Multiple-Choice Testing

Most multiple-choice questions are of the incomplete statement type: A partial statement (called a stem) leads grammatically into four or five sentence endings, or options, listed directly under it. One of the options is the correct answer. The other (incorrect) options are called “distracters” or “decoys”.

This incomplete-statement type question exhibits good construction when:
1. All options are grammatically consistent.
2. The stem is long and the options are short.
3. Extraneous material is excluded from the stem.
4. The stem contains one central problem.
5. Double negatives are not used.
6. All options are plausible.
7. The correct option is no longer or shorter than the others.
8. Only one option is the correct or best answer.

When the use of the incomplete-statement form would lead to an awkward stem or options, the more usual question form is used, such as:

In what century did the Protestant Reformation begin?
 a. 16\textsuperscript{th}   b. 19\textsuperscript{th}   c. 18\textsuperscript{th}   d. 17\textsuperscript{th}

The correct answer is a. The question is not a tricky one. You either know the answer or you don’t. If you studied well about the Reformation, you will know the answer.

It is important to study carefully for a multiple-choice test which is an objective exam. Sometimes, even when you study a great deal, you can still have trouble with these exams. The sample question you have just read is simple and straightforward. Objective exam questions can, however, be confusing, tricky, or put together in an unexpected way.

Following are some strategies for answering multiple-choice questions.

**Strategies: General—for Most Questions**

1. **Read Directions Carefully.** Before you even look at a question on a multiple-choice test, you must read the directions carefully. Some say, “Mark the one best answer,” whereas others may require that you “Mark all correct answers”. You will lose credit if you mark more than one correct answer in the first case, or if you miss a correct option in the second case. If the directions are not clear, then ask.
2. **Read Through The Whole Exam Rapidly, Answering Only The Questions You Know First.** Put a mark in the margin by all the questions that you are not absolutely sure of so that you will be able to find them easily when you come back later to answer them. After you read the stem and the options, spend no more than a brief few seconds puzzling over the question. If it resists answering, cross out any options you have eliminated, mark the question so you will be able to find it easily later, and move on to the next question. Don’t be in a rush to mark the first option that sounds good. In some questions, **all** the options may be correct, and you have to choose the best one; you won’t find it unless you read them all.

3. **Go Back To The Unanswered Questions.** Read each of them with a pencil in hand, circling the key words that identify the information asked for in the question. Underline all words like: **only, all, always, never, sometimes, or which is not.** These words can have a big influence on the way you interpret the question.

   After you have marked the question as suggested, attack it from two angles. First, look at the circled words and think of what you know about each of them. Visualize your study materials. Bring your knowledge to bear on the question. Second, analyze the question for tricky wording by carefully considering the qualifying words you have underlined and how they influence the meaning of the question.

4. **Try To Apply The True-False Technique.** To use the true-false technique, you make a complete statement from the stem plus each option, in turn. An option that results in a false statement is eliminated as a distracter. One that results in a true statement is probably the correct answer.

   **Example:** Because of its lack of lumber, Syria has many “beehive” homes built of:
   
   a. metal       b. concrete       c. marble       d. mud brick

   To judge the correctness of the first option, you would complete the stem as follows: “Because of its lack of lumber, Syria has many “beehive” homes built of metal.” Since Syria is a hot, dry, and rather poor country, you would probably decide that this statement is false. Metal (concrete and marble as well) are too expensive and not readily available to the vast majority of people. The last option (d. mud brick), undoubtedly produced locally, would be inexpensive and available and would hold up in a country where the rainfall is so meager.

   When you use this technique, don’t be too quick to eliminate options; do so only after sufficient consideration. If you have eliminated three options but don’t like the remaining option, you must go back and reconsider them all.
5. **Stick To The Subject Matter Of The Course.** When a multiple-choice question includes options that you don’t recognize or that seem out of place, don’t get panicked into choosing one of them. The chances are great that these misplaced options are distracters.

