

Improving Your Test-Taking Skills

Objective Exams

a. MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

b.

c.



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Multiple-choice tests generally consist of a stem, either an incomplete statement or a question, followed by a number of options or choices. One (or possibly more) of the options is the correct answer and the others are called distractors: one may be close to correct; one may be obviously incorrect; and another may be the opposite of the correct answer.

Here are fourteen suggestions for taking and guessing on multiple-choice tests. *Nothing is better than being prepared and actually knowing and understanding the information. However, an occasion may arise when you need to guess.* On these occasions, look for a clue that may unintentionally be present that can aid you in guessing, especially when lack of knowledge or reasoning do not lead to an answer; but don't expect them because they may not always be there when you need them, especially on well-written tests. In some cases, instructors may use these clues to "trick" unwary students who are not prepared. In the examples given below, the correct answers are enclosed in parentheses.

1. Read the stem and all the options carefully before selecting an option even though the first option may sound correct. Some people read the stem first and then try to think of an answer before reading the options so as not to be confused by the options. If the question is difficult, try reading the stem with each of the options so that you are reading a complete sentence.
2. Try to reduce the number of choices by eliminating options that are incorrect, illogical, silly, or unrelated, and then select from the remaining options.

Example: Heat is considered a form of energy because it

- a. is colorless
- b. is tasteless
- c. is odorless
- (d) can change matter

Options (a) "is colorless," (b) "is tasteless," and (c) "is odorless" might quickly be eliminated as being incorrect. These are indeed qualities of heat but they have nothing to do with heat being a form of energy; (d) "can change matter" is the answer.

3. When in doubt, guess and mark the item with a question mark (?). The question mark will remind you that you guessed at this item. This will allow you to easily identify the item and reconsider your "guessed" answer before turning in the test. On a test with four options, you have a 25% (1 out of 4) chance of getting the correct answer. If you can eliminate options, your chances increase. If you eliminate one option, your chances increase to 33% (1 out of 3); if you eliminate two options, your chances increase to 50% (1 out of 2). If there is a penalty for guessing (i.e., points or fractions of point deducted for wrong answers), consider guessing if you can eliminate some of the options and increase your chances of selecting the correct response as indicated above.



4. Be alert to any patterns of answers. Does the instructor tend to place the correct answers near the beginning (option a), in the middle (option b or c), or near the end (option d)? As you proceed, take note of any patterns of answers and then use this pattern to guess, if necessary.

Example: 1. a b c d 5. (a) b c d
 2. a (b) c d 6. a (b) c d
 3. a b (c) d 7. a b (c) d
 4. a b c (d) 8. a b c (d)

The pattern for each set of four questions appears to be a-b-c-d; (a) is probably the answer for question 1.

5. Watch for repeated words or synonyms or similarities between the sounds or spelling of words in the stem and the words in the options.

Example: Imaginary numbers in mathematics are represented by the letter

- a. e
- (b) i
- c. n
- d. k

The word "Imaginary" begins with the letter "i"; (b) is the letter "i" and the answer.

6. Watch for grammatical inconsistencies between the last word in the stem and what would logically follow in the options.

Example: Among the roots of $x^4 + x^3 - 13x^2 - x + 12$ are

- a. 2
- (b) +1 and -1
- c. -3
- d. -4

The last word in the stem "are" logically suggests that what follows grammatically will be plural or more than one root; (b) has two roots, "+1 and -1" and is the answer. If the last word in the stem was "is" and the statement read "The root of . . . is," logically what would follow grammatically would be singular or one root and one of the options (a) "2," (c) "-3," or (d) "-4" would be the answer.

Example: $\int_0^1 (\log 1/x)^n dx = n!$ is a

- (a) definite integral.
- b. exponential function.
- c. indefinite integral.
- d. arithmetic progression.

The article "a" suggests the word that follows will begin with a consonant; (a) "definite integral" begins with a consonant and is the answer. If the article "an" appeared, one of the options starting

with a vowel (b) "exponential function," (c) "indefinite integral," or (d) "arithmetic progression" would be the answer.

7. When your options are a series of dates or numbers, select one of the middle two (in chronology or size; not location) since the highest and the lowest generally, although not always, are incorrect.

Example: The speed of light is approximately

- a. 50,000 miles per second
- b. 250,000 miles per second
- c. 122,500 miles per second
- (d) 186,000 miles per second

Eliminate the highest (b) "250,000 miles per second" and the lowest (a) "50,000 miles per second," and select from the middle two quantities (c) "122,000 miles per second" or (d) "186,000 miles per second"; (d) is the answer.

