



MASTERING MULTIPLE- CHOICE TESTS & EXAMS

Doing well on tests requires a solid understanding of the course content, as well as positive attitude, strategic planning and thinking.

Preparing for tests

Set a realistic study schedule and begin studying early

Short study sessions spread out over time are more efficient and effective than a single period of condensed study. Begin your study sessions with a quick review of the material you've previously studied, so that this previous material stays fresh even though you studied it in detail weeks before the test. If you learn a little each day and allow plenty of time for repeated reviews, you'll enhance your long-term memory. Avoid the temptation to cram for tests. Your short-term memory doesn't have enough space for everything you need to know.

Identify what concepts are most important

Set priorities and study the most important concepts first.

Try to identify the content of the questions you'll be asked

Anticipate test questions. Ask yourself: "If I were making up this test, I would probably ask...", and then answer these questions. Also, time permitting, try writing some multiple-choice test questions. Guidelines and examples are provided in *Composing Multiple-Choice Test Questions*.

Don't simply memorize facts

You'll have to go beyond straight memorization. Concentrate on understanding the material taught – compare it, contrast it and interpret its meaning. Focus on understanding the ideas and concepts in the course that knit the facts and details together. You must be more than familiar with the material. You must be able to write it down, talk about it, analyze and apply it. If there are graphs, tables or figures on the test, you'll be asked to interpret the data.

Actively summarize

For each major concept, integrate information from your lecture notes, the lecture presentations, text in the printed guide and required readings onto a summary sheet by diagramming, charting, outlining, categorizing in tables, or writing paragraph summaries of the information. Your studying should also focus on defining, explaining and applying terms.

Study with other well-prepared students

These study sessions will give you the opportunity to ask questions and further your understanding of the course material.

Review past tests

Experience the style of questions that have been asked in the past. This will give you an indication of what you might expect, help you determine the level of thinking required (recognition, synthesis, analysis, application) and the degree of difference between incorrect and correct responses. But don't spend too much time on this. Your time is better spent mastering the present material.

Controlling test anxiety

Be prepared emotionally, physically and intellectually

Prepare your brain for optimum performance by keeping your physical resources well maintained. Get a good night's rest before the test. Eat well balanced meals – avoid fasting and don't take stimulants you're not accustomed to (e.g., coffee, soft drinks, chocolate). And keep up with your regular exercise.

Stay away from others right before the test

Anxiety is highly contagious. It's best to focus on what you know rather than on what you don't know. Reinforce your strengths and confine your weaknesses. For this reason, it's also best not to study new material the night before a test.

Arrive at the test room early

Give yourself enough time to select a seat and calm down before the test papers are distributed. Select a seat where the lighting is best (frequently near the front of the room) and where your view of other students will be minimized. Remember to bring your student card and more than one HB pencil. Dress comfortably and in layers, so you can put on your sweater if you're cold.

Don't expect to know everything

It's highly unlikely that any student will answer all questions correctly. Remember that a grade of 75% on a test, which is evidence of a good grasp of the subject matter, means that 25% of the questions were answered incorrectly. So don't panic if you see a question you didn't anticipate or prepare for. Use everything you know about the content of the course and your own reasoning ability to analyze the question and identify a logical answer.

Strategies during the test

Preview the test

Preview the whole test before answering any questions. Make sure your copy has no missing or duplicate pages. Read the directions carefully.

Start with questions you can readily answer

This will build your confidence and to save time for the harder ones. When you identify a correct response, carefully mark this on the question paper. If you're unable to make a choice and need to spend more time with the question, or you answered the question but aren't sure that you made the correct choice, put a big question mark beside that question and move on to the next. Avoid getting bogged down on one question part of the way through the exam. It's much better to move on and finish all the questions that you can answer and then to come back later to process the problematic questions. Sometimes the answer will occur to you simply because you're more relaxed after having answered other questions.

Plan your time and pace yourself

Allocate your time. For example, for a 90-minute test with 50 questions, plan to spend about one to two minutes per question. If you can't answer a question within this time, skip it and come back to it later. Set progress points at the beginning of the test and use them to monitor your progress. For example, know what question you should be answering at the 30-minute mark.

Allocate time to review your answers

And give yourself time to transfer your answers to the computer sheet. It's best to transfer all your responses at once, reducing the probability of making a mistake. Note however, that you won't be given additional time at the end of the test to transfer your answers.

Read each question carefully

Multiple-choice tests also examine your ability to read carefully and thoughtfully as much as they test your ability to recall and reason.

Identify key words: Circle or underline key words, such as: all, always, never, none, not, few, many, some and sometimes.

Identify subject area: Identifying what lecture, reading or lab exercise the question is from might help you narrow the choice of possible responses. On many tests, questions are scrambled and don't follow the order that topics were presented in lectures or labs.

Identify what is being asked: Answer each question as the professor intended – within the context of the course material that was taught.

The “cover up” strategy: Some students find it helpful to read the question and try to recall the answer from memory before looking at each of the five responses.

The “true/false” strategy: Identify if the question is looking for a true or false statement. Then label each of the five responses as “true” or “false” and eliminate those that do not correctly complete the question.

Read each of the responses

Don't just stop when you come upon the one that seems likely.

Don't select a response just because you remember learning the information in the course. It may be a true statement in its own right, but not the correct answer to the question.

Don't dismiss a response because it seems too obvious and simple. If you're well prepared for the test, some of the questions may appear very straight forward.

Don't be persuaded by fancy terms in the question. Don't say to yourself, “That sounds impressive, so it must be the right answer.”

As you read through the possible responses, mark off the ones you know are wrong. This will save time if you have to come back to the question later.

Should I change an answer?

Change answers only if you have a good reason for doing so. Changing your answer from response B because you selected B for the previous two questions is not a good reason. The origin of the myth that students most often change correct answers to wrong answers is probably that it you're less likely to remember the answers you changed from wrong to right.

If two responses appear to be equally correct

Eliminate the response that appears to be least related to the question being asked. Remember, you're looking for the best answer, not only a correct one. Some responses may be correct but are not directly related to the question.

If you're not certain of an answer, guess.

There is no penalty for wrong answers. Eliminate the responses you know are incorrect. Narrow down your selection to two responses and then compare them and identify how they differ. Then, make an informed guess.

After the test

Learn from returned tests

When a graded test has been returned, rework your errors trying to reason out why the correct answers were correct. Identify why you might have missed a question. Did you fail to read it correctly? Did you fail to prepare for it? Was the test at a more difficult level than you prepared for? Did you run out of time? Did you have any problems with anxiety before or during the test?

If you didn't do as well as you expected on a test, examine the way you prepared, and adjust your style of learning and studying to equip yourself to do better on future tests.

The single best way to do well on tests is to know the right answers!

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