MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAMS: PREPARATION STRATEGIES

Planning Study Time

Since multiple choice exams are common in courses which cover a lot of factual information, the most important planning strategies are to begin studying several weeks before the exam and to study in short, distributed sessions. For example, two or three half-hour periods each day. This method involves some time planning, but is far more effective than cramming all your review into a few days or even hours before the exam. Begin each study session with a quick review of any material you've studied previously, so that this previous material stays fresh even if you studied it in detail several weeks before the exam. Weekly review of material right from the beginning of the semester can drastically reduce the amount of time you'll need to spend relearning old material before the exam.

Approaches to Studying

You'll probably find there are two different approaches to studying for multiple choice exams. Some students suggest an emphasis on factual detail, terms and definitions. They memorize as much material as possible and make note of small but interesting details. Other students concentrate on understanding the ideas and concepts in the course which tie the facts and details together. They emphasize the similarities and differences between concepts when studying.

Since most exams test the recall of facts and definitions and an understanding of concepts, the approach you take to studying for multiple choice tests must be based on a thoughtful analysis of the requirements of the particular course you're taking and the approach of your instructor. You'll be better prepared for major exams if you look at each small test during the semester as an indication of not only how much of the course material you know, but of the type of knowledge you have as well. The best and safest approach to studying is to acquire a thorough knowledge of the facts and an understanding of the concepts and ideas underlying them.

Monitoring Study Effectiveness

Some students are under the mistaken impression that if they read and understand something, they know it. The most common error students make when preparing for multiple choice exams is to study only to the point where they can recognize the correct answer - "after all, the right answer is right there on the page in front of you . . ." Multiple choice exams, along with many other types of exams, test not only your ability to recognize information, but your ability to recall and apply facts and concepts.

To ensure that you can do more than recognize the right answer, try to test yourself periodically as you're studying. For example, once you've studied a section of your notes, put them away and try to summarize the information, on paper or orally if you can. Imagine that you'll have to teach a class on that information tomorrow and create an outline for your lecture and make a list of questions the students might ask. Or, draw a diagram to summarize the information, using boxes for main concepts and arrows to show how they're related. Strategies like these can be used to test your ability to both recall the material and to reorganize and transform it into a new format.
However, since multiple choice exams demand that you deal with the course material in a specific format, it’s most important that your studying includes practice in both writing and answering multiple choice questions.

**How to Practice**

Writing multiple choice questions enables you to see the information from your notes and text translated into the multiple choice format before the exam. Writing practice questions can be a great activity to do with a study partner or group, with each of you preparing questions on a section of a chapter, then trading and answering each other's questions. Setting a time limit and correcting responses can make this "rehearsal" more like a real exam.

You'll also need to practice answering "real" multiple choice questions. One of the best ways is to try an old exam from your course. Some instructors place them on file in Spiva Library. You can also ask your instructor for one if there aren't any on file. A different textbook on the same subject or the study guide for your course (if there is one) can also be good sources of practice questions. Wherever you get your practice questions, it's important to limit the time you give yourself (because you won't have endless amounts of time during the exam) and to correct your answers.

**Watch Your Time**

For every exam it's important to calculate the amount of time you can spend on each section or question according to the number of points it is worth. (Do the easy questions or sections first - this is helpful for calming nerves and establishing your concentration.) If your exam is all multiple choice, you may want to mark where you should be after one half of the allotted time to ensure you aren't falling too far behind. It is important to work at a fairly quick pace; multiple choice exams are notorious for being long.

**Process the Question**

Careless mistakes are often made when students rush through the "stem" or first part of the question, missing important information. Read the question carefully, underlining key terms. Watch for negative or positive phrasing, or qualifying words like "always" or "never" which can drastically change the meaning of a statement. If you don't understand the stem, ask your instructor to clarify it.

Before you look at the list of possible responses, try to recall the answer on your own. Then look at the choices to see which one best matches your answer. As you read through the possible responses, mark off the ones you know are wrong. This will mean less reading time if you have to come back to the question later. If none of the selections seems close, reread the question and try to determine what you missed. If you still can't get it, go on. Something in another question may trigger your memory so you can recall the answer later.
TROUBLESHOOTING

"I never get finished."

The down side of carefully reading and processing questions is that it may eat up your time. Set progress points at the beginning of the exam and use them to monitor your speed. If you're significantly behind after the first progress point, you may have to choose between speeding up (and possibly making errors) or not finishing. Be wary that you aren't spending too much time deliberating on answers you're unsure of. Keep up your pace by working through the easy questions quickly and then coming back to the more difficult ones.

"I can't choose between two similar answers."

With multiple choice exams you are required to choose the best answer, which may seem very similar to the second best answer. If this is a recurring problem for you, you may need to look at how you're studying. This type of problem may indicate that you've concentrated on recognition of terms rather than understanding their significance. Or, it could indicate that you need to study the material in more depth. The best way to determine what's causing the problem in your particular case is a careful analysis of your errors. If your exam is not returned, make a point of asking your instructor if you can see it. Try to determine why you chose the wrong answer - did you misread the question, did you simply not know the answer (because you had missed a class or not read a chapter), or could you see the right page of your notes in your mind, but couldn't recall the information? Each of these examples calls for a different kind of corrections strategy, rather than simply studying more. If you can't figure out why an answer was wrong, see your instructor for help. Understanding why you've made an error is critical to preventing that error from happening again.

"The questions were all on trivial details."

Most instructors do test for some recall of detail - knowing your instructor will help you to judge how much you'll need to prepare. However, if it seems that most of your exam covers minor or trivial points, there may be a problem with your ability to judge what are the important points in the course. If you're unsure of your ability to choose important information, or of the amount of detail which your instructor will include, take your notes and text with you to each test you have during the semester. (Naturally they'll remain under your chair during the test!) As soon as you can after the test, go through your lecture notes and textbook and mark the information that was on the test. This will give you a benchmark for comparing what you thought was important enough to study versus what the instructor thought was important enough to put on the test.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

The Learning Center is one of the best sources on campus for advice and information on learning and study related issues.

THE LEARNING CENTER, 659-3725

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