

Multiple-Choice Exams

While your intuition is a good guide in a multiple-choice exam, the questions require thoughtful consideration to deduce an answer. To improve your exam performance you should: (1) thoroughly understand what you are being tested on; (2) understand the various parts of a multiple-choice question; and (3) become familiar with the multiple-choice format.

Types of multiple-choice exam questions

You need to know what type of multiple-choice questions will be included in your exams, or at least be able to identify the type so you can respond appropriately. Some of the most common types of multiple-choice questions are:

(1) True or False

True or False questions usually require you to select EITHER the 'true' (correct) OR the 'false' (incorrect) answer.

(2) Odd-one-out

For some multiple-choice questions you will need to establish a pattern amongst answer alternatives and then choose which answer option is the 'odd-one-out'.

(3) Most accurate

In social science subjects where exact answers are less likely, you may be asked to choose the 'best' or 'most true' or 'most accurate' answer to a question.

(4) Extension

Extension questions require you to complete a sentence by selecting from a list of options.

(5) Statements and logical relations

This type is more common in the medical sciences. You will be asked to consider a sentence comprising of two statements connected by a logical relation e.g. 'depends on...' 'causes...' 'results in...'

(6) Grid format

Grid format questions provide a set of solutions based on sets of answers being correct e.g. you have to choose from a series of answers that resemble a pattern.

Example:

- Answer 1 if A is correct
- Answer 2 if A and C are correct
- Answer 3 if A, B and C are correct
- Answer 4 if D is correct
- Answer 5 if A and D are correct

(Points 1–6 adapted from <http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/study/exams/index.html>)

Parts of a multiple-choice question

Despite the type of multiple-choice questions, there are three important parts that you need to recognise: the root, the stem and the options.

(a) Root

The root is the core, or the main part of the question which relates to the facts you are being asked about. It may be any length and can apply to one or more questions. The facts contained in the root should enable you to answer the question.

- The root is the problem base for the questions, so do not add to it.
- All of the facts in the root may be significant, or some can be irrelevant.

(b) Stem

The stem may take several forms, but it is what you will recognise as the actual question. They may take some of the forms above (1–6).

- The stem may modify or supplement the information contained in the root. Often, this occurs where the same root is used as the basis for a series of questions.
- It may specify the cause of action or theory to use when answering the question.

(c) Options

This is the list of selections you can choose your answer from.

- They may be clear and concise, or they may be longer and include additional facts.

Strategies to employ to avoid making mistakes

You may have more success in multiple-choice exams if you follow some of these strategies:

- Time is always limited in an exam, and students can rush and get the answer wrong because they missed a key word or misread the question. Manage your time in the exam so you set aside a specific duration for each question and adhere to this plan.
- Be alert for basic statements which seem unusual. The change in language (e.g. prefixes and suffixes) could result in a change in answer. In addition, a single word may completely change the meaning of a question. Consider the following example:

Drinking alcohol results in <i>increased</i>	Drinking alcohol results in <i>decreased</i>
a. alertness	a. alertness
b. attention	b. attention
c. self-consciousness	c. self-consciousness
d. confidence	d. confidence

- Other words to watch out for include:

Equal	Less	Bad	Good	Guarantees
Is	Is not	And	Or	But
Never	Great	Much	Either	More
Not	Best	Worst	All	Most
Some	No	Always	Usually	Sometimes

- Think objectively about your choice and consider whether it properly answers the question. You may assume you have the right answer when you are very familiar with a topic and can define every key term.
- Only use the information given to you and don't assume anything else. The root, stem and the options contain everything you need to answer each question. Perhaps an important fact is missing and you will need to identify what that is.
- Pay close attention to the facts. If you change your understanding of a topic based on the question, include that adjustment in your analysis and selection of an answer.
- Look closely at minor details. Everything in the question is significant. The detail may be essential to the answer, or it may be serving as a "distractor" to reveal your assumptions.
- Try to approach the questions simply and avoid introducing further complications. The exam is there to test your knowledge, not to trick you, so avoid unique interpretations of the facts.
- Try to answer the questions in order so that you avoid confusing the order of your answers. If you must answer questions out of order and you have enough time, return to the question later.

A process of elimination

A process of elimination is an excellent strategy for arriving at the correct answer, especially if you are unsure by looking at all the answers. This means that you should start by eliminating answers that you are sure are incorrect, and narrow the options down until you have the most likely answer. Always remember:

- Read the alternatives very closely. Look quickly at the modifier, then analyse the reasoning and then the result. The response will not be correct if the reasoning is not correct.
- Of the limited options possible, only one of them will identify and resolve the central issue.

'Best' answer questions

Not every question will have several "wrong" answers. Often you will be asked to choose the "best" answer because there may be more than one answer to solve the problem. When approaching a question like this, remember:

- If you can prove an answer more easily, it is likely to be the correct one.
- More precise answers are usually better, because they will address the factual situation better than less precise answers.

Guessing intelligently

While no lecturer would advocate guessing, it is sometimes better than no answer. As long as there is no penalty for guessing and it is your last option, do it intelligently. Here are some helpful hints:

- Only guess after you have eliminated the answers which are clearly wrong.

- If two answers are opposites, one is most likely correct.
- Avoid complicating the question: follow your intuition if there seems to be an issue which is clearly relevant.
- After eliminating some options, trust your instincts. You have been working on the question and your 'gut feeling' may be your subconscious helping you to make the correct choice. Because of this, only go back and change an answer if you are sure that you have made an error, and you can see a very clear reason for changing it.
- Be wary of selections from unrelated subjects or unstudied theories.

Practise, practise, practise . . .

Having familiarised yourself with some of the aspects of multiple-choice questions, the best thing to do is become more comfortable with the format by practising with as many multiple-choice exams you can find.

Your teachers may have some past exam materials, but they may not want to provide them to you since it means that they have to redesign exams regularly, which is a difficult thing to do. Try the University Library for past exams in your course, and even try exams in related courses. Although you may not be directly familiar with the material, you can become more familiar with the types of questions that are being asked.

Regular practice sessions are an excellent way to test whether you truly understood the past week's material. Try to incorporate practice into your weekly study routine, and work with your friends and other students. Creating tests for each other can be an excellent way to improve your knowledge and your exam techniques. Anything you can do to imitate exam conditions will be advantageous: for instance, you might like to time yourself or test yourself in the Library or another formal space.

Useful resources

Counselling Service

If you are anxious about your exams, you can seek assistance. If stress becomes overwhelming there are a number of strategies you can explore. The University of Adelaide Counselling Service runs workshops on stress management and relaxation, or you can make a personal consultation time with one of the counsellors by ringing 8303 5663.

Multiple-Choice Exams Printable Material

<http://www.law.suffolk.edu/offices/stuservices/asp/pdf/MasteringMultiChoiceQues.pdf>

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/pdf/multiex.pdf>

<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/library/serv/exampprs.html> (How to find exam papers in the Library.)

If you require more assistance with Multiple-Choice Exams, contact the Writing Centre on 8313 5771.

Visit the Writing Centre website for additional resources: www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/

Principal Author: Donna Velliaris 2009