



DOUGLAS COLLEGE

Learning Centre

STRATEGIES FOR WRITING MULTIPLE-CHOICE EXAMS

Multiple-Choice Questions

Careful reading is also essential for answering multiple-choice questions correctly. Begin by reading the directions carefully. *Usually* the directions say to select only *one* answer; however, do not assume this is always the case. Read the directions to find out. The directions often say to select the *best* answer. One or more of the answers may be correct, but the answer that is the most inclusive (includes the most information) is the best answer. Notice how careful reading is essential in the following example:

- _____ 1. In true-false questions, you should
- a. Watch for negatives because they can change the meaning of a sentence.
 - b. Recognize when a definition is being tested.
 - c. Consider the importance of a 100 percent modifier.
 - d. Use red flag words to help you read more carefully.

Answers (a), (b), (c) are correct; however, (d) includes all the answers in (a), (b), and (c). Red flag words are definition clues, negatives, modifiers, and relationship clues.

Stems and Distractors

Multiple-choice questions have two parts: the *stem*, which begins the question, and the **options**. Only one option is correct. The other options are called distractors.

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|------------------|-------|----|--|
| (Stem) | _____ | 1. | The index in a book |
| (Distractor) | | a. | Provides you with a list of titles for units and chapters. |
| (Distractor) | | b. | Can be organized only by subjects. |
| (Distractor) | | c. | Is an alphabetical listing of specialized words and their definitions. |
| (Correct option) | | d. | Is an alphabetized list of subjects or authors discussed in the book. |

Too many students make the mistake of reading the stem, seeing one possible option, and then making that option the answer. A better option may exist further down the list. Using a system to think through and answer multiple-choice questions can improve your performance on this type of objective questions.

A Six Step Strategy for Multiple-Choice Questions

1. **Read the stem and each option as a true-false question**
2. **Eliminate as many distractors as possible.**
3. **Use immediate response if you know the answer.**
4. **Use delayed response if you don't know the answer.**
5. **Use assisted response when you return to answer questions.**
6. **Use educated guessing if necessary.**

Step One: Make True-False Statements. Read the stem with option (a). Underline key words and circle red flag words if you need help focusing on the question. Then decide if the statement by itself is true or false:

1. If the statement is false, you have discovered a distractor. Cross it out; it will not be the correct answer.
2. If the statement is true, this *may* be the correct answer. Do not select it yet.
3. Continue making true-false statements with the stem and *each* of the options so that you will be able to select the *best* answer.

The following example shows how to think through this process:

- _____ 1. The principle of big picture-little pictures
- a. Encourages you to memorize individual facts and details.
 - b. Is based completely on rote memory.
 - c. Recommends that you process information only in clusters.
 - d. Recommends that you strive to “see the trees” *and* “see the forest” when you study.

By adding each option to the stem, these are the true-false statements that result. Decide if each statement is true or false.

- _____ a. The principle of big picture-little pictures encourages you to memorize individual facts and details.
- _____ b. The principle of big picture-little pictures is based on completely on rote memory.
- _____ c. The principle of big picture-little pictures recommends that you process information only in clusters.
- _____ d. The principle of big picture-little pictures recommends that you strive to “see the trees” *and* “see the forest” when you study.

(A) is true, but you don't know yet if it is the best answer. (B) is false. (C) is false because of the red flag word only. (D) is true. You have identified two distractors. The choice is now between (A) and (D). Which answer is the best? Why?

Step Two: Eliminate Distractors. Eliminate as many distractors as possible. The more distractors you can definitely eliminate, the closer you are to the correct answer.

Step Three: Use Immediate Response. If you know the correct answer, write it on the line. Be sure your writing is easy to read. If the letter is not clear, it will be marked wrong.

Step Four: Use Delayed Response. If you don't know the correct answer even after you have eliminated a distractor, read the possible options a second time. If you don't know the answer, put a check next to the question. Return to this question after you have gone through all the other questions on the test.

Step Five: Use Assisted Response. When you return to an unanswered question, use an assisted response. Skim back through the test to search for other parts of the test that are related and may be able to help you decide which option is best. If you underlined key words to help you stay focused on the question, skim the test to find those words. You may find information to help you select an answer, or the process of skimming may trigger some association in your memory to help you with the answer.

Step Six: Use Educated Guessing. If none of the foregoing strategies helps you find the correct answer, guess. If you were not able to eliminate any of the answers,

Eliminate Foolish or Insulting Options

If you see answers that are meant to be humorous, ridiculous, or unreasonable, treat them as distractors. If answers are insulting or demeaning, treat them as distractors. (An example is included in the next section.)

