

Professor Ken Keith's Tips for Test Taking: Multiple Choice and Short Answer Exams

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Multiple-Choice Exams

- **What are they?** You are presented with a single question and several potential responses or answers (the correct answer and several incorrect ones). Your task is to choose the correct answer from this array.
- **How do I prepare?** Students often believe multiple-choice exams are easy, and thus do not require as much preparation as other types of exams. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although you can be sure the right answer is right there in front of you, there will also be several other (wrong) possibilities as well—and of course studies show that students who guess, while getting some answers right, do not do as well as students who have done the reading, attended class, taken notes, and in general prepared well. There is no substitute for doing the work demanded by the course.

What strategies will help during a multiple choice test?

Researchers agree on several key test-taking approaches that will produce improved results on multiple-choice exams:

- **Read the question (including every option).**
This seems obvious, but it is not unusual for students to quickly scan a question, see a familiar word or concept, choose it, and be **wrong**. This can happen if careless reading causes you to overlook a negative (“not,” “never,” “un-”, etc.) or some other grammatical characteristic that changes the meaning of the question.
- **If you know the answer, compare that answer to all the other options, to be sure you are right.**
- **Compare options to the question's stem.**
Sometimes, incorrect options will not match the stem, grammatically or conceptually. This strategy can help you narrow the possible correct options. Strategies that help you narrow the choices will make guessing more profitable, even if you aren't sure of the answer.
- **Don't waste valuable time on a question you can't answer.**
If you aren't sure of an answer, move on and come back to it later if you have time. Spending too much time on a single question may cost you opportunity to answer others that you can actually answer.
- **Remember that multiple-choice exams rely on recognition memory.**
The correct answer really **is** there; don't over-interpret, read into the options material that really isn't there, or otherwise talk yourself out of choosing the right answer.
- **Pay attention to the logic of the question.**
You will often see qualifying words in multiple-choice questions—words like “never,” “always,” “many,” “sometimes,” “more,” and the like. These may be clues to the right answer. Thus, if you know that a particular statement is “sometimes” true, but one of the possible answers uses the word “never,” you can be certain this is not the correct answer.
- **Trust your own good judgment and style.**
Don't try to “game” the test, by assuming the instructor wouldn't use choice “**B**” three times in a row, or that an answer like “**all of the above**” will always be correct. If you are prepared and know the answer, trust your own knowledge.

Short-Answer Exams

- **What are they?** Short-answer test items usually present a brief question that asks for a written response ranging in length from a word or two to several sentences. For example, they may give a definition and ask you to provide the word or concept matching the definition; they may ask you to define a term; or they might ask you to briefly compare and contrast two concepts.
- **How do I prepare?** As always, the best answer is to know the material. Attend class, take well-organized notes, and try to have a big-picture understanding of the course content.

What strategies will help during a short-answer test?

A few pointers should help you to be more effective when taking short-answer exams:

- **Read the question and the directions carefully.**
Does the question ask you to “define,” “describe,” “name,” “compare,” etc.? This is crucial—If the instructor asks for a description, but you define, you are not likely to do well.
- **It is not generally necessary to write a lot of introductory material.**
It will waste time, perhaps suggest to the instructor that you don’t know what you’re talking about, and it will not show what you really do know.
- **Similarly, do not add extra materials in an effort to show what you know.**
Just answer the question and move on.
- **Keep your writing simple and informational.**
Elaborate writing is usually not necessary; again, just answer the question and move along.
- **Read all the questions before beginning.**
This will often help to jog your memory, and may be helpful on short-answer items.
- **Note the point value of the question and the amount of space provided for your response.**
These factors will often provide a clue to the expected length for your answer.

A Final Word

Although both multiple-choice and short-answer exams require specific knowledge of terms and concepts, you are nevertheless more likely to succeed if your preparation includes some focus on broad principles and general understanding. Most university courses will cover too much material and too many details for all your preparation to be specific, last-minute, and based on rote memory. Do your reading every day as the course progresses—not the night before the exam. After the exam, analyze your performance: Did you find yourself guessing too often? Did you fail to read the questions carefully? Did you learn anything useful about the instructor’s approach (level of detail, ways of wording questions)? These strategies will help you to do a better job of showing what you know on future exams.

Resources

The following are electronic sources that you may find helpful if you want to learn more about test-taking and preparation:

<http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=1&n=2>

<http://www.uky.edu/~scyung0/com325/Tips.htm>

<http://www.uwec.edu/geOGrApHY/lvogeler/multiple.htm>

<http://www.studygs.net/tsttak5.htm>

<http://main.uab.edu/Sites/student-success/resources/33076/#Multiple>