

Multiple Choice Tests & Exams

Becoming proficient at answering Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) is important, as it has implications not just for your GPA, but for future career options (e.g. admissions tests such as the MCAT, LSAT and GRE are heavily MCQ based). But don't despair! Here are some strategies to help you perform well on these types of questions.

MCQ Construction

A typical MCQ is composed of two parts: the stem that identifies the question or problem; and a set of alternatives, one which contains the key (the correct or "best" answer) and distractors (plausible but incorrect answers). Your job is to select the alternative(s) that best answers or completes the stem. A well-written MCQ will be clearly worded and avoid giving clues to the best answer.

Why Are MCQs So Challenging?

Many students believe MCQs are more challenging than essay or short answer questions for the following reasons:

1. **MCQs tend to test for detail.** If you're not a detail-oriented person, you may find these types of questions more difficult.
2. **You can't justify your answer.** In an essay-type question, you can argue your point of view. With the MCQ, your only option is to select from the answers available.
3. **So many questions can be overwhelming.** Even though MCQs tend to be worth less than an essay question, some students prefer having fewer questions to focus on.

Dispelling the Myths About MCQs

Numerous myths circulate about how to perform well on MCQs:

- *Pick the longest answer.* This is simply not true. More often, the key will be complete, yet concise.
- *When in doubt, pick "C."* There is no evidence to support this advice. Test writers are advised to vary the location of correct alternatives randomly.
- *Never change your first answer.* If you have solid, rational arguments for changing your initial answer, then do so. Otherwise, trust your first instinct.

What About Guessing?

If you're not penalized for incorrect answers, guessing is fine. However, relying on guessing alone is a risky venture. Consider the following odds: If you take a 25 question multiple choice test, with each question containing 4 choices, you have almost a *one in a million chance* of getting a C or higher with guessing alone!

Study Strategies for Success

- **Know the details.** MCQs tend to test for detail. You must study the material thoroughly and aim for understanding, not just memorizing. Process the material deeply. Cramming will not aid this process.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** Reading over your notes and textbook is simply not enough. You must practice what you'll be doing on the test. If your course is problem-based, spend the majority of your time doing problems. If your textbook has sample questions at the back of the chapter, make sure you answer them. Test yourself.
- **Study intensely, but take frequent breaks.** Most adults can give a task their undivided concentration for a period of 35—45 minutes. If you find yourself fading, maximize your brain power by taking a five-minute break.
- **Make it meaningful and memorable.** If something you study is meaningful to you in some way, you are more likely to remember it. Try connecting the study material with something in your own life or a recent news event, and it will be easier to recall on a test.
- **Be familiar with the types of MCQs used on your exams.** If possible, look at old exams and assignments to assess the kinds of questions generally used by your professor. If none are available, ask your professor for some sample questions so you know what to expect.

Strategies for Writing the Exam

- **Watch your time.** Before you start writing, assess how much time you have per question. Don't spend too much time on any one question. If you don't know the answer, simply put an identifying mark in the margin, move on to other questions, and come back to it later. The answer will often come to you as you work your way through the test or exam.
- **Underline qualifying words like "always," "never," etc.** These words are crucial because they can completely change the nature of the question.
- **Read the stem thoroughly.** Then think of the answer in your mind. But be sure to read all of the alternatives because the goal is to pick the best answer, not just one that is true.
- **Watch for typos as clues to the best answer.** If one of the alternatives has a typo, it is probably not the key. Test writers usually pay a lot of attention to the proper wording and spelling of the key.
- **Eliminate wrong answers and see what is left over.** Sometimes it is easier to identify the key if there are fewer alternatives to choose from. In addition, it can be motivating to remove those options you know are incorrect.
- **Beware of true statements that don't address the stem.** Sometimes a test-writer will include true statements in the alternatives that don't have anything to do with the question being asked. This is because they know students will often pick a true statement simply because it looks familiar, even though it isn't related to the stem at all.
- **If two items have similar wording, one of the parallel statements is probably correct.** Students often struggle with those alternatives that look fairly similar. Once you eliminate the dissimilar alternatives, choose the option that gives the most complete information.
- **In a question with an "all of the above" choice, if you see at least two true statements, then "all of the above" is the right answer.** This is self-explanatory.
- **Be systematic with confusing MCQs with many alternatives, such as "all of the above," "A, B and D," etc.** Many students feel overwhelmed by MCQ's that have many different alternatives to choose from. Evaluate each alternative carefully. It is tempting to read quickly but you must resist doing so in order to pick the best answer.
- **Review your answers.** Always leave time to check your work. That way, you'll catch any careless errors, such as accidentally filling in the wrong bubble on your test sheet.

Resources Available at the Academic Advising & Career Centre

- For even more tips, attend our *Mastering Multiple Choice Tests and Exams* seminar. You can sign up via the intranet. You will also find more information on multiple choice tests in some of the study skills books in the Academic Advising & Career Centre (AA&CC). Some books to begin with include: *Learning for Success, 3rd Ed.*, *Survey of 300 A+ Students*, and *Test Taking Secrets*.