

Writing Multiple-choice Tests



Students who are successful on multiple-choice tests usually:

Spend time on the question *before* reading the alternatives.

- You're more likely to choose the correct answer if you've thought through the question without the interference of all the information presented in the alternatives. Begin by covering the alternatives with the answer sheet. Then, carefully read the question before looking at the alternatives. Circle or underline key words. Pay special attention to qualifying words that narrow response options such as "principal" function, "primary" criticism, and "major" conclusion.
- Think about where in your text, lecture notes, or course material the question is drawn from. Recall a few points, including related headings or subheadings. If applicable, do calculations.

Predict an answer *before* looking at the alternatives.

While not all questions are written so that an answer can be predicted without looking at the alternatives, many are. By predicting the answer before you look at the alternatives you're less likely to be swayed by an alternative that is incorrect. Even if you can't predict an answer, you may be able to identify closely related concepts that are likely to surface in alternatives.

Check the format of the alternatives.

Uncover the alternatives. Do the options allow for only one correct alternative, or does a response allow for two or more alternatives to be correct? (For example, response "d" indicates that both "a" and "b" are correct.)

Carefully read each alternative.

Read each alternative carefully for understanding, not just for recognition: you may recognize the information as being from the course, but does it answer the question being asked? Pay careful attention to qualifying words. Keep the question in mind and cross off alternatives that you think are incorrect, check off alternatives that you think are correct, and put a question mark beside alternatives that you're uncertain about.

Choose the alternative that best answers the question.

- Carefully mark the correct alternative on your answer sheet. If you do not know the answer, reread the question. If two options still look equally appealing, compare each to the question, making sure that the one you eventually choose answers what is asked and is the "best" fit (i.e., doesn't require additional information to be correct). If you're still unsure, guess (if there's no penalty for wrong answers).
- If you aren't sure that you made the correct choice, put a big question mark beside the question and move on to the next question. Avoid getting bogged down on one question. If time permits, return to any problematic questions you've flagged after completing the test.

Review answers.

If time is available after completing the test, review your answers. Change an answer only if you can logically justify the change. Ensure that test and answer sheet responses correspond.



Students who are successful on multiple-choice tests usually *avoid* the following:

Relying on Recognition.

Don't select an alternative just because you recognize the information as being from the course. It may be a true statement in its own right, but you have to make sure that it answers the question being asked.

Relying on myths and misconceptions.

There are many poor strategies for writing multiple-choice tests, including the longstanding "if in doubt pick c" myth. Don't pick "c" every time you're unsure of the answer; rather, think through the question and alternatives as discussed above. Also, don't choose an answer based on a pattern of responses (i.e., "This can't be another "b" because I've chosen that answer for the last three questions." It could be another "b", or perhaps one of the earlier responses was wrong). Choose an answer based on the strategies discussed above.

LEARNING

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Dismissing alternatives because they seem too obvious.

Don't dismiss an alternative because it seems too obvious an answer. While some questions may require more complex application of concepts, others may only require straight recall. If you're well prepared for the exam, these questions may appear simple. Keep this in mind if you tend to dismiss some alternatives because you assume that multiple-choice tests are tricky.

Running out of time.

Some multiple-choice questions will take longer than others, so it doesn't make sense to allocate equal time for each question even though they're often weighted the same. Rather, track your progress at intervals: halfway through the test are you approximately halfway through the questions? If you're behind, pick up your pace. If you're unsure about an answer, put a big question mark next to it and return to it if time remains once you've completed the test.