   **Example:** Which of the following does not have satellite moons?
   
   a. Venus  
   b. Cassiopeia  
   c. Mars  
   d. Perseus

   You might reason as follows: “We’ve been studying the planets and their rotation around the sun. I’ve never even heard of Perseus or Cassiopeia. I bet both are decoys—I’ll cross them off. We did study Venus and Mars. They are planets, but I don’t remember which one has satellites and which one doesn’t. I’ll mark this question and come back to it later.”

   Later, when you have returned to the question, you might remember that Mars has a ring of satellites or moons around it. That would eliminate Mars, leaving Venus. You still might not remember whether or not Venus has satellites, but since that’s the only option left, you would choose it. (Venus is the correct answer.)

6. If you are stuck on a multiple-choice question in the choices, **Read The Question Again Covering The Options, Stop and Think Of The Answer And Then Look For It.** In a good multiple-choice question, all of the answers are plausible. Sometimes you can read through the answers and become confused. It may help to stop and think of the correct answer and then read through the choices again.

7. **Sometimes in answering a difficult multiple-choice question, A Process Of Elimination Will Help You Narrow Down The Choices.** Eliminate the obviously incorrect choices and improve your chances.

   **Example:** How do authors use supporting material?
   
   a. To move smoothly from one idea to the next.  
   b. To help the reader distinguish the main points.  
   c. To clarify a main point and make it more interesting.  
   d. To show the relationship between a major point and a detail.

   You may not be able to remember why authors use supporting material and, consequently, cannot use suggestion #6 above. So you move through the choices. Answer a is a description of the function of a transition, so you can eliminate it. Answers b and d are also functions of the transition. You are sure of that much. So, by the process of elimination, answer c must be correct.

8. **Watch Out For Negative And Extreme Words.** Whenever you find negative words such as *not* or *except* in the stem or the options, circle them so they’ll
stand out. Then make sure you take them into consideration when you choose your answer.

Example: Which materials are not used in making saddles?
   a. Linen, canvas, serge    b. Wood and leather
   c. Rubber and cork          d. Iron and steel

(The correct answer is d. The materials in a, b, and c are all used in saddles.)

Always circle such 100 percent words as NEVER, NO, BEST, WORST, ALWAYS, ALL, and EVERY. Be very suspicious of the options in which you find them. In fact, if you have to guess, first eliminate all the options that contain absolute words. Then look over the remaining choices.

9. Foolish Options Are Usually Incorrect. Occasionally test writers include a silly statement as an option. Sometimes they do this as a joke to relieve some tension for the tester. Or they may simply have run out of ideas and dashed off foolish statements to fill space. You should almost always view such statements as distracters worthy of being immediately crossed out.

10. Numbers In The Middle Range Are Usually Correct. When all the options in a multiple-choice question are numbers, the answer is easy if you have memorized the correct number. Otherwise, you'll probably have to do some guessing. If you have no other information to go on, your chances of guessing correctly are increased if you eliminate the highest and lowest numbers. For some reason, test writers usually include at least one number lower than the correct answer and at least one number higher than the correct answer.

This rule allows us to eliminate half the options in the following example: The "Great Pyramid" originally stood how many feet high?
   a. 281    b. 381    c. 481    d. 981

We would eliminate 281 as the lowest number and 981 as the highest, leaving two middle-range numbers 381 and 481. At this point we have a 50-50 chance of choosing correctly. Can we do better? We could compare the two remaining options to something we know—say a football field. Then, 381 feet is slightly greater than a football field, perhaps not so high for a pyramid. But 481 feet is over 1-1/2 times as high as a football field is long. That would really make a "Great Pyramid." (If we stuck with 481, we would be correct.)

11. Check For Look-Alike Options. Test makers occasionally include, in one question, two options that are alike except for one word. Such a pair seems to indicate where the test maker's interest was focused, so it is logical to assume that one of the pair is the correct answer. The other options should, of course, be read carefully; they should be eliminated in favor of the look-alikes only in a guessing situation.
**Example:** The author considers himself an authority on:

a. touring the Middle East       b. Middle East rug dealers
b. Middle East rug dealers       d. behavior patterns of tourists

c. Middle East rug bargains

If I had no inkling of the correct answer, I would eliminate a and d and choose from the similar pair b and c. (The correct option is b.)

