Study Tip # 34: The Art of Answering Multiple Choice Questions

1. What is the answer?
○ A This is right.
○ B No, this is.
○ C Definitely this.
○ D I give up.
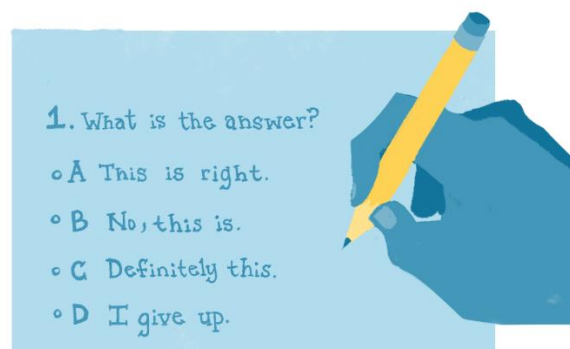
Anatomy of Multiple Choice Questions

Scenario: A brief description of any scenario relating to the question and/or a brief summary of important facts and/or values.

Stem: The statement that asks the question or specifies the problem to be solved.

Options: The possible solutions to the problem or answers to the question.

Correct response: The option that answers the question correctly.

Distractors: The options with the incorrect answers.

Example: Rick Astley is an English singer, songwriter, musician, and radio personality. By the time of his retirement in 1993, Astley had sold approximately 40 million records worldwide. — **Scenario**

Rick Astley's never gonna: — **Stem**

Options
A Give you up
B Let you down — **Distractors**
C Desert you
D All of the above — **Correct Response**

Important Points

- Assume that all the information in the scenario is there for a reason.

- The stem usually contains the key words or phrases that determine what the question is asking for.

- The options will include:

  Statements similar to the correct answer
  Completely implausible statements
  Similar distractors
  True statements that do not answer the question

- Exams are usually constructed with numerical answers in increasing order, and worded options in a random order. Therefore:

  C is no more likely to be the correct answer than A, B, D or E.

  Do not waste time looking for patterns in your answers.

  Do not become worried if you have selected five "B" answers in a row.

  If you must guess a number of questions, you have a better chance of getting more questions correct if you choose the same letter answer for every guessed question.

Answering Multiple Choice Questions

- During the first pass:

  Read each question carefully. Are you being asked to find the best response or a correct response or the incorrect answer?

  Underline negative terms or phrases and absolute and conditional qualifiers as you come across them.

  Whenever possible, cover the options so you're not distracted by them. Then think of the correct answer without looking at the given options and then select the choice that best matches your answer.

  Make sure you read **every option** before making your choice. Watch out for negatives, modifiers and qualifiers and underline these words/terms as you come across them.

  If the answer isn't obvious, cross out the options that are definitely wrong, mark the question, and move onto the next one. This will save you time during subsequent passes, and improve your odds of guessing a question correctly should this be required.

- During the second and/or third passes, try the following strategies:

  Read the stem of a question together with each possible response independently from the other options. Having a complete sentence to think about may jog your memory more than by only looking at the answers.

  Re-read the question stem separately with each answer and think of them as either true or false statements.

  Ask yourself: "What's this question asking?"

  Rephrase the question in your own words until you understand it.

  Without looking at the answers ask, "What do I know about that question?"

  Break the question or answers into smaller parts if you find them complicated or confusing.

  Switch from finding the correct answer to finding the incorrect answer(s) and visa versa.

- During the final pass, make **educated guesses** for those questions you were unable to answer.

- Unless you are penalised for incorrect answers, do not leave a question unanswered.

- Check your answer sheet to make sure you haven't accidentally selected two answers for the same question.

- Erase stray pencil marks on your answer sheet as they can count as errors when the sheet is computer scored.

Note:

- The single most frequent error students make in a multiple-choice questions is to misread, and therefore misinterpret what is required of them. The most common reasons why this occurs include:

  Skimming through questions and making the assumption that they're similar to what they've covered when preparing for the exam. Students then proceed to use the same solution process, not realising that the question is asking for something different to that which they've assumed.

