THE MULTIPLE-CHOICE EXAM

Learning Skills Program - University of Victoria

We have observed that students often think that a multiple-choice exam is simply a matter of recognizing true statements. That may be true in some courses. However, students often are asked to do more than just recognize textbook material. Multiple choice questions, they learn, require them to make fine distinctions between correct and nearly correct statements. They learn that these distinctions are not only of recognition, but are distinctions that involve application, analysis, and synthesis. Besides not being fully prepared for these types of questions, students often read the questions carelessly. We hope that this document provides you with some insights and tips for reading and answering multiple-choice exams.

Preparing/Study for Multiple Choice Exams

- Take our Modular Learning Skills Course to learn how to recognize the various levels of learning that are required in your courses, and how to use new strategies for learning, remembering, thinking and problem-solving. In particular, see Module 1.

- Join or form a Study Group to practise making and answering multiple-choice questions of various levels. As you try to make up multiple-choice questions, you will both discover how difficult it is to write a good item, and learn to read and study in a more active way by asking questions. See Module L for help with Study Groups.

- Study old exams. Examine each question to determine the level or type of thinking required of you (recognition, application, analysis or synthesis), and the degree of difference between incorrect and correct alternatives.

- When studying, pay particular attention to similarities and differences since multiple-choice questions tend to focus on that. While learning, pay special attention to the differences among the facts and ideas within a group. It may be effective to think of each fact or concept in terms of what each means-or includes and what each does not mean or does not include. What is necessary for it to be the concept? What is sufficient? What small changes to a definition would make it no longer valid?

Writing Multiple Choice Exams

- Read the directions carefully. The directions usually indicate that some alternatives may be partly correct or correct statements in themselves but not when joined to the stem. (The stem is the question and the alternatives are the choices). The directions may say: `choose the most correct answer or 'mark the one best answer.' Sometimes you may be asked to "mark all correct answers."

- If your exam has types of questions other than multiple-choice, do the multiple-choice first. Just reading the stems and alternatives acts as a warm-up to the material. Also, the ideas embedded in these multiple-choice questions will fuel your thinking for doing the other parts of the exam. Remember, however, that a great deal of the information embedded in multiple-choice alternatives is incorrect. If you are prone to getting confused during an examination of this type, it might be better to do the other questions first. Experiment a bit and notice if the order makes a difference. Some students like to leave the multiple-choice questions to the end of the exam so they don't skimp on high-point essay questions.
If you tend to do better on short answer questions than on multiple-choice questions, then you may be better off working from your strength. First read the stem of the question, and before you look at the alternatives, try to anticipate the correct answer. Thinking about the answer before looking at the alternatives seems to help about one in three students, and it doesn't affect the other. Give that a try.

Often you are required to answer up to 70 multiple-choice questions in an hour or less. This means you may have less than a minute, on average, to spend on each question. Some questions, of course, will take only a few seconds, while others will require more time for thought: Plan to progress through the exam in three ways:

1. Read every question carefully, answering only those of which you are 99% certain. Put a '?' on those that need more consideration.
2. Then, go back and examine the questions not yet answered. Focus on the stem of the question again, reading it more carefully. Answer those you are reasonably sure of without pondering too long on each. Erase the '?'
3. Finally, study read the remaining unanswered questions. If you cannot come to a decision by reasoning or if you run out of time, guess. Erase the '?'

When the answer doesn't pop out at you, by these strategies:

- Use the process of elimination procedure. Eliminate the obviously incorrect alternatives.
- Read ALL of the stem and EVERY alternative.
- Read the stem with each alternative to take advantage of the correct sound or flow the correct answer often produces. Also, you can eliminate any alternatives that do not agree grammatically with the stem.
- Consider 'all of the above' and 'none of the above.' Examine the 'above' alternatives to see if all of them or none of them apply totally. If even one does not apply totally, do not consider "all of the above" or "none of the above" as the correct answer.
- Note negatives. If a negative such as 'none', 'not', 'never', or 'neither occurs in the stem, know that the correct alternative must be a fact or absolute, and that the other alternatives could be true statements, but not the correct answer.
- Note superlatives. Words such as "most", "every", "air", "none", 'always', and 'only' are superlatives that indicate the correct answer must be an undisputed fact. Extreme answers should be suspect.
- Note qualifying words. "Usually", 'often', 'generally', "may", and "seldom" are qualifiers that could indicate a true statement.
- Study qualifications. Break the stem down into grammatical parts. Pull out the bare subject and verb (if it's in-the-stem), and then examine all the modifiers (qualifiers) to the subject and verb. This process ensures that you will examine every part of the stem.
- We are often asked if it is wise to change answers. The research on this shows that students change answers from right to wrong as often as they change answers from wrong to right. As test-takers, we notice when we change an answer from a correct to an incorrect one, but since we are less likely to look over those we got correct, we don't notice those we changed
So, when reviewing your exam, change your answer only if you have a good reason and not because you are unsure. Be careful.

- During the exam, if you start to get overly anxious or your head is filled with distracting thoughts, then take a minute to relax and get focused. Close your eyes, relax your muscles, and take a few deep breaths.

**Following-up After Your Exam Has Been Returned**

- Study your marked and returned exam in order to learn from your successes and mistakes, and to improve your performance on the next exam. This will pay dividends on future exams.

- Examine each question you did get correct. Remember how you knew that the information was important when you studied. How did you study that information? You'll want to use those methods again.

- Examine each question you did not get correct. Did you expect a question on that bit of content? Did you anticipate a question at that level? If you did and still got it wrong, then read it carefully in order to understand the fine distinction between the correct alternative and the incorrect alternatives. Ask yourself why the correct answer is correct and why the other alternatives are incorrect. Learn the correct answer since it is probably important for the next section of the course.

- Read through all of the questions to determine the level of thought your instructor expects of you. Are you expected to recognize, analyze, synthesize and/or apply the material that has been presented to you? Study accordingly for the next exam.