Mastering Multiple Choice Exams

Multiple choice exams are common because they’re the simplest method for testing a large number of students on a wide range of material. Several nuances to the multiple choice format can make it difficult, but you can make the right choices more consistently by paying attention to these subtleties and knowing your material.

**Before the Exam**

- Periodically review your notes leading up to the exam, and try to organize them in a way that makes them easier to remember. This might mean making flash cards, using mnemonic devices such as acronyms, drawing concept maps, or whatever suits your learning style and helps you learn more efficiently.

- Even though multiple choice can seem like a memorization test, it’s important to thoroughly understand the material you study. This will help you answer more difficult questions while making it easier to recall what you know rather than what you’ve tried to commit to memory.

- If available, use past exams to study. At the U of S, check the Exam File at the USSU (U of S Students’ Union) Help Centre in Room 105, Memorial Union Building for old exams. If none is available, try making your own multiple choice questions.

**During the Exam**

- Read the stem of each question carefully. Underline or circle key words in the question. Try to answer a question in your head before looking at your choice of answers.

- If the wording of a question confuses you, ask your professors to clarify. They can’t tell you the answers, but that doesn’t mean they can’t help you to better understand the questions.

- After considering the question carefully and reasoning through the choices, try not to second-guess yourself. Change answers if you have a good reason, but if you are unsure, trust your gut feeling.

- Unless you are penalized for incorrect answers, be sure to answer every question. When making an educated guess, look for similar choices.

- Don’t get stuck on individual questions. If you don’t know or can’t decide on an answer, mark the question with an asterisk (*) or a question mark and move on. Save time to come back to it later.

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• When you know that an answer is wrong, cross it off your list of choices. Reducing the set of answers makes it easier to decide which one is correct.

  Q.1 Which of the following is a support service on campus?

  (a) Starbucks  (b) Student Learning Services  (c) AIDS Saskatoon  (d) All of the above

  We know (a) can’t be correct, because it is a coffee shop. AIDS Saskatoon (c) isn’t on campus, so it may be crossed off, and if (a) and (c) are wrong, so is (d), since not all answers are true.

• For questions that require calculations, don’t estimate the value and look for the closest option; complete the calculation.

  Q.2 49/20 + (49x20) - 20/49 =?

  (a) 983.418  (b) 984.318  (c) 981.841  (d) 982.042

  Since the answers are so similar, care must be taken in solving the equation to determine which is correct.

• If a question has a lot of details, eliminate information that’s irrelevant to the answer.

  Q.3 John won $50 at a skateboarding competition and spent it all on a new skateboard. His brother, Dan, gave him an old board for the competition, but John broke it hours before getting the new one. This was after Dan had told John he would buy him supper if he won the competition. John had ridden his new board for two hours when Dan told him that the new board was only worth half as much as the one he broke. How much did Dan pay for the board that John broke?

  (a) $75  (b) $90  (c) $100  (d) $120

  The only information needed to answer this question is that “John won $50 and spent it all on a board… worth half as much as the one he broke.” The rest of the information is unnecessary.

• Don’t let the trickiness of any multiple choice question undermine your confidence in the material. Your knowledge is ultimately more important than any test score. No exam can test everything you know, and nobody knows everything, so don’t let a little adversity discourage you.

Answers for examples: Q.1 (b), Q.2 (d), Q.3 (c)

Make Smart Choices!