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Multiple-Choice Test Strategies

Multiple-choice is the most popular kind of standardized test. It's popular with professors, because the answers are easy for teaching assistants to grade. And it's the type of exam that rewards testwise students with the most extra points for their testwiseness.

We have arranged the strategies for answering multiple-choice questions in the order in which you should use them during an exam. In other words, if strategies 1 through 3 supply the answers, don't even bother to use strategies 4 through 9.

STRATEGY 1: WORK QUICKLY

Studies have shown that students who rapid-fire their way through multiple-choice tests—even if they pick some answers at random—get better scores than students who may know the material better but are slow at taking tests.

Read each question through just once. Don't dawdle

about putting down the right answer the instant you come to it. If you have second thoughts about the answer, don't stop to think about it right then; jot down a little mark alongside the number. Then, if you have time at the end of the test, you can go back and think over your first answer.

If an answer seems obvious, have confidence in yourself. Choose that simple answer. Don't waste time looking for hidden qualifications and tricks.

STRATEGY 2: GIVE THE ANSWER THE TEACHER WANTS

Sloppy reading and intellectual heroics can cost you test points. Learn to read—and to understand—test instructions as well as questions. Then follow them.

Tactic 1: Make sure you understand precisely what the directions tell you to do

Some tests, especially teacher-prepared versions, ask for the *most correct* answer. In that case, you may have to figure out more than just the answer; you may have to figure out what the test preparer's biases are. Remember, it's not what seems most correct to *you* that counts, but what the *teacher* believes is most correct. This is not the time to stand staunchly by your own opinions.

Some teacher-made tests allow for *more than one* correct answer. If you're supposed to mark *all* the right ones, be sure to do it.

Be careful on tests that include "all of the above" or "none of the above" choices. Don't select a choice like that unless it applies *totally*. For example, if the first two choices are right, the third choice is definitely wrong, and the fourth choice is "all of the above," *don't* check off number 4. Choose between number 1 and number 2.

Tactic 2: Study the “given” part of each question

Read quickly, but read *every* word that counts. (If you’re not good at this, practice. Race against the clock using the practice test books listed in Appendix A. This is a skill that can be learned. Learn it.)

If the “given” section of a question (test-designers call it the *stem*) includes several complicated statements, isolate each of them. Make sure you understand each individual part. When you have picked an answer, check it against each segment. Your answer has to satisfy every part of the question. Several studies have shown that this knack of breaking down complicated questions into several smaller ones rewards testwise students with extra points on almost every exam.

STRATEGY 3: GUESS BEFORE YOU CHOOSE

Figure out your answer before you look at the possible choices. If it’s among the choices, you’ll save a lot of time. If it isn’t, forget it and start studying each of the choices. At least you will have activated the part of your memory that applies to the topic, and that can help you recognize the answer your test-maker is seeking.

STRATEGY 4: CHOOSE THE CLOSEST ANSWER

Most multiple-choice tests look for the quick, easy response. By their very nature, they are simplistic. So choose the closest answer—even if you think it isn’t 100 percent correct.

If a test is well constructed, all the answers will seem somewhat plausible. In that case, there will probably be at least one clue word in the stem that makes one answer definitely better than all the rest. Go back and reread the stem, looking for that clue word.

Some test-makers set traps for the unwary. They may put a plausible but incorrect choice first, then surround the one correct answer with some implausible choices. So don't grab at answer (a) until you have read (b), (c), and (d) as well.

STRATEGY 5: ELIMINATE IMPLAUSIBLE ANSWERS

The greater the number of ridiculous choices you can discard, the better your odds are of choosing the correct answer.

- Some answers are obviously wrong. Move quickly to the next possibility.
- Many answers are partly wrong. If they are wrong in *any* significant way, they're not the right choice unless the question was badly written. In that case, take it up with your instructor *after* the exam but *before* grades are given out.
- Many answers are correct statements by themselves. But they have nothing to do with the stem part of the question. Don't get trapped into choosing one of these.
- Sometimes two answers say exactly the opposite thing. In such a case, the correct answer is usually one or the other of the pair. (But if your teacher is a trickster, be wary!)
- Many times, two of the answers are similar. Often only one or two words are different. Again, the correct answer is usually one of the pair. Decide how the two answers are different and how these differences make one correct and the other incorrect.

STRATEGY 6: LOOK FOR CLUE WORDS OR NUMBERS

You can't always figure out correct answers by looking for

clue words. In fact, some clever test-makers deliberately insert phony clues to throw the unwary student off the track. But if you have exhausted the first five strategies, then give this one a try. Looking for clues may point you to an answer that you suddenly remember as the correct one.

