

Mastering Multiple Choice Exams

Multiple choice exams are common because they're the simplest method for testing a large number of students on a wide range of material. The multiple choice exam format can be challenging, but by paying attention to subtleties and knowing your material, you can choose the right answers more consistently.

The multiple choice exam format

Understanding the way multiple choice questions are formatted can help you identify the correct response. Generally, the choices given for multiple choice questions are as follows:

1. Distracter – an answer similar to the right answer, but wrong
2. The right answer, but only if certain conditions apply
3. A “clearly” wrong answer.
4. The right answer!

Read the questions and options carefully, and don't get trapped by Jargon – words that sound impressive but are not the right answer or familiar phrases from the course – common statements or phrases from the course, but not the right answer.

Before the exam

Even though multiple choice exams can seem like a memorization test, it is important to thoroughly understand the material you study. This will help you answer more difficult questions while making it easier to recall what you know rather than what you have tried to commit to memory.

Study regularly leading up to the exam, and try to organize your notes in a way that makes them easier to remember. Making flash cards, using mnemonic devices such as acronyms, drawing concept maps, or whatever suits your learning style and can help you learn more efficiently. If you are seeking help to create a study plan, organize your notes or understand study strategies, visit the Student Life Hub.

If available, use past exams to help study. Ask your professor, faculty or search for practice tests online. If none is available, try making your own multiple choice questions.

During the exam

Try to answer a question in your head before looking at the possible answers. This way the choices given on the test won't throw you off or trick you.

Eliminate answers you know are incorrect. Reducing the selection of answers makes it easier to decide which one is correct.

Read all the choices carefully before choosing your answer. Underline key words to help focus your reasoning.

Don't change your answer unless you misread the question. Change answers if you have a good reason, but if you are unsure, trust your gut feeling.

If you are confused by the wording of a question, ask your professors to clarify. They can't tell you the answers, but that doesn't mean they can't help you to better understand the questions.

Don't get stuck on individual questions. If you can't decide on an answer, move on and save time to come back to it later.

Examples

1. Which of the following is a support service on campus?

A. Starbucks

B. Student Learning Centre

C. Good 2 Talk

All of the above

We know a) can't be correct, because it is a coffee shop. Good 2 Talk isn't on campus, so c) may be crossed off, and if a) and c) are wrong, so is d), since not all answers are true.

2. John won \$50 at a skateboarding competition and spent it all on a new skateboard. His brother, Dan, gave him an old board for the competition, but John broke it hours before getting the new one. This was after Dan had told John he would buy him supper if he won the competition. John had ridden his new board for two hours when Dan told him that the board was only worth half as much as the one he broke. How much did Dan pay for the board that John broke?

A. \$75

B. \$90

B. \$100

B. \$120

The only information needed to answer this question is that "John won \$50 and spent it all on a board... worth half as much as the one he broke." The rest of the information is unnecessary.

Don't let the trickiness of any multiple choice question undermine your confidence in the material. Your knowledge is ultimately more important than any test score. No exam can test everything you know, and nobody knows everything, so don't let a little adversity discourage you. **Answers for examples: Ex.1 – b) Ex.2 – c)**

Make Smart Choices!

Student Learning Centre

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