

Multiple Choice Exams

Introduction

Multiple choice: do you love it or hate it? Few other exam formats provoke such passionate responses as multiple choice, yet this format is common at the university level. If you prefer other types of exam formats to multiple choice, understanding why you dislike multiple choice may help you determine what steps to take to master this exam format. We've encountered a few common reasons for some students' difficulty with multiple choice; see if you can identify with any of these situations.

1. For some students, multiple choice is an unfamiliar format for exams. If your high school emphasized homework completion, essays, or short answer exams over multiple choice, it may seem frustrating to be almost solely evaluated through a brand new format. You may have a steep learning curve at the beginning as you prepare for and write multiple choice exams, but many students find that they quickly adjust.
2. Other students think multiple choice is difficult because they don't expect the questions to have the layers of complexity found in university-level exams. They may study for multiple choice by focusing only on the recognition of basic terminology rather than on a thorough understanding of course concepts. In this situation, modifying your exam preparation strategies can help you prepare for multiple choice.
3. Still other students dislike multiple choice because they're convinced that multiple choice questions are phrased to trick students deliberately into choosing an incorrect answer. It's true that some multiple choice questions are worded awkwardly, and you'll have to put in additional effort to decode those questions. However, very few multiple choice questions are deliberately "tricky." Questions are designed to challenge you and encourage you to think, but not lead you to the wrong answer.

Whatever your feelings about multiple choice, you'll encounter this format often at university, especially in first- and second-year courses. Keep reading this Study Skills Tip Sheet for extensive information to

help you with many aspects of multiple choice, from study strategies through ways to untangle difficult wording.

Part I: Preparation Strategies

Stay on Top of Your Courses

Since multiple choice exams are common in courses which cover a lot of factual information, the most important planning strategy is to stay on top of your coursework. If you keep up with readings and assignments, attend lectures and take thorough notes, and set aside time to integrate and summarize your text and lecture notes on a regular basis, you'll be well on your way to preparing effectively for multiple choice exams. Weekly review right from the beginning of the semester can drastically reduce the amount of time you'll need to spend relearning old material before the exam. We recommend that you begin each study session with a quick review of the material you've studied previously, so the previous material stays fresh. Attending a Study Skills Session with a Counsellor is a good way to ensure you will be successful.

If you make the time to review weekly, you'll avoid having to cram at the last minute. When you cram, the information you've studied stays in your memory for a limited time. That means that you'll probably forget most or all of the information as soon as you've finished the midterm or exam. While cramming might seem like a timesaver at first, it usually ends up costing you in later semesters, when you'll have to relearn information from previous courses. By incorporating regular review into your study schedule, you'll make a difference in your exam performance now and in the future. For ideas and suggestions about how to fit weekly review into your schedule, check out the Time Management Study Skills Tip Sheet.

Find Your Approach to Studying

If you ask experienced, successful students for their advice on how to prepare for multiple choice exams (as we did in writing this Tip Sheet), you would probably find that there are two different approaches.

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Some students advocate an emphasis on factual detail, terms, and definitions. They memorize as much material as possible and make note of small but interesting details. Other students concentrate on understanding the course ideas and concepts which knit the facts and details together. They emphasize the relationships, similarities, and differences between concepts.

Since many multiple choice exams test for both the recall of facts and an understanding of concepts, the approach you take to studying for multiple choice tests must be based on a thoughtful analysis of your course and your instructor's approach to the material. You'll be better prepared for major exams if you look at each test during the semester as an indication of not only how much of the course material you know, but also what type of knowledge (factual details, conceptual understanding, or a combination) the instructor expects you to have. The safest approach to studying for multiple choice exams is to acquire a thorough knowledge of the facts, as well as an understanding of the concepts and ideas underlying them.

Monitor Your Study Effectiveness

A common error students make when preparing for multiple choice exams is to study only to the point where they can recognize the correct answer ("after all, the right answer is on the page in front of you ..."). However, multiple choice exams test not only your ability to recognize information, but also your ability to apply facts and concepts in new contexts.

To ensure that you can do more than just recognize the right answer, test yourself periodically as you're studying:

- Once you're done reviewing a section of your notes, put them away and try to summarize the information, on paper or orally.
- Try explaining the concepts to friends and study partners.
- Draw a diagram to summarize the information, using boxes for main concepts and arrows to show how they're related. Our Study Skills Tip Sheet on Concept Mapping has detailed information about creating effective concept maps.