Tactic 1: Watch for absolutes and qualifiers

Answers that include *always*, *never*, *all*, and *none* are often incorrect. Few things in life are *always* true or *always* false. Test-designers who try to avoid quarrels over the answers like to slip in qualifiers such as *seldom*, *generally*, and *tend to be*.

Here's an actual exam question that could have been figured out using this method:

All of the following theories about the state of the dead are represented in the *Odyssey* except:

1. The dead may be changed into minor gods and thus achieve immortality.
2. The fortunate dead go to fields of eternal summer.
3. The spirits of the dead are taken to the Underworld.
4. Death is simply the end, with no survival in any form.

Got it all figured out already. No? Well, in number 1 the tester says, "The dead *may be* changed. . . ." Number 2 says, "The *fortunate* dead go. . . ." In number 3 you won't find such easy clue words, but anyone who knows anything about Greek mythology recognizes the statement as being true. Notice that in number 4 the clue words give it all away: ". . . *no* survival in *any* form." That's right. The correct answer is number 4. Even if you had never opened the *Odyssey*, if you used Strategy 6 you could get the correct answer!

Tactic 2: Look for grammatical clues

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, there's a tendency among test-makers to have the correct answer agree grammatically with the stem; they seldom take such care with incorrect responses. But beware: this is also a favorite trick of testers who like to throw testwise students off the track.

Tactic 3: Look for familiar phrases

In teacher-prepared tests, stems and correct responses are often taken right out of textbook or lecture notes. So if you recognize particular words or phrases—or if the stem and one answer just naturally flow smoothly together in your mind—follow your hunch.

Tactic 4: Look for degrees of correctness

If the answer is a number, at least one choice is likely to be too large and one too small. If time is involved, one date is likely to be too early, one too late.

However, if one possibly correct choice is very specific, and another possibly correct choice is very general, the general one may be the one you want. This is especially true if the general choice incorporates all or most of the information in the specific choice.

None of these clues is foolproof, of course. But they are a lot more dependable than wild guessing!

STRATEGY 7: GUESS

On four-part multiple-choice tests, random guessing on all of the questions would give you an average grade of 25 percent. But you rarely need to guess randomly. On most

multiple-choice tests, you should quickly be able to rule out two of the four possible answers by using what you *do* know plus the strategies we have already presented in this section. That alone can result in an average grade of 75 percent achieved by guessing alone. If you also use a bit of intelligence, you can push the guess rate beyond 80 percent.

We know someone who got stuck in a required ROTC course. Staunchly, he refused to read the textbook. On the other hand, he didn't want to flunk the course; he would just have had to take it over. He noticed that all the exam questions were four-part multiple choices and that two parts were always ridiculous. So he flipped a coin on the remaining choices and ended up with exactly 75 for his grade. We don't recommend this, but it shows how well the method works.

If you draw a total blank on the test's information, you still may be able to slant the odds in your favor. *Watch for patterns in the answers.* Some large-scale hand-corrected tests actually use definite answer patterns to simplify scoring. So, if all else fails, if answer (c) hasn't been chosen on your answer sheet for a long time, fill in (c). Unless you're penalized for wrong answers, *any* answer is better than *no* answer.

STRATEGY 8: DO CHANGE ANSWERS

A popular old wives' tale says, "Never change an answer." Don't follow this adage. Research shows that when you have a hunch that you ought to change an answer, your hunch usually proves to be right. But follow your hunches systematically.

- Don't go over answers until you have finished the test. Then use all the time you have.
- First, go back and reread the directions. Make sure you've followed them to the letter.

- Next make sure you have put all your answers in the correct places. You'd be shocked at how many students lose lots of points for not checking this.
- Next check over the questions and answers that you flagged for further thought.
- Finally, if you still have time, go over all your other answers.

If you believe that you ought to change an answer, change it. Sometimes just answering all the questions will give you clues—consciously or unconsciously. Also, by the end of the test you should have a better understanding of the test-maker's point of view; maybe you can figure out what he or she was driving at in a poorly worded question.

Don't keep changing answers back and forth. Repeated changes of the same answer rarely pay off; they just waste time.

Before you hand in your paper, be sure to erase all marks that don't belong on it.

STRATEGY 9: NEVER GIVE UP!

Researchers tell us that many students lose points because they give up before they've worked their way through the eight strategies above. Testwise students keep moving along, rapid-fire, ticking off each question in turn—watching for the words that count, looking for tricks, guessing at probable answers as they read the stem, searching quickly among the choices for the answer they prefer, systematically eliminating unlikely answers so that they can make an educated guess from the others. They make a stab at each question and move on. They know that the odds are in their favor if they just keep going.