

Multiple choice exams

Understanding multiple choice questions and doing well in 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 ideas 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** (incorrect answers).

For multiple choice, as for any exam, you need to revise your subject material thoroughly. Practising questions under exam conditions is also important.

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

Types of multiple choice exams

It is important that you know what type of multiple choice questions (**MCQs**) will be asked in your exam, as well as the response format required. There are several different types of multiple choice questions. The following are some of the more common ones.

True / False: Essentially a two-option MCQ, these questions may require you to select either the 'true' (correct) or the 'false' (incorrect) answer. E.g.

Zafirlukast is a leukotriene receptor antagonist. T / F

Odd one out: For some MCQs, you will need to establish a pattern amongst answer alternatives, and then choose which answer option is the 'odd one out' – the one that doesn't fit. 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' or 'best'* answer to a question. E.g.

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

- A.** Hallucinatory sleep
- B.** Deep sleep
- C.** High suggestibility
- D.** Mind control

*Note that for 'best' answer MCQs, there may seem to be more than one correct answer; the trick is to choose the most correct.

Grid format: need to be read carefully as they provide two sets of data to process. They may, for example, provide a set of solutions based on sets of answers being correct. E.g.

Tissue oedema may result from:

- A.** protein-deficient diet.
- B.** local accumulation of metabolites.
- C.** loss of sympathetic vasomotor tone.
- D.** 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: These require you to 'extend' the stem by choosing the correct completion option. For example:

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

- A.** an adaptive system.
- B.** a closed system.
- C.** an open system.
- D.** a controlled and responsive system.
- E.** 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 word or phrase showing logical relation; such as; 'depends on', 'causes', 'results in'. 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.** Note 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** – e.g. *only, always, sometimes, rarely*. Exact words such as *always, never, none, must, without exception*, mean that there is **no exception**. If you can think of an exception, statements that include these words are incorrect or false. In contrast, indefinite words, such as *rarely, usually, seldom, sometimes, frequently, often*, can tolerate exceptions.
5. **Try to think of the answer before looking at the options.** 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 harder ones later. **Never leave a question blank** (unless you will lose marks for an incorrect response). Make a calculated guess if 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? Are there any options you can eliminate straight away? Ask: are options in the right range? Is there something out of range you can eliminate straight away? Is the measurement unit correct? Does it sound reasonable?

- **Look for grammatical inconsistencies:** In extension-type (sentence complete) questions a choice will be 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 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

(Also be wary of the 'odd one out' effect – see answer 'D' above: it is probably not correct.)

- **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 MCQs, but they are worth considering when you would otherwise leave a blank.

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