

Psychology Club: Special Presentation

December 15, 2005

Conquering Exam-o-phobia

OR

Test-Taking Advice: Especially for the Multiple-Choice Challenged

Many students believe that they are severely disadvantaged when it comes to performing well on multiple choice (MC) questions. Indeed, one recent student, who had obtained 48% on the MC section of a AP Psych exam, earned 97% on the written part-- clearly something was wrong! With increasing pressure for high GPAs to gain entry into crowded programs, difficulty answering MC questions can be a true handicap with very heavy implications for later career development (e.g., the MCAT, LSAT, and GRE that are used for admission to professional schools are MC tests...).

Here are a few strategies and bits of advice to help you conquer your fear of multiple choice exams as well as a few other types of tests you may encounter.

Remember: Practice makes perfect. It may take a little while to get the hang of it, but if you try a few of these tips on your next exam, you might be pleasantly surprised by the results.

In General : Test Taking Strategies

- ❖ Bring at least **two pens/pencils** with good erasers, calculator with enough batteries and any other resources that your instructor allows you to.
- ❖ Bring a **watch** to the test with you so that you can better pace yourself.
- ❖ Keep a **positive attitude** throughout the whole test and try to *stay relaxed*, if you start to feel nervous take a few deep breaths to relax.
- ❖ **Keep your eyes on your own paper**, you don't want to appear to be cheating and cause unnecessary trouble for yourself.
- ❖ Do the **easiest problems first**; don't stay on a problem that you are stuck on especially when time is a factor.
- ❖ Do the problems that have the **greatest point values first**.
- ❖ Don't rush but **pace yourself**, read the entire question and look for keywords.

- ❖ **Ask the instructor** for clarification if you don't understand what they are asking for on the test.

- ❖ **Write legibly**, if the grader can't read what you wrote they'll most likely mark it wrong.

- ❖ Always **read the whole question** carefully, don't make assumptions about what the question might be.

- ❖ **If you don't know an answer skip it**, go on with the rest of the test and come back to it later, maybe on another part of the test there'll be something that will help you out with that question.

- ❖ **Don't worry** if others finish before you; **focus on the test** in front of you.

- ❖ When you are finished, if you have time left **look over your test**, make sure that you have answered all the questions, only change an answer if you misread or misinterpreted the question because the first answer that you put is usually the correct one. **Watch out for careless mistakes** and proofread your essay and/or short answer questions.

More Specifically:

Multiple Choice Test Tips-Help

Read the question before you look at the answer.

- **Briefly read through the entire exam** before you begin. Sometimes reading a question will jog your memory in regards to another answer.

- **Starting at the beginning, go through the questions again, answering the ones that are obvious to you.** Take care to read the entire question to ensure you know exactly what the instructor is looking for.

- **Don't get hung up on questions that you know you should know the answer to, but just can't remember it.** Leave it **blank** for now and go on to the next question. Go through the exam two or three times in this manner.

- **Come up with the answer in your head** before looking at the possible answers, this way the choices given on the test won't throw you off or trick you.

- **Eliminate answers** you know aren't right.

- **Read all the choices** before choosing your answer.

- If there is no guessing penalty, always **take an educated guess** and select an answer.

- **Don't keep on changing your answer**, usually your **first choice is the right** one, unless you miss-read the question.

- In "**All of the above**" and "**None of the above**" choices, if you are certain one of the statements is true don't choose "None of the above" or one of the statements are false don't choose "All of the above".
- In a question with an "**All of the above**" choice, if you see that at **least two correct statements**, then "All of the above" is probably the answer.
- A **positive choice is more likely to be true** than a negative one.
- Usually the **correct answer is the choice with the most information**.
- Now for the tough part. The remaining questions are those which you either simply do not know the answer to, or those in which the answer is buried deep in your memory and may or may not surface before the end of the exam! Now you need to **look for clues in the wording of the questions**. Do you know which answers are definitely **not correct**? Does the question ask for a measurement in pounds rather than kilograms, for example, or the name of a woman rather than a man? Do two or more answers have the exact same meaning?