8. Watch for absolute qualifiers (e.g., all, none; always, never; everyone, no one; only) which tend to be, but not always, incorrect.

Example: A smile

- (a) may mean different things in different societies
- b. always signifies happiness
- c. occurs among the people of only some societies
- d. never occurs involuntarily

The absolute qualifiers in (b) "always . . .," (c) ". . . only . . .," and (d) "never . . ." suggest that these may be incorrect; the use of the word "may" (indicating some likelihood or possibility) in (a) is not as restrictive; (a) is the answer.

9. If two of the options appear to be correct or seem to say or mean the SAME thing, select either both (if more than one answer is allowed) or neither of them.

Example: *Inflammable* means

- a. not capable of burning
- b. not quickly ignited
- (c) ignites and burns easily
- d. incapable of being wrong

(a) "not capable of burning" and (b) "not quickly ignited" are similar in meaning; if only one answer is allowed, these would be eliminated leaving (c) "ignites and burns easily" and (d) "incapable of being wrong"; (c) is the answer.

10. If two of the options appear to be correct but say or mean OPPOSITE things, select either one or neither of them. If the two opposite options represent all the possibilities in the world, then one of them is the answer.

Example: The quality that the majority of the people in the world have in common is

- a. left-handedness
- (b) right-handedness
- c. the English language
- d. love of popular music

(a) "left-handedness" and (b) "right-handedness" are opposites; however, everyone in the world is either left-handed or right-handed so one must be the answer; in this case, (b) is the answer.

11. If one option encompasses (e.g., "All of the above") or is a more general term or expression for the other options, select that option.

Example: Reading slowness is caused by

- a. distractions
- b. poorly developed vocabulary
- c. word-by-word reading
- (d) all of the above

If at least two of the three options (a), (b), and (c) seem to be correct, they must all be correct; (d) "all of the above" is the answer.

Example: Physical attractiveness is likely to vary more among

- a. blond-haired women
- b. female bank tellers
- c. high school cheerleaders
- (d) women over thirty

(d) "women over thirty" encompasses more people, including those mentioned in options (a) "blond-haired women," (b) "female bank tellers," and (c) "high school cheerleaders"; (d) is the answer.

12. Watch for information in other test items that may relate to or answer a given item.

Example: 10. The "Virginia," a Union naval ironclad, was captured, repaired, and renamed by the South. The "Virginia" was originally named by the Union Navy as the

- a. Southern Belle
- b. Merrimack
- c. Monitor
- d. Dixie

. . . A later question in the same test . . .

16. In the famous March 9, 1862, Civil War sea battle of the ironclad ships, the Union ironclad ship, the "Monitor," fought which Confederate ironclad to a draw?

- (a) the Merrimack
- b. the Richmond
- c. the Atlanta
- d. the Jefferson Davis

Question 16 has as one of its options (b) the "Merrimack"; question 1 also has as one of its options

(a) "Merrimack"; (b) "Merrimack" is the answer for question 16 and (a) "the Merrimack" is the answer for question 1.

13. Make note of options which are longer (or shorter) than other options as a clue to the correct option. Some instructors may be very precise (short) or make options long to either include qualifiers which may make the option either wrong or right. Can go either way. Some disagreement about this suggestion. See if there is a pattern of correct long or short answers.

Example: By using the expression "pump priming" as a description of public works projects, the implication is that they

- a. are useless
- b. waste money
- c. lower human dignity
- (d) provide business with the initial impetus that would make it self-sufficient

(d) is the longest option; in this case, (d) is the answer.

14. Options with unfamiliar words, terms or phrases may not be correct.

Example: It is against the law in most states to drink alcoholic beverages if

- a. you suffer from a loss of perspicacity
- b. you do not have parental consent
- (c) you are under 21 years of age
- d. you have been declared pestiferous

(a) ". . . perspicacity" and (d) ". . . pestiferous" contain unfamiliar words; (b) "you do not have parental consent" is incorrect; (c) "you are under 21 years of age" is the answer.

Most examples adapted from
Ben E. Johnson (1992). Doing It Right: Improving College Learning Skills (pp. 275-78).
Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath.
and
Bernard Feder (1979). The Complete Guide to Taking Tests (pp. 62-68).
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Sample Multiple-Choice Test #1

Directions: Read each statement below and select the response which most correctly completes the statement or answers the question. Draw a circle around the letter of your response.