  Reading the options and selecting an answer before they've read the question carefully, and understand what answer is required of them.

  Choosing the first correct answer they come across and not considering the remaining options.

  Selecting an option simply because it includes correct information. These options may be incorrect and they do not answer the question asked.

- Be careful when asked one of the following: *"which option is not true"* or *"all of the following apply except"*. These questions are asking you to pick an **incorrect** answer.

- Be aware of degrees of correctness.

- Don't choose the first answer that appears to be correct. You must select not only a correct answer, but the best answer. It is therefore important that you read all of the options and not stop when you come upon one that seems likely.
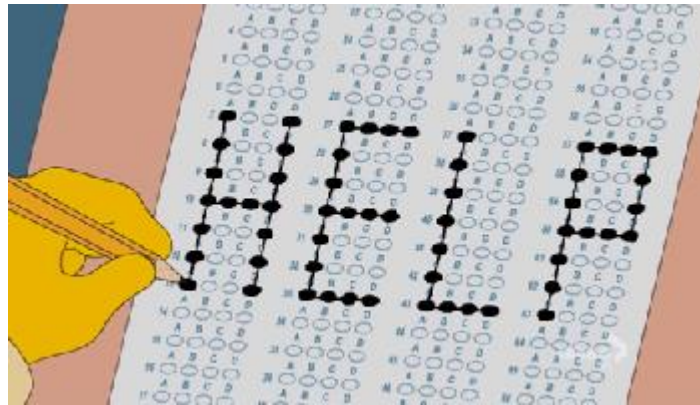
Question 1
The best example of the use of short-term memory is:

A   reciting the key points of what you have just read.
B   repeating a phone number that was just given to you.
C   remembering the concept of categorization and discussing it on an essay exam.
D   remembering the name of a friend whom you have not seen for eight years.

Summary of Key Points

- Read the question before you look at the answers.

- Assume that all the information in the scenario is there for a reason.

- Think of the answer before you read the options.

- Read all of the choices.

- Eliminate the answers you know are incorrect.

- Unless there's a penalty, do not leave a multiple-choice question unanswered.

- Re-read every question before moving to the next one.

Making Educated Guesses

As you're working through past exam questions and/or papers, observe:

- how questions are phrased and structured;

- the level of detail required for full marks;

- key words that need to be mentioned;

- loose phrasing you could use to acquire some marks if you didn't know the actual answer to that question.

When addressing multiple-choice questions:

- look for patterns in which options yield the correct answer;

- guess which answer would be correct before trying to work out the actual answer.

You will need these skills to maximise your chances of obtaining marks for the questions you can't answer. And the result can be huge, as shown in the following example.

Example: The impact of applying educated guesses in a hypothetical
100 multiple-choice question examination

Two students could answer half the questions in this hypothetical multiple-choice exam, and both need to guess the remaining 50 questions to maximise their examination mark.

One student has developed the art of making educated guesses, understands exam designs and has question reasoning skills, and is therefore likely to get about half the questions correct, resulting in an overall score of 75%.

The other student has little or no such skills can only rely on chance, getting one in five questions correct (in questions with 5 answer options), which equates to a mark of 60%.

	Student with no training in making educated guesses		Student who has learned how to make educated guesses	
	Questions Answered	Questions Correct	Questions Answered	Questions Correct
Answers Known	50	50	50	50
Guesses at	50	10	50	25
Total Mark		60		75
Mark as a %		**60%**		**75%**

Method:

Use the strategies below as a **last resort** and only if marks are not deducted for incorrect answers.

- Cross out options that are clearly not correct.

- Eliminate options that are identical but phrased differently.

- Eliminate alternatives that aren't grammatically correct when the question stem is joined to each option. For example:

  If the stem ends with "an" then the correct response will most likely begin with a vowel.