Strategies like these can be used to test your ability to recall the material and to re-organize and transform it

into a new format. Since very few multiple choice exams repeat course information in the same way that it was covered in class, you'll need to prepare for exams by studying the course material in a variety of ways. You'll become better prepared for exam questions which apply or present material in new ways that weren't discussed in class or in the text.

Write Your Own Multiple Choice Questions

Since multiple choice exams demand that you deal with the course material in a specific format, your preparation should include practice in both writing and answering multiple choice questions. Writing multiple choice questions enables you to see the information from your notes and text translated into the multiple choice format before the exam itself. Try these ideas when creating questions:

- Turn the headings and subheadings in your textbook into questions.
- Turn key concepts from lecture notes into questions.
- Look at the first midterm, or other ones written by the same instructor, to get a sense of the style of the questions.
- Write practice questions with a study partner or group, with each of you preparing questions on a section of a chapter, then trading and answering each other's questions.

Practice Answering "Real" Questions

You'll also need to practice answering "real" multiple choice questions. There are a number of places where you might find practice questions:

- Textbooks and lab manuals often have multiple choice questions, though some students find that these are much easier than the ones on the exam.
- Many textbooks have CDs or websites; check these out for possible review questions.
- Ask your instructor for old midterms and exams.
- Many instructors post practice questions for on-line courses.
- Different textbooks on the same subject can be good sources of practice questions.

Wherever you get practice questions, it's important to limit the time you give yourself to write the practice exam (because you won't have endless amounts of time during the exam) and to correct your answers.

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If Your Exam is Online

Find out as much as you can about the exam well in advance so you'll have time to prepare appropriately. You should be able to answer these questions about your exam:

- Is the exam open book?
- Will I see one question at a time, or can I scroll through the entire exam?
- Will I have to answer each question before going on to the next?
- Can I go back to unanswered questions?
- Can I change an answer?
- Can I print out the exam, complete it on paper, and then type my answers into the computer?

If your exam is open book, study and prepare for it in much the same way you would for a regular exam; don't assume that you'll have time to look up answers while you're writing the exam. However, it may be worthwhile to tab the important pages in your notes and text so you can reference them quickly. An alternative is to create your own crib sheet - a one page sheet which contains all of the essential information about the course material.

If your exam restricts you from changing your answers, skipping questions, or reading ahead, keep in mind that these restrictions may place additional stress on you. Depending upon how you react to such stress, you may need to prepare even more thoroughly for online exams than you would for paper-based exams. If possible, use sample questions or practice quizzes on WebCT or in your textbook's CD to prepare yourself as much as possible for reading and responding to online questions within a limited timeframe.

Part II: Writing Strategies

Watch Your Time

For every exam, it's important to calculate the amount of time you can spend on each section or question according to the number of marks it is worth. Do the easy questions or sections first - this is helpful for calming nerves and establishing your concentration. It is also important to work at a fairly quick pace; multiple choice exams are notorious for being long.

Answer Questions Systematically

Careless mistakes are often made when students rush

through the "stem," or first part of the question, and miss important information. Try this approach to make sure you read each question thoroughly.

1. Cover up the alternatives before you read the stem (the first part of the question).
2. Read the stem carefully.
3. Process the stem:
 - underline key words
 - translate the question into your own words
 - watch for small but important words, such as not or always.
4. Predict an answer.
5. Uncover the alternatives and read all of them carefully, even if the first choice seems correct.
6. Identify the best response.

Skip Difficult Questions

If you've followed the steps above and you're still not sure of an answer, it's tempting to keep rereading and reworking the question until you select one.

However, you may be wasting valuable time as you "worry through" these questions. If you're unsure of an answer, skip the question and keep going. If you run out of time, it's better to have answered all of the easier questions than to have missed some of them because of your attempts to answer the more difficult ones.

Decode Difficult Questions

The language of multiple choice questions can sometimes lead to confusion about what the question is really asking. Try these techniques when you encounter a question with difficult or confusing wording:

- Pay attention to absolute terms, such as never, always or none. They often (but not always) indicate that the statement is false.
- Pay attention to the use of negatives, such as not, unless or none. Some students find it helpful to rephrase stems with two negatives in positive terms.
- Look for distractors - extraneous bits of information that might distract you from the real purpose of the question. As you read the stem, cross out the distractors and underline the key points to help you maintain focus.
- Rephrase a stem in your own words; for example, try changing a question to a statement. Be careful, however, not to lose sight of the original meaning of the stem.

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- Treat each alternative as a true-false statement, and search for the one true statement amid the alternatives.
- If you're debating between two similar answers, try identifying which is the worse answer, rather than which is the better one. Looking at the question from a different perspective can sometimes help to clarify the underlying purpose of the question.

