Multiple Choice Exams
Strategies for Success

Introduction

What are the tips and tricks of multiple choice? This is the question students usually ask, but the truth is there are no tricks. Multiple choice exams are just like any other type of exam in that they require preparation, good study skills and effective writing strategies. By following a few simple exam-writing guidelines, you will find that it is possible to overcome exam stress and achieve better examination results.

Studying for Multiple Choice

Many students assume that studying for multiple choice exams requires simple memorization and recognition; however, it is important to do more than just memorize information. You must learn it, understand it and also be able to look at the material in different ways. In other words, you will study for multiple choice just as you would for a short answer exam.

• Check the syllabus: What are the learning objectives and weekly themes?
• Consider the textbook’s headings and subheadings, and pay attention to anything bold, italicized or otherwise unique.
• Lectures: What information does the professor emphasize or repeat?
• Look for themes, as well as ideas that are opposing or closely related.

Writing the Multiple Choice Exam

When writing your exam, take the following steps to increase your success and improve your results:

Read Directions Carefully
Because all exams are created differently, they may have unique instructions or requirements. Are you allowed to write on the exam paper? Are you penalized for guessing? What is the time limit? Knowing and understanding these instructions will ensure no marks are lost for avoidable mistakes.

Plan Your Time
Before starting the exam, consider the time limit and how many questions there are. Factor in some time at the end for reviewing your answers, and figure out how much time you have per question. If you get stuck on a difficult question, move on and come back to it later.

Answer Systematically and Use Logic
Follow these steps when answering questions:
• Use the “cover up” strategy: Cover up the possible choices and guess the answer before looking.
• Underline key words in the question. Read carefully, and translate into your own words.
• Take out extra, unnecessary information in the question that might distract from the meaning.
• Watch for small but important words, such as “not” or “except”.

Exam Preparation Begins On Day 1

While it may seem easy to wait until the last minute, preparing for exams starts on the first day of class. Everything on your exam will be from lectures, weekly readings and notes, so it is important to attend all classes and maintain a good note-taking system. Review notes regularly to keep information fresh, and remember that your professor is a great resource. Take advantage of weekly office hours, and listen carefully for exam hints!

Understanding Key Concepts
Studying for multiple choice exams requires understanding of the key concepts and ideas. But how do you know what the key concepts are?
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• Pay attention to absolute qualifiers, such as “never”, “always” or “none” – these choices are often (but not always!) wrong.
• Eliminate choices you know are wrong.
• If debating between two choices, compare them for differences and refer to the question for the best answer.
• Don’t look for patterns in your responses.
• If two choices are exact opposites (e.g., either Jamie is a girl or Jamie is a boy), one of them is likely the correct answer.
• If two choices mean the same thing (e.g., X is a positive number or X is greater than 0), neither is correct.
• Don’t change your answers (unless you have a very good reason to).
• When all else fails, guess! (unless there are penalties for guessing)