  Question 2
  Non-responsive frattling is usually found in an:

  A   Gringle
  B   Janket
  C   Kloppie
  D   Uckerpod

  The question and the correct answer will have verbs of the same tense and have nouns and verbs that agree.

Question 3
The people of Iceland:

A   a country located just outside the Arctic Circle
B   are the world's most avid readers
C   claim to be descendants of the Aztecs
D   the capital, Reykjavik, where arms talks have been held

Select answers that match the stem for being plural or singular.

Question 4
Small salamanders are:

A   mole
B   tarpon
C   cowl
D   newts

- Some distractors may be accurate and sound correct, but won't apply to the stem they're paired with. Therefore, read the question with each stem separately (cover the other options as you read the question). This reduces the distracting effects of the wrong answers and can make it easier for you to intuitively see which answer makes better sense.

Question 5
What is the effect of releasing a ball in positive gravity?

A   It will rise
B   It will retain its mass
C   It will fall down
D   Its shape will change

Change the options to:

A   What is the effect of releasing a ball in positive gravity? It will rise.
B   What is the effect of releasing a ball in positive gravity? It will retain its mass.
C   What is the effect of releasing a ball in positive gravity? It will fall down.
D   What is the effect of releasing a ball in positive gravity? Its shape will change.
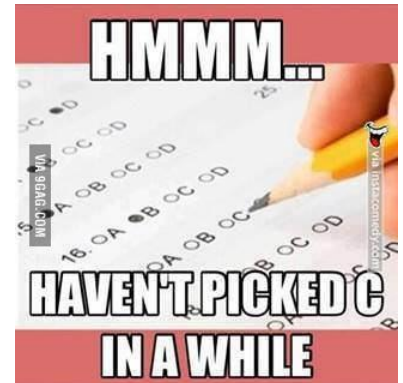
- Address options that use **absolute qualifiers.**

  Absolute qualifiers are words or phrases that indicate or imply that there are no exceptions to the facts stated in the question. Examples include: always, never, none, all, only, every, must, absolutely, every time, invariably, necessary, impossible, is, are, guarantees, ensures.

  Options that include absolute qualifiers are usually incorrect as such statements are highly restrictive and very difficult to defend (it's also very difficult to write an absolute statement that is accurate and valid). Therefore, avoid choosing any option that must be true or false every time.

Question 6
Lurkies suffer from trangitis because

A   Their prads are always developed
B   All their brizes are horizontal
C   Their curnpieces are usually imperfect
D   None of their dringoes can ever adapt

- Options that use absolute qualifiers in conjunction with rules or standards may be correct. For example, *"You must always check that a person is not breathing before starting resuscitation techniques"* holds without exception and hence is correct.

- Address options that use **conditional qualifiers.**

  Conditional qualifiers are words that alter a statement and can make an option be correct or incorrect.

  Examples include: usually, most, probably, frequently, often, generally, may, good, bad, sometimes, seldom, may, perhaps, rarely, occasionally, probably, likely, could, might, should, few, many, some.

  Options that include qualifiers are usually good choices if you cannot come up with the correct answer.

- Responses that use absolute qualifiers are less likely to be correct than ones that use conditional words.

  Question 7
  Which of the following statements is correct?

  A   January is always a summer month.
  B   The pay of a skilled worker often exceeds that of a labourer.
  C   Insurance often helps to prevent an interruption in income.
  D   A hospital patient's details are obtained at the time of admission.

- If you're unsure whether a statement involving an absolute qualifier is correct or not, replace the absolute words with their corresponding conditional qualifiers.

  For example, replace *always* with *often* or *frequently*. Replace *must* with *should* etc. If the statement with the conditional qualifier sounds more valid, take that into consideration when choosing your answer.

  Example:

  Given *"It always rains in Hobart"*, replace the absolute term with its conditional qualifier: *"It often rains in Hobart"*.

  The second statement is true, while the word "always" in the first statement makes it false.

- If you're unsure whether a statement with a conditional qualifier is correct or not, replace the conditional qualifiers with their corresponding absolute terms and determine which sounds more valid. Take this information into consideration when selecting your answer.