The test writer can keep you from using this technique simply by inserting two pairs of similar options. Then you would have to deal with four options as always.

The author considers himself an authority on:

a. behavior patterns of merchants   b. Middle East rug dealers
b. Middle East rug dealers   d. behavior patterns of tourists

c. Middle East rug bargains

12. **Check For Longer Or More Inclusive Options.** In multiple-choice questions, the correct option is often longer or more inclusive of qualities or ideas than the decoys. The length or inclusiveness results when the test writer must qualify or amplify a simple statement. So, be alert for tightly packed or overly long options, as in this question:

The author says that rug buying in the Middle East is like courtship in that:

a. both parties fool each other
b. both parties must trust each other
c. both parties desire the same thing but begin with expressions of disinterest
d. in rug buying, as in courtship, one dresses in one’s best

(Here, option c is correct.)

13. **Don’t Automatically Eliminate The Choices “All Of The Above” or “None Of The Above.”** Here is an example of a question in which “all of the above” is the correct answer:

Which of the following is an example of humanitarian reform in the 19th century?

a. abolishment of slavery       b. prison reforms
b. prison reforms       d. all of the above

c. children’s hospitals

d. all of the above

One way to confirm the choice of “all of the above” is to find two correct answers in the options. For example, suppose you were sure that (a) “abolishment of slavery” and (c) “children’s hospitals” were part of the 19th century reform, but you weren’t sure about (b) “prison reform.” Then, if only one answer were permitted, that answer would have to be d, because d is the only option that includes a and c.
If you use the process of elimination and can’t eliminate anything, choose “all of the above” as your answer. If, on the other hand, you find that you can eliminate every answer, and “none of the above” is the last answer, choose it.

14. Find Out If You Can Mark More Than One Choice. Students often take for granted that all multiple-choice questions have only one answer. Some students fail exams because they assume this when, in fact, more than one answer can be circled for each question. Instructors will usually tell you in the directions printed at the top of the exam if more than one answer can be marked. If there are no instructions, and you have reason to believe that more than one answer could be chosen, ask your instructor. Here is a question in which two of the choices are correct. See if you can figure out which ones they are:

Which of the following is part of the process of surveying a book?
   a. Read the table of contents.
   b. Read the introduction.
   c. Read a sample chapter from the middle of the book.
   d. Quickly glance at each page.

Both a and b are correct answers.

STRATEGIES for Difficult Questions
So you have read all the questions on the test as carefully as possible. You have circled the key words, underlined and analyzed the qualifying words, used the process of elimination to arrive at answers, and tried to think up your own examples to clarify the question. If you have followed the above suggestions and you are still stuck on a few questions, there are a few more things you can try before you resort to blind guessing.

15. Sometimes you will read a multiple-choice question and draw a complete blank. Leave The Question Itself And Read Each Of The Answers Separately And Thoughtfully. Sometimes one of them will give you a clue to the meaning of the question itself.

16. Another Way To Attack A Difficult Multiple-Choice Question Is To Read The Question Repeatedly With Each Separate Answer. Sometimes one of the answers won’t guarantee that the answer is the right one, but reading the question in this way will give you a slightly better chance at the correct answer than blind guessing. Also, this way you can check for grammatical structure.

17. If you can, without distorting the test writer’s meaning, Paraphrase Or Restate A Difficult Question In Your Own Words. Then try to think of some examples that will make the meaning even clearer. Go back and reread the original question and see if it is easier to answer than it was at first.
18. Use What You Have Learned From The Test Itself To Help You Answer The Tough Questions you have saved for the end. Actively look for information to help you answer the questions on which you are stuck.

19. As An Absolute Last Resort, Guess On The Remaining Questions. According to research, you will do better than leaving the questions blank.

Changing Answers

20. Proofread The Entire Test Before You Turn It In. You may have learned new information from the test itself, which makes it obvious that some of your answers are wrong. If so, change them. Change the answers only if you have good reason to do so. All last minute changes should be well thought out.