

Multiple choice exams

Understanding and doing well in multiple choice exams

You may hear one or any of the following pieces of advice about multiple choice exams:

- A. *changing the answer to every question is good/bad*
- B. *the correct answer is usually 'C'*
- C. *'D' is usually not relevant*
- D. *you can't study for multiple choice exams*

These are 'myths' that would have you believe that success in multiple choice exams is a matter of luck. Don't be fooled!

Multiple choice exams can require a great deal of skill to do well. They require accurate knowledge and careful reading of the instructions, questions and responses. They also require you to be certain of your knowledge; the challenge in multiple choice exams is not to be distracted by the 'distractors' (false answers).

For multiple choice, as for any exam, you need to revise your subject material thoroughly. Moreover, revision and practice, and doing questions under exam conditions, is also important.

You will feel more confident if you have an understanding of the types of questions you may be asked in a multiple choice exam, a set of exam strategies for this type of exam and an idea of what you might do when you don't know an answer. That's where this pamphlet can help.

Types of multiple choice exams

It is important that you know what type of multiple choice questions will be asked in your exam, as well as the response format required.

There are several different types of multiple choice questions. Following are some of the more common ones.



True/False

True/False questions may require you to select EITHER the 'true' (correct) OR the 'false' (incorrect) answer. e.g.:

True or false: Zafirlukast is a leukotriene receptor antagonist.

Odd one out

For some multiple choice questions you will need to establish a pattern amongst answer alternatives and then choose which answer option is the 'odd one out'. Common examples are number or object patterns or sequences in intelligence tests.

Most accurate

In social science subjects where exact answers are less likely, you may be asked to choose the 'most accurate' answer to a question. e.g.:

Which of the following options provides the best description of hypnosis?

- E. *hallucinatory sleep*
- F. *deep sleep*
- G. *high suggestibility*
- H. *mind control*

Grid format

Grid format questions provide a set of solutions based on sets of answers being correct. e.g.:

Tissue oedema may result from:

- I. *protein-deficient diet*
- J. *local accumulation of metabolites*
- K. *loss of sympathetic vasomotor tone*
- L. *venous congestion*

- 1. Answer 1 if A is correct
- 2. Answer 2 if A and C are correct
- 3. Answer 3 if A, B and C are correct
- 4. Answer 4 if D is correct
- 5. Answer 5 if A and D are correct

Extension questions

Extension questions require you to, for example, complete a sentence. eg:

A business organization which exchanges inputs and outputs with its environment and has the ability to adjust to changes in the environment is called:

- M. *an adaptive system*
- N. *a closed system*
- O. *an open system*
- P. *a controlled and responsive system*
- Q. *an open and adaptive system*

Statements and logical relations questions

These are more common in the medical sciences. You will be asked to consider a sentence comprising two statements connected by a logical relation (such as: 'depends on', 'causes', 'results in') [ie: Statement A, Logical Relation, Statement B]. e.g.:

Ventricular stroke is very common in elderly people because it depends on high values for stroke volume and mean arterial pressure.

Statement A: *Ventricular stroke is very common in elderly people*

Logical Relation: *because*

Statement B: *it depends on high values for stroke volume and mean arterial pressure.*

1. Answer 1 if Statement A is true and Statement B is true but the logical relation is false.
2. Answer 2 if Statement A is true and Statement B is true and the logical relation is false.
3. Answer 3 if both Statements A and B are false.
4. Answer 4 if Statement B is true and Statement A is false.
5. Answer 5 if Statement A is true and Statement B is false.

Multiple choice exam strategies

1. **Read the instructions very carefully.** In particular, take note of whether you will lose marks for incorrect answers.
2. **Calculate** how much time you have to answer all questions and how much time you will spend on each question (if it has not been done for you).
3. **Read the questions very carefully.** Circle or underline topic words and any negatives.
4. **Identify any modifiers and qualifiers** – eg: 'only', 'always', 'sometimes', 'rarely'. Exact words such as 'always', 'never', 'none', 'must', 'without exception', mean that there is no exception. Therefore, if you can think of one exception, statements that include these words are incorrect or false (distractors). In contrast, indefinite words, such as 'rarely', 'usually', 'seldom', 'some', 'sometimes', 'frequently', 'often', can tolerate exceptions.
5. If possible, **don't look at the options provided until you think of an answer.** Analyse the responses available and match your answer with one of the choices – read them *all* before making a choice. If your answer does not match exactly, find the choice that most closely approximates your answer.
6. Before you tick a box or mark a choice on a multiple choice answer sheet, **check your preferred answer** again. For calculations, ensure you have taken care with measurement units or decimal points.
7. **Leave time** at the end of the exam to go back to check your answers.

When you don't know the answer

As with all exams, attempt the questions that are easiest for you first. Come back and do the hard ones later. Unless you will lose marks for an incorrect response, never leave a question blank. Make a calculated guess if you are sure you don't know the answer.

Here are some tips to help you guess 'intelligently'.

Use a process of elimination

Try to narrow your choice as much as possible: which of the options is most likely to be *incorrect*? Ask: are options in the right range? Is the measurement unit correct? Does it sound reasonable?

Look for grammatical inconsistencies

In extension-type questions a choice is nearly always wrong if the question and the answer do not combine to make a grammatically correct sentence. Also look for repetition of key words from the question in the responses. If words *are* repeated, the option is worth considering. e.g.:

The apparent distance hypothesis explains...

b) *The distance between the two parallel lines appears...*

Be wary of options containing definitive words and generalisations

Because they can't tolerate exceptions, options containing words like 'always', 'only', 'never', 'must' *tend* to be incorrect more often. Similarly, options containing strong generalisations *tend* to be incorrect more often.

Favour look-alike options

If two of the alternatives are similar, give them your consideration. e.g.:

- A. ***tourism consultants***
- B. *tourists*
- C. ***tourism promoters***
- D. *fairy penguins*

Favour numbers in the mid-range

If you have no idea what the real answer is, avoid extremes.

Favour more inclusive options

If in doubt, select the option that encompasses others. e.g.:

- A. *an adaptive system*
- B. *a closed system*
- C. *an open system*
- D. *a controlled and responsive system*
- E. ***an open and adaptive system.***

Please note: None of these strategies is foolproof and they do not apply equally to the different types of multiple choice questions, but they are worth considering when you would otherwise leave a blank.