  Example:

  Given *"It often rains in Hobart"*, replace the qualifier with its absolute equivalent: *"It always rains in Hobart"*.

- Address options that use **double negatives.**

  Negatives are words or prefixes that reverse the meaning of a sentence.

  Common negative words include: no, not, never, none, neither, except, false, but.

  Common negative prefixes include: un (e.g. Uninterested), non (e.g. non-negotiable), in (e.g. Indirect), im (e.g. Impatient), il (e.g. Illogical), dis (e.g. disorganised).

  Double negative are statements which contain two negatives – one which usually is a word, the other a prefix. The two negatives cancel each other out to create the equivalent positive statement. For example:

  "He is not unathletic" = *"He is ~~not un~~athletic"* = *"He is athletic"*
  "Not uncommon" actually means common.
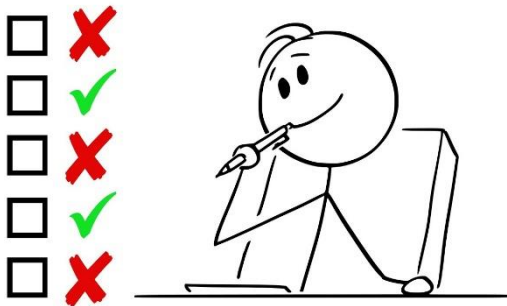
Question 8
Which of the following statements is incorrect?

A   Thomas Edison was born in 1873.

B   It is logical to assume that Thomas Edison's fame was due to his many practical inventions.

C   It is illogical to assume that Thomas Edison's fame was not due to his many practical inventions.

- Note that qualifiers and negatives can appear in the stem or one or more options.

- Eliminate alternatives that are absurd, silly, or obviously incorrect.

- "None of the above" or "All of the above" options

  These options are usually incorrect.

  "All of the above" is a strong possibility for an answer if two or more of the other responses are correct.

  Cross off "None of the above" or "All of the above" options when you read through the answers and find one that makes either of these two statements incorrect.

- Favour more inclusive options i.e. options that encompasses others.

Question 9

A business organisation, which exchanges inputs and outputs with its environment, and has the ability to adjust to changes in the environment, is called:

A   an adaptive system
B   a closed system
C   an open system
D   a controlled and responsive system
E   an open and adaptive system.
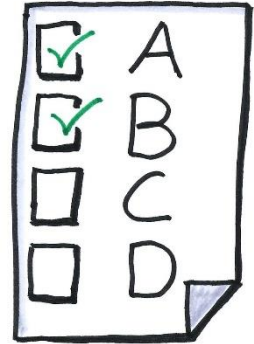
- Avoid choosing answers that are unfamiliar or that you do not understand unless you're certain that all of the other answers are incorrect.

Question 10

Jeans are always:

A   Dark blue
B   Well worn
C   Too tight
D   Bifurcated

- If you have thoroughly prepared for your exams, a choice that's unfamiliar to you is probably incorrect.

- If the options are numbers, choose one in the middle range.

- Favour look-alike options i.e. If two alternatives have similar qualities or similar wording, choose one.
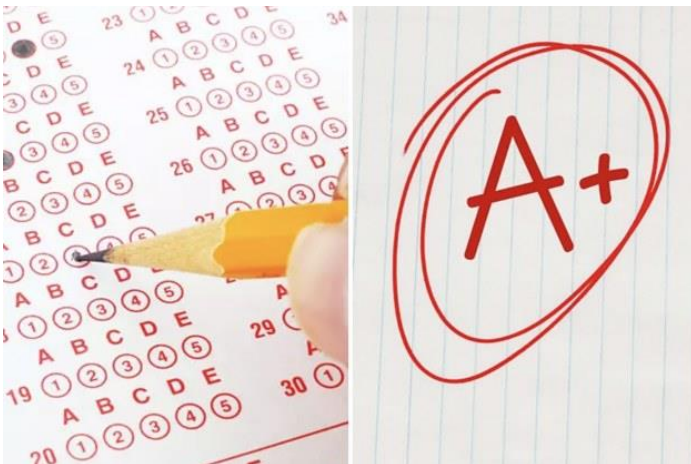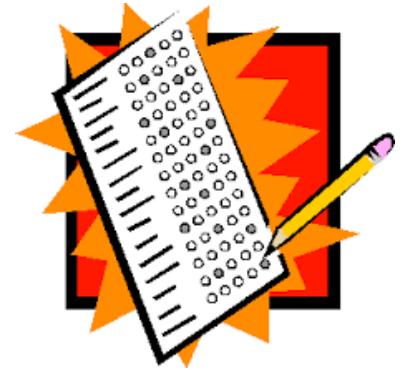
Question 11
An individual who handles travel bookings and inquiries is known as a:

