

Preparing for, and taking, a Multiple Choice Exam: Some Basic Tips, Tactics, and Strategies

Multiple choice tests demand a different approach than constructed item response (e.g., essay) tests in that they focus on breadth rather than depth of knowledge. However, it is a mistake to assume that such tests only measure your ability to memorize isolated pieces of information. In truth, the better you know and understand the material being assessed, and the better you prepare, the better you will perform. There really are no “tricks” to get you to better performance. You must learn the material to do well. Keep in mind that the items on the exam are a sample from the broad domain or topics you are learning. Rather than focusing on learning very specific details, ideas, or solutions, generally speaking, the more you learn, know, and understand about the areas being tested, the better you are likely to do.

I. WHEN PREPARING FOR THE TEST:

Do

- ✓ Study material you are learning in short, spaced, segments (20-40 minutes at a time, over many days).
- ✓ Don't put off preparing. MC exams typically focus on breadth of content covered so it is easy to fall behind. If you know you must take a standardized exam like the state basic skills test, review the test preparation materials to find out what is being assessed and then develop a long term (one that will take several months to implement) strategy for preparation. Always take the practice tests first to get a true sense of how prepared you are.
- ✓ Develop a strategy, or use a ready-made strategy to help you prepare. (For example: **SQ4R** - Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review, Reflect, or **Elaborative Interrogation** - turning facts into why-questions, and then answering them (for example: It's a **fact** that learning requires attention. Question = **why** is attention essential to learning?).
- ✓ Use the technique of **self-explanation**. As you study, stop periodically and try to explain to yourself what you have just read or practiced. Do you truly understand the ideas, concepts, theory, etc. that you just studied? Could you explain them to another person if you had to? You may want to pair up with another individual to see if you could actually do this.
- ✓ Practice answering MC questions over the material to be tested. Questions generated by another person work best. The only way to be sure you are ready is to practice.
- ✓ When studying from text, if you highlight (or underline), do it judiciously. Try using different colored highlighters, for example, one for key concepts, the other for specific examples.
- ✓ Develop an outline or concept map of the main topics the exam will cover. Fill in the outline/map with detail (key facts, concepts, examples) over time. An organized map is easier to retain in memory and helps to facilitate retrieval.
- ✓ Connect ideas as you learn them; connections between ideas facilitate comprehension, trigger recall and provide multiple pathways to information stored in memory.

Don't

- ✓ Cram; frequent, targeted repetition is far better for retention than one massive attempt to get everything down in memory.
- ✓ Simply rote memorize (MC questions, contrary to popular belief, are not limited to simple definitions, or material that has been rote memorized, nor are they necessarily easier than constructed item exams).
- ✓ Assume you are prepared because you *feel* ready. The only way to know you are truly prepared is to rehearse.

II. WHEN TAKING THE TEST:

- ✓ If you cannot answer a question within one minute, skip it and come back to it later (you may want to circle or otherwise mark the question so you won't forget).
- ✓ Don't overlook the exam as a resource. Reading the questions and possible answers can stimulate your thinking and you may find information in one question that will help you answer other questions.
- ✓ Try reading the questions and answering them before looking at any of the choices. If one of the choices then matches closely to your response, it is probably correct.
- ✓ When stuck, eliminate all obviously wrong answers first.
- ✓ Always make certain the choices available pertain to the question or item under consideration. Sometimes correct statements are available as answer choices but they have nothing to do with the question you're working on.
- ✓ Be wary of negatives; negatives are known to be more difficult to process. Make sure you understand the question.
- ✓ Answer questions without assuming too much; try not to overanalyze. Ask for clarification if needed. (You will often "feel" that one of the answers is right/wrong. Trust your feeling – although not absolutely reliable, research suggests that feelings are frequently accessible even when factual recall is poor).
- ✓ If you find yourself frustrated, or tired, and if time permits, take a short break
- ✓ Before turning in the completed exam, review and make sure you have filled-in all the bubbles on the answer sheet and/or answered all the questions on the exam