



SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING WITH MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS ON INTRODUCTORY PSYCHOLOGY TEST AND EXAMS

Multiple-choice questions consist of three parts:

- 1) a stem, which asks a question, poses a problem, or presents an incomplete sentence,
- 2) the correct answer, which appears among
- 3) a number of "distracters" or "seductive" alternatives.

Your task is to identify the correct answer alternative, that is, the best answer alternative from among the given answer alternatives.

Multiple-choice questions can be unnerving for students unfamiliar with them. The following twelve suggestions should help you with them. To be of maximum benefit, it is recommended that you review them before each test.

1. Do not count on being able to answer multiple-choice questions correctly merely by recognizing the correct answer. Recognition usually entails choosing a familiar item. However, in a multiple-choice question, it is possible for every alternative to be familiar. The problem, then, is not familiarity, but rather understanding the meaning of each of the alternatives with respect to the context of the question posed. You can best achieve this level of understanding by studying for the test as though it will be a short-answer or essay test. Read each question stem twice. As you read, underline words such as "not" or "always" to help you remember what it is you are looking for.
2. Before reading the answer alternatives, attempt first your own answer to the question stem. Because the answer alternatives may sometimes begin to confuse you, it is best to reflect on what you know before looking at these alternatives. If the question stem does not seem to provide sufficient information about what is being asked, then glance over the alternatives to get a better idea.
3. When you are ready to read the answer alternatives, always read answer alternatives, carefully before jumping to the conclusion that a particular one must be the best.
4. Beware of jargon. Answer alternatives may appear in technical language in order to detect whether you know the difference between what "looks right" and what "is right". The correct answer may also appear in jargon to see whether you know the relevant technical terminology.
5. Beware too, of answer alternatives that are correct statements in and of themselves but are not correct answer alternatives to the questions stem. Be sure that your choice is the best completion of the stem.
6. Be particularly careful with answer alternatives such as "all of the above," "none of the above" and "more than one, but not all, of the above." These choices are frequently most difficult. Look at every other answer alternative very carefully to be sure that it says what you think it says. Sloppy reading can be particularly disastrous with items such as these.

7. Watch out for double negatives! Though we believe that a good multiple-choice test really should not have such questions, sometimes they do slip in. A question whose question stem is "Which of the following is not true?" can be particularly difficult. This difficulty is compounded if one or more of the answer alternatives also contains negatives. You find yourself saying to yourself such things as "It is not true that this alternative is not true."! To make such answer alternatives more manageable, rephrase such a negative question stem to yourself according to the following strategy: If I can find just one answer alternative that is not true, then the other alternatives, the correct (false) answer alternative will be clear by a process of elimination. This procedure is not as complicated as it appears and will help you cope with such cases. Try it.
8. In general, a good strategy for taking multiple-choice tests is to first go through the test, answering all the questions you can, without worrying about the ones you cannot answer for the moment. There are two reasons for this: doing the easier questions first may help allay some of the anxiety that test often evoke; and sometimes seeing the answer alternatives to later questions will remind you of the answer alternatives to earlier questions. Subsequently, go through the test again, answering all the questions about which you are uncertain.
9. Pace yourself properly throughout the test. On average, you will have just over one minute per question. You will probably want to reserve additional time to review your answers, and you will require some time to transfer your answers to your computer answer sheet, IF APPLICABLE. Note: Extra time is not allowed for transferring answers to a computer answer sheet. A good general rule of thumb is to try to answer five multiple-choice questions about every five minutes. This strategy will allow sufficient time at the end for those questions you found most problematic.
10. In PSY 100 there is no penalty for guessing on the multiple-choice questions. In answering questions about which you are not sure, you should guess, but not "blindly." Instead, view the situation as a problem in probabilities: if there are five answer alternatives from which to choose, your chances of guessing the correct answer alternative are one in five, or 20%. But, if you can eliminate even just one answer alternative as being clearly wrong, your chances now of guessing the correct answer alternative have risen to one in four, or 25%. Elimination of additional answer alternatives further increases your chances of guessing the correct answer alternative. So if you must guess, then guess, but do so from among as small a number of answer alternatives as possible.
11. A good rule of thumb to follow once you have selected an answer alternative is: **BE WARY OF CHANGING YOUR MIND**. There is evidence to suggest that students more frequently change right answers to wrong ones than wrong ones to right ones.
12. Keep in mind that everyone has a unique optimal test-taking style and that there is no reason for you to conclude that you have found yours. Most students continue to show improvements in test-taking skills with experience. Be willing to experiment with new strategies and to learn from your mistakes. Review questions that you got wrong and try to find out why you answered them incorrectly. Look for patterns in your wrong answers, both in the type of material tested and in the particular form or style of the questions. If you are ever unsure as to why the answer alternative you chose on a particular multiple-choice questions was incorrect, go back to the text and notes to check it out. Then, if still unsure, ask the course instructor.

SOURCE: Psy 100 Handbook 1994-1995
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