When all else fails, go with your first instinct. These aren't multiple guess tests, but any answer has a better chance than no answer.

If you're utterly stumped by a question, here are some strategies to help you narrow the field and select the correct answer:

- 1. Ask yourself whether the answer you're considering completely addresses the question.** If the test answer is only partly true or is true only under certain narrow conditions, then it's probably not the right answer. If you have to make a significant assumption in order for the answer to be true, ask yourself whether this assumption is obvious enough that the instructor would expect everyone to make it. If not, dump the answer overboard.
- 2. If you think an item is a trick question, think again.** Very few instructors would ever write a question intended to be deceptive. If you suspect that a question is a trick item, make sure you're not reading too much into the question, and try to avoid imagining detailed scenarios in which the answer *could* be true. In most cases, "trick questions" are only tricky because they're not taken at face value.
- 3. If, after your very best effort, you cannot choose between two alternatives, try vividly imagining each one as the correct answer.** If you are like most people, you will often "feel" that one of the answers is wrong. Trust this feeling -- research suggests that feelings are frequently accessible even when recall is poor (e.g., we can still know how we feel about a person even if we can't remember the person's name). Although this tip is not infallible, many students find it useful.

Strategies to answer difficult questions:

- **Eliminate options** you know to be incorrect
If allowed, mark words or alternatives in questions that eliminate the option .
- Give each option of a question the "**true-false test:**"
This may reduce your selection to the best answer
- Question options that **grammatically** don't fit with the stem
- Question options that are **totally unfamiliar** to you
- Question options that **contain negative or absolute words**.
Try substituting a qualified term for the absolute one, like *frequently for always; or typical for every* to see if you can eliminate it
- **Number answers:**
toss out the high and low and consider the middle range numbers
- **"Look alike options"**
probably **one is correct; choose the best but eliminate choices** that mean basically the same thing, and thus cancel each other out .
- **Double negatives:**
Create the equivalent positive statement and consider.
- **Echo options:**
If two options are opposite each other, chances are one of them is correct
- **Favor options that contain qualifiers**
The result is longer, more inclusive items that better fill the role of the answer
- If two alternatives seem correct, **compare them for differences**, then refer to the stem to find your best answer

To Guess or Not to Guess, that is the Question:

- **Always guess when there is no penalty** for guessing or you can eliminate options
- **Don't guess if you are penalized** for guessing and if you have no basis for your choice
- **Use hints from questions** you know to answer questions you do not.
- **Change your first answers only when you are sure of the correction**, or other cues in the test cue you to change.

Remember that you are looking for the best answer, not only a correct one, and not one which must be true all of the time, in all cases, and without exception.

More Specifically:

Short Answer Essays

Some tips:

- *Go over your notes and the assigned reading.
- *Prepare for the test by studying from summary sheets that are packed with information within a condensed space.
- *Categorize the material.
- *Use grammatical clues within a statement as hints for the correct answer.
- *If you can think of several answers for a blank or short answer question, you might let the instructor know. The instructor may give you a clue to the correct answer he or she is looking for.
- *A guess made with common sense and thoughtfulness will probably earn you more test points than if you leave an answer blank.
- *Write your short answers in simple, clear sentences. Write legibly and take your time.
- *Packing in as much information as you can is generally more important than literary style on a short answer question.

More Specifically:

The Essay Test

Before writing:

- **Set up a time schedule to answer each question and to review and edit your responses.**
If six questions are to be answered in sixty minutes, allow yourself only seven minutes for each.
If questions are weighted, consider this as a factor in time allocation.
- **When the time is up for one question, stop writing, leave space, and begin the next question.** The incomplete answers can be completed during the review time.
- **Six incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than three complete ones.**
- **Read through all of the questions once** and note if you have any choice in answering questions.
- **Pay attention to how the question is phrased, or to the "directives,"** (words like "compare," "contrast," "criticize," etc.) See their definitions in Section Six of this chapter.
- **Answers will come to mind immediately for some questions. When this happens, jot down key words, listings, etc, as they are fresh in your mind.** Otherwise these ideas may be blocked (or be unavailable) when the time comes to write the responses later. This tip will reduce "clutching," panic or anxiety which disrupts thoughts.

