

Strategies for Answering Multiple-Choice Questions

On multiple-choice tests, certain strategies distinguish good test takers from poor test takers. While you do need to know content included on the test in order to do well, knowing some proven test-taking strategies can help you get an even better score.

1. Different types of Questions:

- Questions that require prior knowledge, e.g. poetic devices, literary devices, parts of speech. (You can prepare for this by studying literary terms and devices.)
- Questions where no prior knowledge is required, e.g. main idea, supporting detail, inference (and sometimes vocabulary in context).

2. General Strategies for Multiple-Choice Test Questions

- Read the question carefully, paying attention to the key words of the question.
- Rephrase the question in your own words before attempting to choose the answer.
- Eliminate incorrect answers first and select the best answer.
- Process of elimination
 - Answer might be too easy or too obvious
 - Words used in an answer might be a different part of speech
 - Words in an answer might have multiple definitions - the easier or more common definition is usually not correct
 - Watch for words like always, never, except
 - Be careful selecting answers that indicate extremes
 - Look for key words in questions or examples that might provide an answer, or other reference
- Select the best answer
 - There is no penalty for guessing; make your best guess; do not leave blank an answer
 - Use prior knowledge: words you know, prefix, suffix, roots, foreign languages (especially for vocabulary in context)
 - There can be two "right" answers; look at diction
- If a question has you stumped or seems especially difficult, skip it and come back to it later after you have finished the easier questions.
- If you can eliminate at least two answers and still aren't sure, take a guess or come back to the question later. Then go with the answer that seems right to you.
- Go back to the most difficult questions after you've answered all the others. If you still can't eliminate any answers at this point, GUESS. Do Not Leave Any Answers Blank.

General Strategies for Answering Multiple-Choice Questions Based on Reading Passages

1. **Preview the passage and the questions.** Read the title of the passage, the directions, and any introductory material. Scan the passage to get a feel for the type of writing it is, and the level of difficulty of the material. Finally, read the questions (but don't worry about the answers at this point) to help you focus your reading.
2. **Read the passage carefully.** You are allowed to write on the test. Write notes in the margins and underline information that you think will help you answer some of the questions.
3. **After you read the passage, begin answering the questions.** Use general strategies above, but also remember to use the passage. Some questions will not require you to reread any of the passage, but others will. Go back to the passage to help you answer questions when it's called for.
4. **When you choose an answer** for a question that's related to something in the passage, check the passage once more for evidence that your answer is correct before selecting it.

Do's for Answering Multiple-Choice Questions

1. If the question is "conceptual", i.e., if the answer it seeks is a statement, begin by covering the alternatives with a ruler or piece of paper. Then, carefully read and understand the stem of the question before looking at the alternatives. Circle or underline key words in the stem, paying special attention to qualifying words such as "always," "major," "increase," etc.
2. Use your knowledge of headings to think about where in your text, lecture notes, lab, etc. that question is drawn from. Recall a few salient points about the information. If necessary, jot down any relevant facts you need to process the alternatives. This does not have to take much time but this recall is an essential step!
3. Predict an answer, if possible.
4. Uncover all of the alternatives and check the format of the question. Is only one of the alternatives correct, or can several or all of the alternatives be correct?
5. Read each alternative carefully for understanding - NOT JUST FOR RECOGNITION. Again, pay careful attention to qualifying words. Keeping the stem of the question in mind, respond to each alternative with a yes, no, or maybe/not sure.
6. If you know the answer, carefully mark the correct answer on your answer sheet.
7. If you do not know the answer, re-check the stem of the question. Narrow your choices, by eliminating any alternative that you know is incorrect. If two options still look equally appealing, compare each to the stem of the question, making sure that the one you eventually choose answers what is asked. If you are still not sure, make an educated guess.
8. If you were unable to make a choice and need to spend more time with the question, or you answered the question but are not at all sure that you made the correct choice, put a big question mark beside that question, and move on to the next. Avoid getting bogged down on one question part of the way through the exam. It is much better to move on and finish all of those questions that you can answer and then to come back later to process the problematic questions.
9. If necessary, when looking over the questions again, change an answer if you can logically justify the change.
- 10.** If one answer seems to be correct (i.e. obviously jumps out at you) it is probably the correct answer (90% of first impression answers are correct).

Don'ts for Answering Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Don't select an alternative just because you remember learning the information in the course; it may be a "true" statement in its own right, but you have to make sure that it is the "correct" answer to the question.
2. Don't pick an answer just because it seems to make sense. You are answering from your knowledge of the course content, not just from your general knowledge and logic.
3. Don't dismiss an alternative because it seems too obvious and simple an answer. If you are well prepared for the exam, some of the questions will appear very straight forward to you.
4. Don't be wowed by fancy terms in the question, i.e., don't say to yourself, "That sounds impressive, so it must be the right answer!"
5. Don't pick "c" every time you are unsure of the answer. You could end up picking "c" far too many times.
6. Don't pick your answer based on a pattern of responses, i.e., don't say to yourself, "This can't be another "b" answer as we have just had three in a row."

More Strategies for Answering Multiple-Choice Questions

1. *Read all of the stem and every alternative.*

– Read the stem with each alternative to take advantage of the correct sound or flow that the correct answer often produces. Also, you can eliminate any alternatives that do not agree grammatically with the stem.

– **Some students find it effective to read the stem and anticipate the correct alternative before actually looking at the alternatives. If you generally do better on essay exams, this strategy may help you a great deal. Research shows that one in three students scores better with this strategy alone!**

2. *Consider "all of the above" and "none of the above."* Examine the "above" alternatives to see if all of them or none of them apply totally. If even one does not apply totally, do not consider "all of the above" or "none of the above" as the correct answer. Make sure that a statement applies to the question since it can be true, but not be relevant to the question at hand!

3. *Note negatives.* If a negative such as "none", "not", "never", or "neither" occurs in the stem, know that the correct alternative must be a fact or absolute and that the other alternatives could be true statements, but not the correct answer.

4. *Note superlatives.* Words such as "every", "all", "none", "always", and "only" are superlatives that indicate the correct answer must be an undisputed fact. In the social sciences, absolutes are rare.

5. *Note qualifying words.* "Usually", "often", "generally", "may", and "seldom" are qualifiers that could indicate a true statement.

6. *Study Qualifications.* Break the stem down into grammatical parts. Pull out the bare subject and verb (if it is in the stem), and then examine all the modifiers (qualifiers) to the subject and verb. This process ensures that you will examine every part of the stem.

7. *Changing Answers.* If you have a good reason for changing your answer, change it, but only if you are certain your original answer is wrong. If you are wavering, trust your original gut instinct – it tends to be right 90% of the time.

8. *Reviewing your exam.* Check to be certain you have answered all the questions, but do NOT go back and review your answers.