Eliminate Options with Unfamiliar Terms

If you have thoroughly studied your textbook and your lecture notes, you will be familiar with all the key terms covered in the course. If you see options that are totally unfamiliar, treat them as distractors. In the following example, the stem and the options are turned into true-false statements. Notice the option that contains a foolish answer and the option that contains an unfamiliar term.

- _____ 1. Interpersonal intelligence
- a. Is a form of type B behavior.
 - b. Is shown by those who party instead of study.
 - c. Is not a useful quality in school.
 - d. Belongs to those with social and leadership skills.
- F A. Interpersonal intelligence is a form of type B behavior. (*This term has not been discussed in this course.*)
- F B. Interpersonal intelligence is shown by those who party instead of study. (*This is ridiculous!*)
- F C. Interpersonal intelligence is not a useful quality in school. (*Having strong communication, social, and leadership skills is useful in school.*)
- T D. Interpersonal intelligence belongs to those with social and leadership skills. (*This is true. It matches the definition of interpersonal intelligence.*)

Eliminate the Highest and Lowest Numbers

When the options are numbers, chances are better that the correct answer is one of the numbers in the middle range. Therefore, treat the highest and the lowest numbers as distractors. That leaves you with two options. Try to reason through to make the better choice. If any one of the other guessing strategies apply (such as choose [c]), incorporate that strategy as well to choose your answer.

Notice how this strategy is used in the following example:

- _____ 1. The average rate of thinking is
- a. 100 words per minute.
 - b. 200 words per minute.
 - c. 400 words per minute.
 - d. 650 words per minute

Eliminate 100 and 650. Think back to the material on the rate of thinking. Which one sounds familiar? If you have to guess, take a wild shot guess and choose (c)-- which is correct.

Choose One of the Look-alike Options

Some questions have two options that look almost the same. Perhaps only one or two words are different. Chances are good that the correct answer is one of these two. Eliminate the other options and focus on these two look-alikes. Carefully think through and associate the information to what you have learned. If you can't decide, choose either one.

- _____ 1. Compared to the left hemisphere of the brain, the right hemisphere of the brain
- a. understands spoken language better.
 - b. has better logical abilities.
 - c. perceives words better.
 - d. perceives emotions better.

Focus on (c) and (d) because they are look-alikes. Now try to reason your way through this. You have already eliminated (a), which deals with language. Because (c) also relates to language, it, too, must be incorrect. This leaves you with (d) as the correct answer, which it is. (Notice in this case how the guessing strategy to use [c] does not work--there are no guarantees!)

Choose the longest or Most Inclusive Option

This guessing strategy is based on two premises. First, sometimes more words are needed to give complete enough information to make a correct answer. Second, an answer that covers a wider range of possibilities is more likely correct.

You can begin by looking at the *length* of the answer. If one option is much longer than the others, choose it. Also look at the content of the answers. Sometimes two or three answers may be correct to some degree, but one answer contains more information or a broader idea. This answer is the most inclusive. Notice how the **most inclusive answer** in the following is the best answer.

- _____ 1. Test anxiety can be reduced by focusing
- a. on yourself and ignoring others.
 - b. on outward thoughts and actions.
 - c. on your strengths and accomplishments.
 - d. on the five strategies to reduce test anxiety.

All of the answers are correct to some degree. However, (d) is the longest and includes a wider range of information. The answers (a), (b), and (c) fit under the category given in (d).

Choose “All of the Above”

If you know for sure that two options are correct, but you are not sure about the third option, and the fourth option is “all of the above”, choose. It. This is a safe guess since you can choose only one answer and you know that two are correct. If you do not know for certain that two are correct, and you have tried each option in a true-false form and don't know the answer, go ahead and choose “all of the above”. This strategy is not a very reliable one, so be sure to check out all other possibilities before you decide to use this strategy.

- _____ 1. Cramming is
- a. the result of being under prepared.
 - b. a frantic attempt to learn a lot of information in a short amount of time.
 - c. a method that does not use very many memory principles.
 - d. Characterized by all of the above.

Your first reaction might be to choose (b) because it is the longest answer. However, if you know that at least two of these are correct, your only choice then is to choose (d), which is correct.

Choose (C) as a Wild Shot Guess

Many teachers favour the (c) answer for the correct answer. If you try writing some of your own multiple-choice questions, you may find that you too tend to put more correct answers in the (c) position than in any other position. Here are a few explanations for why (c) is the most common answer:

- (A) is not used as often because many students would stop reading the question and stop thinking about the answer if the correct answer was given first.
- (B) is not used as often for the same reason as (a) is not.
- (C) seems to hide the answer best and force the reader to read through more of the options.
- (D) seems to be too visible because it is on the last line.