

Multiple Choice Exams

Many classes assess learning through multiple choice exams. Multiple choice exams can be tricky, and it is common for students to struggle with this format. Many students feel that they studied effectively and know the material well, but the multiple-choice format trips them up and they do not do as well as they expected. Often, students are misled by distractors—choices that can look, sound or mean about the same thing as the correct answer, but are incorrect because they are either too specific or too general. This handout discusses things to know about multiple choice exams and effective strategies to improve your performance on these types of exams.

Preparing for multiple choice exams

Self-test with practice example problems in multiple choice format. It's important to practice the same kind of problems as the ones you will see on the exam. To do this, look for study guides, end-of-chapter practice problems, and practice exams. Once you have found practice problems, answer or solve as many as possible. Don't look at the answers or solutions until you have already answered the question on your own. Only look at the answers to check and see if you were right.

Use the practice test as a study tool. Take the incorrect answer choices from each question and make them correct. Ask yourself, "What would make this answer right?" or "This answer would be correct if it said..." This will give you more practice with the material and give you some insight on how the test writer is organizing the questions.

Use effective study strategies as you prepare for your exam. Good techniques include concept maps, self-testing, and higher order questions. Check out the resources and videos from the Learning Center to learn more about effective study and note-taking strategies.

Space out your studying over a longer period of time and break it into smaller study sessions. Limit your study sessions to no more than one hour at a time and give yourself breaks in between.

During multiple choice exams

Strategies for answering the question

Analyze the stem (the question or statement), noting how the meaning changes with:

- Qualifiers (i.e. usually, sometimes)
- Modifiers (i.e. always, never)
- Negatives (i.e. not, none, un__, dis__, etc.)

Cover up the answer and read only the stem (the question or statement). Read only as much as you can understand before continuing. Underline or circle key words. This will help you fully understand and focus on the question before thinking about the answer.

Answer the question in your own words before reading the choices. Then look for a choice that best matches your answer.

Make sure to read all of the answer choices, even if you think you know the correct answer. Sometimes there is an answer that seems correct, but there is a better answer.

Use process of elimination. Actually cross out answers that you know are wrong to help narrow down your choices.

Identify and eliminate distractors to help narrow your choices:

- Note similar answers
- Note grammatically incorrect choices
- Be wary of extreme modifiers (i.e. always, never)
- Plug each remaining answer into the stem and see how it sounds and feels as a complete statement. Incorrect answers may sound awkward when they are plugged into the question.

Stuck? Try these strategies:

- Skip the question and come back to it. Other test questions may offer clues and information that might help.
- Make notes in the margin to help you recall content.
- If all else fails, guess! Don't just leave it blank.

Strategies for self-management during the exam

Decide if you want to do the easier ones first to boost your confidence or tackle the more difficult ones first to identify roadblocks.

Manage your time. Pay attention to how much time you have remaining and budget your time so you are able to get through the whole exam

Strategies for bubbling

If using a scantron, bubble in your answers as you go, instead of waiting until the end and bubbling them all in at once. Bubbling as you go can help ensure you don't accidentally skip one or make an error in bubbling.

Check out video on Learning Center video for further details about taking multiple choice exams.

After multiple choice exams

Take a deep breath. No matter what happened or how it went, be kind to yourself, stay positive, and keep trying new strategies.

Reflect on the exam; don't just look at the grade and forget about it. Think about some of these questions to reflect and set goals going forward:

- How did I do on this test? Why do I think I got this grade?
- How did I feel going into this test? Prepared? Unprepared? Nervous? How did these feelings affect the test?
- What factors most impacted my score on this exam? (the multiple-choice format, time management during the test, my study habits, test anxiety, not understanding the content, or something else?)
- What strategies did I use to prepare for this exam? Are there other strategies I could try?
- How much time did I spend studying and over what length of time? Do I need to start studying earlier and space it out more?
- What can I do now to improve and grow?

Attend tutoring to review your test and any missed questions or points of confusion with your professor. Also ask about ways to better prepare for the next test.

Mark any questions you got wrong and then analyze each one and why you missed them. You can use the Learning Center's test analyzer to help you think through each missed question and what went wrong.

Works consulted

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