A   tourism consultant
B   tourist
C   tourism promoter
D   fairy penguin

- Responses that look like the word to be defined are usually incorrect.

Question 12
An illusion is:

A   something that is not really there.
B   an allusion.
C   the same as elusive.
D   another word for illustration

- Look for verbal associations. A response that repeats key words that are in the stem is likely to be correct

- Be alert for choices that are identical (they are usually both incorrect) or opposite (often one of them will be the correct choice).

Question 13
In the brain, language functions are associated mainly with the:

A   Left hemisphere
B   Right hemisphere
C   Cerebellum
D   Corpus callosum

- Favour options that have the longest response. The longest choice is usually correct as it's likely to contain details or qualifying information to ensure the answer is correct.

- Options with two sets of facts:

    These questions consist of two contrasting sets of statements. If you can identify one statement that is either correct or incorrect, you can eliminate at least two options. For example:

Question 14
The more you study:

A   The higher your exam marks and the lower your stress levels before your exams
B   The higher your exam marks and the higher your stress levels before your exams
C   The lower your exam marks and the lower your stress levels before your exams
D   The lower your exam marks and the higher your stress levels before your exams

Knowing that more study results in higher examination marks enables you to eliminate options C and D.

Selecting from More Than
One Possible Answer

- Look for and understand the context of the question. More than one answer may look right, but one will fit the context better.

- Read the stem of a question together with each possible response independently from the other options and try to determine which one makes a more true (or false) statement. Having a complete sentence to think about may jog your memory more than by only looking at the answers.

- Compare each alternative and identify how they differ (just the answers, ignore the question). Then look at the question again and ask yourself *"how is this difference important for this question?"*

- Ask yourself whether the option you're considering completely addresses the question. If an answer is only partly true, or is true only under certain conditions, then it's probably not the correct answer.

- If you have to make a significant assumption in order for an answer to be true, ask yourself whether this assumption is obvious enough that the examiners would expect everyone to make it. If not, then it's probably not the correct answer.

- Try imagining each option as the correct answer. If you're like most people, you'll often "feel" that one of the answers is wrong. Research suggests that feelings are frequently accessible even when recall is poor. For example, we can still know how we feel about a person even when we can't remember the person's name!

- If you really think there's absolutely no difference between the possible answers, then look at the options you've eliminated – maybe one of them is actually the correct one.

Regards,
TSFX

Question 1   Answer is B

The question even gives you the hint: *"best example"*. Both A and B are correct, but B is the best example, especially if this is a test in Psychology 1010, covering a chapter about memory and cognition.

Question 2   Answer is D

Question 3

Option A is missing the verb
Option D has no connection to "the people of Iceland."

These options can be eliminated, even though both are true, and you are left with options B and C as possible answers.

Question 4   Answer is D

"Salamanders" is plural, so the answer needs to be plural.

Question 6   Answer is C

Question 7   Answer is A

Question 8   Answer is A

Question 9   Answer is E

Question 10   Answer is D

Question 11   Answer is A

Question 12   Answer is A

Question 13   Answer is A

Question 14   Answer is A

Regards,
TSFX