



Learning From Multiple-Choice Exams

Error Analysis for Multiple-Choice Exams

Try to understand why you lost marks on exams. Analyzing your errors can help you adapt your studying and improve your performance on future exams. If the exam isn't returned to you, ask to review it with your professor or TA or speak with a Learning Skills Counsellor in SDC to see if an exam review can be arranged. Think about the following possible explanations for exam errors:

You don't ever remember seeing that information before

If the information was from class, you may not have recorded it in your notes, and so your own review for the test did not cover it: maybe you weren't following the pace of the lecture; maybe you thought the point was unimportant and didn't record it; or maybe you missed that class. Similar problems could have happened if the information was from the text and you read too fast, dismissed the point as unimportant, or didn't finish your readings.

The relevant course content is in your class notes and/or text summary, but you did not know it well enough in the exam

Either you dismissed the specific information as not being important when you studied for the test, you did not apply adequate memory strategies to that particular section of the course content, or you did not study enough for the test.

You may have relied on "common sense" to answer the question rather than specific knowledge of course content

There can be a tendency to choose the "that makes sense" answer. You may have used "common sense" to make your selection, rather than your knowledge of the course content.

You may have relied solely on recognition - "I know that!"

The alternative you chose may have been taught in the course, but it doesn't answer the question. The question and the correct alternative are like a lock and a key: they must fit together.

You may have chosen a partially correct answer

If the correct response was a combination answer, such as "both a and b", you may have answered the question half right by selecting only option "a" or option "b" and not the correct combination answer. In an "all of the above" answer, you may have selected only one of the options. You identified part of the answer, but not the whole answer that was required.



Reading too much into the question

You may have been looking for a deeper meaning to a straight recall question, saying to yourself, "It has to be more difficult than this."

"Application to new context" problems

You may have good recall of information, but you have difficulty applying the information to a new context.

Reading mistake

You may have made a decoding mistake, such as misreading or missing one important term.

Calculation error

If the question required some mathematical calculations, you may have made a mathematical error.

Myth problem

You may have been applying some of the common myths about multiple-choice questions, such as one of the following:

- (a) "This answer can't be "e" because the previous two questions were both "e" answers."
- (b) "When in doubt, choose c)."
- (c) "The correct answer is never all of the above."

There is a problem with the question itself

Very occasionally, the question itself may be the problem:

- (a) The question contains a typographical error, ambiguous wording, or there is more than one possible correct answer.
- (b) The question tests information that the vast majority of students, including you, did not learn.

Test anxiety or fatigue

You may have been so anxious or so tired that your reading and thinking abilities were impaired. Talk to a counsellor if you think that this explains your situation, but first evaluate all of the above possible reasons for errors to see if any of them apply.