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Tips on Taking Multiple Choice Exams

Objective or multiple choice tests are scored without instructor judgment. A multiple choice test covers the same amount of material as an essay test, but the material tends to be presented in more detail. Be aware that multiple choice tests don't just test basic knowledge, but also test students' understanding and ability to apply that knowledge. If you are interested in more information on how to prepare for multiple choice tests, please see our "Preparing for Multiple Choice Tests" handout.

Plan your time: Look over the whole test before you start. Plan how rapidly you must do the items in order to finish the test and still have 10 minutes at the end for checking your answers. For example, if there are 50 multiple choice questions and you have 50 minutes then you have approx. **50 seconds per answer**. Stay on course!

Check the scoring system to find out if some parts are weighted more or if there is a penalty for guessing. If there is a penalty, do not guess at answers you do not know.

Do the easy questions first, then cycle back to do the more difficult items. On the first pass through the test, mark the questions you did not attempt with a check mark or a negative sign. On the second pass through, as you answer these more difficult questions, change one check mark to two, or the negative sign to a positive sign.

Read the whole item, processing the information carefully. Make sure that you don't overlook any part of the question. Watch for negatives, double negatives and two-part statements in the stem. Take the items at face value and avoid reading too much into the question. Don't waste time looking for tricks and traps. Usually they are not there.

Try to recall a concept from memory before picking out or reading the responses. Students may know an answer and then be confused by the responses. If you know what you are looking for, you will have an easier time picking it out.

Read the lead of an item together with each response. Having a complete sentence to think about may jog your memory more than leaving the parts in fragments.

Watch for qualifiers; these are words that make an absolute statement. They tend to make an answer false. Be wary of words such as: *always, never, none, every*, which may indicate a false response.

For problem solving tests don't read the whole item first. Instead, read the question only and solve the problem. Then look for your answer among the possible responses. Otherwise an incorrect answer may influence your problem-solving techniques and lead you astray.

Ignore superstitions when doing multiple-choice exams. Don't waste time looking for patterns in your answers. Don't become worried if you find you have produced four "C" answers in a row. Tests are usually constructed with the answers in a random order and the instructor has not viewed the pattern of answers the same way that you have.

Be systematic when you are facing confusing answers such as "all of the above", "three of the above", or a range of answers then a choice among them, for example, "1.a; 2.b; 3.c; 4.d; 5.a, b, and c; 6.b, c, and d; etc. Examine the following example, which will illustrate how to be systematic about answering confusing items:

Example: Which of the following facilitates the healing process?

Resting the injured part of the body
Protection of the wound from further Injury.
Adequate nutrition
Emotional support from friends and family
Depriving the patient of fluids
A, b, d, e
A, b, c, d
A, c, d, e
All of the above
None of the above

You may find the wording of this question confusing. Remember to be systematic. Do not get overwhelmed by all the choices.

First, draw a line separating the single answers (top section) from the combination answers (bottom section).

Second, deal with the single answers. Read and decide which answers, "a, b, c, d, or e", are true and which of those are false.

Once you have knocked out one of those choices (e in this case) from the top section, go to the bottom section and eliminate any answers that contain the false answer among the choices. If you can keep from choosing answers impulsively, then you have a good chance of arriving at the right answer.

Check your paper. With the time that you have left, go over your paper and make any changes necessary. The myth that your answers should never be changed and that your first answer is always the right one is just that - - a myth! If you know one of your answers is wrong, or realize that you misread an item than change your answer. Sometimes you may have been reminded of the answer to a question by another question.

Finally, check your bubble sheet for foolish mistakes or clerical errors. Circling two answers for the same question or not erasing stray pencil marks on your answer page count as errors when the page is machine scored.