives are opposites then one of them and the "all/none of the above" choice is also wrong.
- **Be prepared to change your answer**
Only do this if you can determine a clear reason why your first response is incorrect. Do not simply make changes on the basis of nervous feelings.
- **You might want to try to answer all the questions from the same section of the course**
This offsets the mixing of questions inherent in the design of the test. This demands care be taken that answer sheets are correctly completed and that all questions have been answered.
- **Be alert to terminology that links the alternatives or questions to key areas of the course, lectures, or chapters of a course's materials.**
This may help you narrow the field of possible choices and think through to the best answer.
- **Be wary of descriptive words which are overly exclusive or overly inclusive.**
These absolute terms tend to portray things as right or wrong where this is often not the case. Words like *always*, *never*, *completely*, and *only* are absolutes. Relative words like *often*, *usually*, *seem* and *may* are often more accurate.
- **Translate double negative statements into positive ones.**
Examples like "Not lacking" or "not none" become "having" and "some" and this can reduce confusion. Note that these are often partly in the stem and partly in the choices of a particular question.
- **If you must guess, look for some of these possibilities:**
 - the style of an answer option is very different from all of the others - this may disqualify it;
 - the grammar of the question stem is not in agreement with the grammar of an alternative;
 - some alternative is not in the area or topic of the question, but comes from some other part of the course- this may disqualify it.

Overall, remember that you are looking for the best answer, not only a correct one, and not one which must be true all of the time, in all cases, and without exception.