1. A marriage may have a better chance to succeed if the wife and husband have which characteristic in common?
 - a. a similar level of education
 - b. similar social and economic backgrounds
 - c. shared interests and goals
 - d. all of the above

2. Most of the assignments students are asked to do in school require them to use
 - a. left-brain capacities
 - b. right-brain capacities
 - c. learning styles
 - d. visualization

3. Which of the following women collected or contributed creative works to her husband's presidential art collection?
 - a. Mrs. Benjamin A. Franklin
 - b. Mrs. Alexander Gardiner Hamilton
 - c. Mrs. John W. Hancock
 - d. Mrs. Ida Saxton McKinley

4. A balanced diet should include
 - a. milk, cheese, and fruit
 - b. bread, cereal, and whole grains
 - c. milk, fruit, vegetables, meat, and whole grains
 - d. vegetables, fruit, and meat

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5. Which of these words is a synonym for *intractable*?

- a. synergistic
- b. stubborn
- c. acerbic
- d. exacerbating

6. Television commercials

- a. always attempt to deceive viewers
- b. are never in the public interest
- c. are sometimes interesting to viewers
- d. influence only people who listen to them

7. The first quiz programs were televised

- a. in the 1970's
- b. in the 1950's
- c. in the 1940's
- d. in the 1920's

8. $\text{HC}_2\text{H}_3\text{O}_2$ is the formula for an

- a. polymer
- b. base
- c. acid
- d. free radical

9. Among the causes of the Civil War were

- a. Northern opposition to bringing slaves into California
- b. differing views on the tariff and the Constitution
- c. Southern jealousy of Northern prosperity

- d. Southern anger at interference with foreign slave trade
10. What led to the formation of the States Rights Party?
- a. the level of federal taxation
 - b. the industrialization of the South
 - c. pressure from Britain
 - d. the demand of states for the right to make their own laws

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11. A child is putting coins in a candy machine. At first, he obtains a few candy bars, but then the machine, having been emptied, keeps returning the coins. After several unsuccessful attempts, the child walks away in disgust. This situation best illustrates
- a. psychosis
 - b. extinction
 - c. hypnosis
 - d. distinction
12. The major purpose of the United Nations is to
- a. establish international law
 - b. inform governments
 - c. provide military control
 - d. maintain peace among the peoples of over 150 independent nations of the world
13. When rendering first aid to a severely-injured person, immediately
- a. transport the victim to a hospital
 - b. call 911
 - c. establish the victim's identity and address
 - d. none of the above
14. Which of the following made a significant contribution to the artistic decor of the white house?
- a. Mrs. Ida Saxton McKinley
 - b. Mrs. Florence King Harding
 - c. Mrs. Lou Henry Hoover

- d. Mrs. Jane Means Appleton Pierce
15. Pretend you were running out of time and had to guess on this one without reading it. Which option would you choose to circle?
- a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.

Questions adapted from: Carol Kanar (1991). The Confident Student (p. 344). Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin; and Norman Gronlund (1976). Measurement and Evaluation in Teaching. New York, NY: Macmillan.

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3. Which of the following are examples of fallacious reasoning?
- a. glittering generalities
 - b. plain folks
 - c. bandwagon
 - d. glittering generalities, plain folks, and bandwagon
6. Approximately, what percentage of immigrants to the United States between 1971 and 1984 came from Asia?
- a. 60 percent
 - b. 30 percent

- c. 40 percent
- d. 15 percent

5. Most of the world's population is situated in
- a. the Pacific islands
 - b. the Northern Hemisphere
 - c. the Southern Hemisphere
 - d. near the equator

Sample Multiple-Choice Test B

1. Cheap protein substitutes for milk, eggs, and meal
- a. may be obtained from vitamins and minerals
 - b. are being sought by scientists
 - c. are not needed
 - d. can be found in iodized salt
2. By using the expression "pump priming" as a description of public works projects, the implication is that they
- a. are useless
 - b. are pouring money down the drain
 - c. lower human dignity
 - d. provide business with the initial impetus that would make it self-

sufficient

3. An airline traffic manager depends on all of the following except:
 - a. latitude
 - b. altitude
 - c. the continuous curve in a four-dimensional space
 - d. longitude

4. The total assets of the bank were \$57.6 million. What is the annual income from "other assets"?
 - a. \$82,944
 - b. \$921,600
 - c. \$1,728,000
 - d. \$21,469,000

5. The library archives are open to the public:
 - a. Mondays
 - b. Wednesdays
 - c. Fridays
 - d. All of the above

6. Approximately what percentage of men who marry are between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-seven?
 - a. 7 %
 - b. 13%
 - c. 44%
 - d. 72%