- **Before attempting to answer a question, put it in your own words.** Now compare your version with the original. Do they mean the same thing? If they don't, you've misread the question. You'll be surprised how often the two don't agree.
- **Make a brief outline for each question by jotting down a few words to indicate the ideas you want to discuss.** Then number the items in your list to indicate your order.
- **Teachers are influenced by compactness, completeness, and clarity** of an organized answer. Writing in the hope that the right answer will somehow turn up is time-consuming and usually futile. On essay exams, to know a little and to present it well is, by and large, superior to knowing much and presenting it poorly.

On the Beginning:

- **Begin with a strong first sentence** that states the main idea of your essay.
- Use the **introductory paragraph** to provide an overview of your essay.

On Developing your argument:

- Begin each paragraph with a **key point** from the introduction.
- Develop each point into a **complete paragraph**.
- Use **transitions** to connect your points.
- Hold to your **time allocation** and to your chosen organization.
- Qualify answers when in doubt. For example, It is better to say "toward the end of the 19th century" than to say "in 1894" when you can't remember the exact year. In many cases, the approximate time is all that is wanted; 1894 may be incorrect and will usually be marked accordingly.

What to do with your remaining time:

Complete questions left incomplete. Not enough time? Outline remaining answers. Allow time to review and correct all questions.

Helpful Definition Guide

The following words are "directives," words that ask you to answer, or present information, in a particular way.

Compare:

Examine qualities or characteristics to discover resemblances.

"Compare" is usually stated as "compare with." You are to emphasize similarities, although differences should also be mentioned.

Contrast:

Stress dissimilarities, differences, or unlikeness of things, qualities, events, or problems.

Criticize:

Express your judgment or correctness or merit. Discuss the limitations and contributions of the work in question.

Define:

Definitions call for concise, clear, authoritative meanings. Details are not required but limitations of the definition should be briefly cited.

You must keep in mind the category to which something belongs and consider what differentiates the particular object from all others in its category.

Describe:

In a descriptive answer you should recount, characterize, sketch or relate in narrative form.

Diagram:

For a question which specifies a diagram you should present a drawing, chart, plan, or graphic representation in your answer.

Generally the student is also expected to label the diagram and in some cases to add a brief explanation or description.

Discuss:

The term discuss, which appears often in essay questions, directs you to examine, analyze carefully, and present considerations both pro and con regarding the problems or items involved.

Enumerate:

The word enumerate specifies a list or outline form of reply. In such questions you should recount, one by one and concisely the points required.

Evaluate:

In an evaluation question you are expected to present a careful appraisal of the problem stressing both advantages and limitations. Evaluation implies authoritative and, to a lesser degree, personal appraisal of both contributions and limitations.

Explain:

In explanatory answers it is imperative that you clarify, elucidate, and interpret the material you present. In such an answer it is best to state the "how or why," reconcile any differences in opinion or experimental results, and, where possible, state causes. The aim is to make plain the conditions which give rise to whatever you are examining.

Illustrate:

A question which asks you to illustrate usually requires you to explain or clarify your answer to the problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram, or concrete example.

Interpret:

An interpretation question is similar to one requiring explanation. You are expected to translate, exemplify, solve, or comment upon the subject and usually to give your judgment or reaction to the problem.

Justify:

When you are instructed to justify your answer you must prove or show grounds for decisions. In such an answer, evidence should be presented in convincing form.

List:

Listing is similar to enumeration. You are expected in such questions to present an itemized series or tabulation. Such answers should always be given in concise form.

Outline:

An outline answer is organized description. You should give main points and essential supplementary materials, omitting minor details, and present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.

Prove:

A question which requires proof is one which demands confirmation or verification. In such discussions you should establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing evidence or by logical reasoning.