Keep in mind that these techniques will not work for all questions, and that they can be time-consuming. If some of these techniques seem helpful, make sure you familiarize yourself with them in a practice exam well before the midterm or exam.

Guess Strategically

If you've tried the strategies above and you still don't know the answer:

- Cross off any alternatives that you know are wrong.
- Skip the question and come back to it later - a question further along may trigger your memory.
- Reread the question carefully when you come back to it; you might have missed something the first time.
- Guess if you still don't know the answer and if there is no penalty for wrong answers.

Don't Change Your Answers

In general, when reviewing answers, you should only change an answer if you have a specific reason for doing so (for example, you remembered a new piece of information). Even if you're not entirely sure that your answer is correct, it's usually better to keep it than to switch to another answer at the last minute.

If Your Exam is Online:

Prepare your testing space

If you're writing a quiz or exam at home or in residence, make sure you have ideal conditions. Turn off the ringers for your phones, put up a large "Do Not Disturb - Writing an Exam" sign, shut down MSN or other nonessential programs on your computer, and set up your desk with your exam tools (calculator, scrap paper, pens, water bottle).

Adapt strategies for the online environment

For multiple choice questions, follow the same steps

we recommend for paper-based exams. You may need to make some adaptations, such as using your hand or a piece of paper to cover up alternatives before you read the question stem. In some cases, it may be helpful to write out your answer on scrap paper before considering alternatives.

If your exam won't let you go back to difficult questions, then make sure you answer each question before going on to the next. You will need to monitor your time very carefully to ensure that you have enough time to complete all of the questions. Deciding on a certain time limit for each question before you begin the exam (i.e., "If I can't decide on an answer within X minutes, then I will quickly choose from my remaining alternatives and go on to the next question") can help prevent you from taking too much time on a few difficult questions.

If it's possible, print off the quiz or exam right after you have written it. You'll have a good source of material to help you prepare for the final.

Part III: Post-Exam Strategies

Review Your Marked Exam

When they don't do as well on midterms or exams as they would have liked, some students simply don't think about the exams again, other than to say, "I'll do better next time." Resist the temptation to forget about exams when they're over, and make an effort to review them thoroughly. Especially if you didn't perform as well as you wanted to, you'll need to determine why your performance wasn't as expected so you can adjust your studying and exam-writing strategies for improved performance in the future.

If your instructor doesn't return your midterms or exams, you'll need to make a special effort to review them. Email your instructor or visit him or her during office hours and request to see your exam, ideally within a few days of when marks were posted. You may not be able to take notes while reviewing your exam, but instructors are usually very willing to let you read through your exam.

Once you have the exam in front of you, try to determine why you chose an incorrect answer by asking yourself these questions:

- Did I misread the question?

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- Did I make careless mistakes, such as reversing numbers?
- Did I simply not know the answer because I missed a class, didn't read the chapter, or didn't have enough time to review?
- Did I know the general concepts, but not at the appropriate level of detail?
- Did I run out of time?

Each of these examples calls for a different kind of correction strategy, rather than simply increasing the time spent studying. Some strategies are briefly discussed below - read more Study Skills Tip Sheets for in-depth information on these and other strategies for improving your exam performance. If you can't figure out why your answer was wrong, see your instructor for help. Understanding why you've made an error is critical to preventing that error from happening again.

Misreading the question or making careless errors

- Slow down while writing the exam.
- Cover up the alternatives to ensure that you read the stem carefully, without glancing down at the alternatives
- Leave time at the end of the exam to check your answers.

Not knowing answers due to missed lectures or a lack of review time

- Good time management skills are the key for improving on these types of errors. Read the Making Time Management Work for You Tip Sheet for more ideas on how you can balance studying with your other commitments.

Not knowing details

- Incorporate regular weekly review sessions to give yourself more time to absorb the information.
- Use practice exams or explain concepts aloud to your study partner to ensure mastery of the important details.

Running out of time

You may need to study the material in more so that the answers come quickly as you're writing the exam.

- If anxiety gets in the way of your efficient use of time, contact the Counsellors in Student Services for an appointment.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department is the best source for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford - 604-854-4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack - 604-795-2808 (E 105) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

- Preparing for Midterms and Exams
- Essay Exams

Web Resources

- York University's [http://www.yorku.ca/mclaughlin/documents/time management.ppt](http://www.yorku.ca/mclaughlin/documents/time%20management.ppt)

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