



How to Take Multiple Choice Test

Preparing for the Multiple Choice Exam

Simulate the Required Behavior

When studying for an examination, the most effective approach is to closely simulate the behavior you'll ultimately be required to perform. For example, if you're studying for a difficult closed-book exam in Social Psychology, it's important that you practice answering difficult social psychology questions without access to your notes or textbook. Equally important, *you need to practice answering questions that someone else has chosen*. After all, you're not the one picking items for the exam, so asking yourself questions that you have made up on your own is usually a poor way to simulate the behavior called for on an exam. That's one of the reasons why workbooks and test batteries are so essential when preparing for the Graduate Record Examinations -- they provide you with difficult practice items that someone else has written.

For introductory courses like Social Psychology, one of the best study strategies is a two-tiered approach in which you study alone at first and study with others afterward. During the first phase, carefully review your notes and the textbook, perhaps creating flashcards to help you remember definitions, theories, and other important material. Then, once you feel confident of the material, study with one or more classmates (or with a TA during weekly office hours). During this second phase, trade off asking each other questions without allowing the person who is answering to look at the textbook or any notes. If you are studying with more than one partner, just form a circle and rotate the role of question-asker.

This kind of studying is highly efficient because it allows others to pick the material, thereby exposing gaps in your knowledge (just as an exam does). Moreover, if the questions people ask are comparable in difficulty to exam questions, you'll be able to estimate your performance on the upcoming exam (e.g., if you can answer 80% of the study questions, you'll probably get about 80% correct on the exam). The only serious drawback to this method is that it can be a waste of time if you or your partners haven't finished reading all the material in advance. Group time should be reserved mainly for *practice* -- not for review and discussion.

Spaced Practice is Better than Massed Practice

Suppose you have a tight schedule and can only afford to spend 6 hours studying for a major exam. One common question is whether you should "mass" the hours together right before the exam (to keep the material fresh in memory), or whether you should "space" the hours apart over a few weeks. Quite a bit of research suggests that spaced practice is generally superior to massed practice. For example, all things being equal, you'll get more mileage out of three 2-hour blocks than one 6-hour block, even though the total amount of time studying is identical in both cases. So if you have a particularly busy schedule and can only spend a few hours studying, be sure to use them well. Late-night cramming is usually a recipe for poor retention, mental and physical fatigue, and careless mistakes on the exam.

Don't Psych Yourself Out

It's been demonstrated that when you carry extra emotional baggage -- "I've got to ace this exam" or "If I screw up, I'll never get into graduate school" -- performance suffers, so don't lose the big picture. The most constructive approach is to focus on the task at hand, put in as much time studying as you can afford, and just do your best. Returning to the luggage metaphor: all the excess baggage can be dealt with later, if you're so inclined. Unpack *after* the exam.

A certain amount of anxiety is normal (or even useful) when studying for an exam, but if you feel overwhelmed or feel that uncontrollable emotions are interfering with your exam performance, you may be suffering from test anxiety. If you think this is a possibility, you should alert your instructor right away and ask for help. Your instructor may be able to recommend techniques to reduce your anxiety (e.g., relaxation training) or may allow you to take the exam in a less stressful environment (e.g., by moving you to a quieter room, or giving you a few extra minutes to complete the exam). In a case of severe test anxiety, the worst thing you can do is to continue taking the exams without notifying your instructor that there is a problem.

Taking the Test

Look Over the Test and Pace Yourself

When you first get the exam, don't just plunge into answering test items. Instead, thumb through the pages and get the lay of the land. How many questions are there? How many different sections? Are some questions worth more points than others? Once you've looked through the entire test, try to estimate what pace you should maintain in order to finish approximately 10 minutes before the period is over. That way, you'll have a little time at the end to check for mistakes like skipped questions or misread items.

Some of the worst problems occur when students enter a time warp and forget to check the clock, or when they spend too much time on one or two difficult items. To prevent this from happening, one trick you can use is to scribble the desired "finish time" time for each section right on the test booklet. That way, you'll be prompted to check the clock after completing each part of the exam.

Take Short Breaks

Try taking a few breaks during the exam by stopping for a moment, shutting your eyes, and taking some deep breaths. Periodically clearing your head in this way can help you stay fresh during the exam session. Remember, you get no points for being the first person to finish the exam, so don't feel like you have to race through all the items -- even two or three 30-second breaks can be very helpful.

Don't Skip Around

Skipping around the exam can waste valuable time, because at some point you will have to spend time searching for the skipped questions and re-reading them. A better approach is to answer each question in order. If you are truly baffled by a question, mark the answer you believe to be right, place a question mark next to the question, and come back to it later if you have time. Try to keep these flagged questions to a bare minimum (e.g., fewer than 10% of all items).

Don't Be Afraid to Change Your First Answer

Even though first answers are often correct, you shouldn't be afraid to change your original answer if, upon reflection, it seems wrong to you. Dozens of studies over the past 70 years have found that students who change dubious answers usually improve their test scores. For example, a 2005 study of 1,561 introductory psychology midterm exams found that when students changed their answers, they went from wrong to right 51% of the time, right to wrong 25% of the time, and wrong to a different wrong answer 23% of the time (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 88, 725-735).

What To Do If More Than One Answer Seems Correct

If you're utterly stumped by a question, here are some strategies to help you narrow the field and select the correct answer:

1. Ask yourself whether the answer you're considering completely addresses the question. If the test answer is only partly true or is true only under certain narrow conditions, then it's probably not the right answer. If you have to make a significant assumption in order for the answer to be true, ask yourself whether this assumption is obvious enough that the instructor would expect everyone to make it. If not, dump the answer overboard.
2. If you think an item is a trick question, think again. Very few instructors would ever write a question intended to be deceptive. If you suspect that a question is a trick item, make sure you're not reading too much into the question, and try to avoid imagining detailed scenarios in which the answer *could* be true. In most cases, "trick questions" are only tricky because they're not taken at face value.
3. If, after your very best effort, you cannot choose between two alternatives, try vividly imagining each one as the correct answer. If you are like most people, you will often "feel" that one of the answers is wrong. Trust this feeling -- research suggests that feelings are frequently accessible even when recall is poor (e.g., we can still know how we feel about a person even if we can't remember the person's name). Although this tip is not infallible, many students find it useful.