

MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAMS: MISCONCEPTIONS & TIPS

Many university courses use multiple-choice tests to evaluate your knowledge and understanding. Surely you've done these types of test before, but you may still be anxious about how to succeed on these tests in university. In this article, we will go through a few common misconceptions about multiple-choice tests, and we'll also offer a few tips on how to score well on them.

Misconception #1

The first misconception is that because the correct answer to each question is already on the page, multiple-choice tests are easy, and you could plausibly score well on them even with no preparation whatsoever. While this is technically not impossible, the odds against you are monstrous. Let's look at an example: say you're faced with a multiple-choice exam that is just 20 questions, each with five possible answers, and there is no penalty for guessing. Using a purely random guessing strategy, the probability of passing this test (getting 10 or more questions right) is about 0.26%. In other words, you have a 1 in 385 chance of passing the test. University-level final exams commonly have over 100 questions, and the probability of passing a test of this length just by guessing is incomprehensibly small (about 1 in 47 billion). So don't underestimate the difficulty of multiple-choice tests.

Misconception #2

The second misconception is that multiple-choice tests only evaluate your ability to memorize facts. While some questions may reward you for memorization, many others will require you to understand complex concepts. Others will test your reasoning and problem-solving skills. When you're studying, make sure you don't *just* drill yourself on terms and definitions – learn the underlying principles too.

Misconception #3

The third misconception is that you should always trust your first instinct, and so you should never change an answer unless you're absolutely certain you've made a mistake. While a change from right to wrong may stand out more to you in retrospect than a change from wrong to right, a feeling of intuition does not contribute to the correctness of an answer choice. Students who are comfortable changing their answers after careful reflection generally score higher than students who follow a rule of always trusting their first instinct. That being said, don't doubt yourself too much; the important thing is to think clearly and objectively.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Tip #1: Read Carefully

Now a few tips for what to do on test day. The first and most important tip is to read the question stem very carefully. (The "question stem" is the prompt, or the stimulus; it is followed by the "alternatives," or the answer choices.) Pay close attention to words like these: all, most, some, few, none, not, only, if, unless, except, can, cannot, must

If you skim the question and miss one of these words, you may end up erroneously answering a question that is drastically different from the one you're supposed to be answering. And it's likely that one of the

answer choices will be designed specifically to answer that wrong question.

Tip #2: Answer the Easy Questions First

Tip number two is to answer the easy questions first. One thing that is true of almost every multiple-choice test is that every question is worth the same number of points, so getting a difficult question right is worth no more than getting an easy question right. If you can rack up a large number of points early in the test by answering the questions you know, not only will you be calmer and more confident when it's time to tackle the harder ones, but you'll also be less concerned about wasting time. Another possible benefit is that the easy questions could spark your memory to help you with the harder questions.

Tip #3: Eliminate the Wrong Answers and Use Logic

Now, on to our last tip. We've told you that your chances of passing a multiple-choice test just by guessing are miniscule, so hopefully you'll study enough to have some idea of how to approach most questions on the test. But at some point you will probably encounter a question that stumps you. What do you do in this case? First of all, as long as there is no penalty for guessing wrong, then you obviously shouldn't leave the question blank. But how do you increase your chances of guessing right?

The short answer is to use the process of elimination. Most people think this only includes striking out answer choices that couldn't possibly be right (and it does indeed include this), but there's more to it than that. For example, if two or more answer choices are functionally equivalent – they all answer the question in exactly the same way – then none of them can be right. Another example: if two or more answer choices are correct but different from each other, then the right answer must encompass all of them (e.g. "all of the above").

YOUR FINAL RESORT

If you've done most of the questions confidently and you don't have enough time to do the rest, look back over your test and try to estimate (or calculate, if you have the time) which was the least common answer choice, then guess that answer for the remaining questions. This may seem unwise because it's highly unlikely that there would be a long string of the exact same answer at the end of a test, but the goal is not to get every remaining question right; we already know how unlikely that is. Instead, the goal is to get one or two points rather than zero. If you use a totally random guessing strategy, it's very likely that you will not get any questions right.

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