7. At low temperatures, frogs:
 - a. become more active
 - b. become less active
 - c. require more food
 - d. develop stress

8. In tropical climates, the "open space under the entire dwelling" is

provided in order to obtain:

- a. light
- b. heat from the sun
- c. a kind of air-conditioning
- d. an open style of architecture

9. Basic research is vital because:

- a. it provides the basis for scientific progress
- b. it is driven out by applied research
- c. it a kind of air-conditioning
- d. its results cannot be anticipated

7. Of all the following, which is the least common in animals?

- a. protective resemblance
- b. aggressive resemblance
- c. cryptic coloring
- d. mistaken identity

Sample Multiple-Choice Test C

1. Vitamin deficiencies cause

- a. kwashiorkor
- b. disease
- c. food substitute
- d. lack of calories

2. Henry James's later novels were characterized as:

- a. being dull
- b. being too long
- c. horror stories
- d. psychological novels

3. In order to shed light on a difficult topic, the author employs:

- a. a quotation from Einstein
- b. lengthy definitions
- c. a bland writing style

- d. familiar images
4. The distance between the two airplanes was:
- one-half mile
 - three miles
 - forty miles
 - fifty-seven miles
5. The most convenient time for Michael to do library work is:
- 10-11 A.M.
 - 11 A.M.-noon
 - noon to 1 P.M.
 - none of the above
6. People should not watch so much television because:
- television viewing promotes criminal behavior
 - television encourages people to gain weight
 - television persuades viewers to passively accept what happens to them
 - television viewing puts a strain on electricity consumption after 7 P.M.
7. Between 1960 and 1974, the number of people in this country who have expressed a fear of inflation has increased by approximately:
- 10%
 - 25%
 - 400%
 - 1000%
8. In timberland areas of the world:
- there is dense population
 - we may expect to find malaria-infested jungles
 - good quality land is found
 - the density of population is relatively low
9. "Candor" means:

- a. frankness
- b. bias
- c. irritation
- d. sarcasm

10. Invertebrate marine animals are:

- a. homeomorphous
- b. boneless
- c. conical in form
- d. ichthyosaurs

Sample Multiple-Choice of Really Obscure Knowledge

1. Medaclopiis was a
 - a. omnivorous dinosaur
 - b. early pagan god
 - c. ancient herbal medicine
 - d. ichthyosaurs

2. The Foramen of Multaca is located:
 - a. in the pelticulus of the cerebellum
 - b. in the thalamic nucleus
 - c. centrally within the thalamic
 - d. midway through the thalamic

4. The legal plea of scintus voir cosorti:
 - a. omnivorous dinosaur
 - b. always results in a change of venue
 - c. can never be rescinded
 - d. may lead to a judgement against the defendant

5. Which of the following cities is most northern?
 - a. Tibet
 - b. Congo
 - c. Jocassee
 - d. Afghanistan

6. Mulshor can only be measured in:
 - a. ounces
 - b. centimeters
 - c. pounds
 - d. tons

7. The pelticulus is located in the:
 - a. cerebellum
 - b. inner ear
 - c. thalamus
 - d. intestinal tract

8. Carpulian's trigonometric equation:
 - a. will never be solved
 - b. always results in computer loops
 - c. is continuously recursive upon its constants
 - d. may often require polynomial expansion

9. The George Shepard Valor Award is bestowed upon:
 - a. cancer researchers
 - b. firemen
 - c. fellows of the American Medical Association
 - d. unrecognized literary figures

11. The chemicals involved in a "zentrlor reaction" cause the solution to:
 - a. lose their translucence
 - b. form a precipitate
 - c. turn opaque
 - d. become dark green

12. The nineteenth-century scientist Antoine Norvus was a:
 - a. co-discoverer of several elements
 - b. contemporary of Einstein
 - c. proponent of nuclear radiation treatment
 - d. discovered of a cancer cure

13. The line that is central to the curve $Y = X^3 + 3X - 2$
- a. -3.50
 - b. -4.75
 - c. $-21/6$
 - d. $-3 \frac{1}{2}$
14. An often-quoted line from Nardo's "Back to the Woods" is:
- a. "There but for the grace of God go I"
 - b. "The sexes shall be as one--equal"
 - c. "Let me be one with nature"
 - d. "We shall unite our forces and go forth"
15. The South African author James Brighton was best known for his:
- a. essays on endangered species
 - b. paintings of the plains of Kilimanjaro
 - c. prints of South American wildlife
 - d. colorful block drawings of arctic birds