Answering Multiple-Choice Questions

This resource outlines strategies for approaching exams and quizzes with multiple-choice questions.

Understanding the instructions

Careful reading is essential for answering multiple-choice questions correctly. Begin by reading the directions carefully:

- *Usually* the instructions say to select only *one* answer; however, do not assume this is always the case.
- The instructions may say to select the *best* answer. This means 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.
- If the test is online, determine if you allowed to return to questions later for review or if you only have one opportunity to answer them.

Understanding the parts of the question

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

The index in a book	*(Stem)*
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?*	*(Distractor)*
d. *is an alphabetized list of subjects or authors discussed in the book?*	*(Correct option)*

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.

Strategies for answering multiple-choice questions

Use these strategies to help find your answer when you know the material. If you are taking the exam online, keep paper and pen nearby, so you can make notes about your answer choices.

Use Immediate Response

If you know the correct answer, write it out immediately. Then use the other strategies to check your answer to find the best response.

Eliminate Distractors

Eliminate as many distractors as possible with your knowledge of the subject. The more distractors you can eliminate, the closer you are to the correct answer.

Make True-False Statements

Read the stem with each option. 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:

- If the statement is false, you have discovered a distractor. Cross it out.
- If the statement is true, this may be the correct answer. Do not select it yet.
- 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:

> *The principle of big picture-little pictures*   *(Stem)*
> 1.   *encourages you to memorize individual facts and details.*
> 2.   *is based completely on rote memory.*
> 3.   *recommends that you process information only in clusters.*
> 4.   *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 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 word only. (d) is true. You have identified two distractors, (b) and (c). The choice is now between (a) and (d). Which answer is the best? Why?

Use Delayed Response*

*If you are allowed to return to questions on the exam. 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.

Making educated guesses

If none of the previous strategies helped you find the correct answer, your next option is to guess.

If a question has four options, you have a one in four chance of guessing the right answer. Your goal is to eliminate as many options as possible to increase your odds of guessing correctly. If you can eliminate one option so that you are choosing from three, your odds of being correct increase to one in three. If you can eliminate two options, you have a one in two chance of guessing correctly since only two options are left.

Eliminate 100-Percent Modifier (or Absolute) Options

When an option with a 100-percent modifier is added to the stem, a true-false question is created. The true-false guessing strategy for 100-percent modifiers is to guess false because reality is rarely all or nothing.

>   *The prefix intra-*
>   a.   *Is never used in English words.*
>   b.   *Always means "between".*
>   c.   *Means "within" or "inside of".*
>   d.   *Means none of the above.*

>   _F_   a.   The prefix *intra-* is **never** used in English words.
>   _F_   b.   The prefix *intra-* **always** means "Between".
>   _T_   c.   The prefix *intra-* means "within" or "inside of".

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.

>   *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. 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.

>   *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.

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.

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.

> 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.

> 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 instructors favor 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 as well. Only use this strategy if all the other strategies did not help you eliminate distractors.