Relate:

In a question which asks you to show the relationship or to relate, your answer should emphasize connections and associations in descriptive form.

Review:

A review specifies a critical examination. You should analyze and comment briefly in organized sequence upon the major points of the problem.

State:

In questions which direct you to specify, give, state, or present, you are called upon to express the high points in brief, clear narrative form. Details and illustrations or examples may be omitted.

Summarize:

When you are asked to summarize or present a summarization, you should give in condensed form the main points or facts. All details, illustrations and elaboration are to be omitted.

Trace:

When a question asks you to trace a course of events, you are to give a description of progress, historical sequence, or development from the point of origin. Such narratives may call for probing and for deduction.

Some Serious Study Strategies Guaranteed to Work!

Scheduling Study Time and Rewarding Yourself for Good Study Behavior

1. **Make appointments with yourself for study time** (i.e., in your daytimer) so that it is clear to you when you're meeting or shirking your study responsibilities. Study appointments may be among the most important that you ever make and keep since they very much determine your success in school.
2. When possible, **plan to study even if only briefly before scheduled pleasant events** (e.g., parties, trips, visits). Over time, this will tend to "fool" your nervous system into believing that **studying is fun** because it seems to lead to a positive outcome. It will also allow you to enjoy positive events more fully because your conscience is less likely to intrude on them to remind you about the need to study.
3. **It is a lot easier to study hard if you know that you'll get a break before too long.** Frequent short breaks also reduce interference between different aspects of new information while allowing for its "consolidation." For these reasons, you might try to study very hard for 20-25 minutes at a time followed by a 5-minute break for a scheduled positive event (e.g., a snack, an exercise break, call a friend, etc.). **After every 3 such study/short break cycles, take a 15-minute break, repeating this overall procedure until your study time or tasks are completed.** Of course, the actual schedule that is best for you or any other individual varies--work out the study periods and cycles over which you can best apply yourself on a sustained basis.
4. **Study your class or lab notes as soon after the class as possible.** Not only will this greatly reduce memory loss and save a lot of time later, it will also help you to fix any errors or omissions in your notes or in your understanding of the material well before you get to the exam.

5. **Studying is much more effective and efficient if it is spread out over time, rather than done all at once (e.g., as in cramming the night before).** Spreading it out also allows for reviewing those things that you need to work on the night before and still **get a good rest** which is important for peak performance.

Use Active Study Techniques

1. **Process the material deeply.** Studying is much more effective if you mentally manipulate (i.e., play with) the information that you're reading. This is one argument against using highlighters. "Painting" your book with a highlighter gives you an illusory sense of progress through your reading without any guarantee that you've actually processed any information at all. **It's better if you use a colored pen or pencil to underline "key words"** (e.g., terms, concepts) and underline "connecting words" (e.g., the "ands", "nots", "greater than", etc.) that are critical to understanding the context for the key words. This will greatly reduce what you have to attend to when it is time to review (just read the circled and underlined words). It also makes you process the material more deeply the first time through because you have to actively divide all the words into 1 of 3 categories: **key words, connecting words, and unnecessary words (most words fall into this latter category).**
2. **Material is more likely to be remembered if it is associated with an emotional reaction.** For example, give a "dramatic reading" from the text material in front of a mirror. Or make up rhymes or use other memory tricks to organize the material--they will help your later memory of it.
3. **Creating vivid images of the material helps later recall.** Develop interesting concrete visual images of the material in your head--they are much easier to recall at the exam than are abstract concepts. For example, if you were studying the parts of a neuron for the first time, you might imagine a neuron as a tree, its "branches" are the dendrites, its "trunk" the axon, the "bark" the myelin sheath, the "roots" the axon endings and the sap the transmitter substance. Alternatively you could imagine that

you're a neuron and reaching for information with your "dendrites" (arms) and so on.

If, after you have worked over the material using some or all of the ideas mentioned above, and you honestly feel that you have mastered the material, yet you still aren't able to "show what you know" on MC exams then maybe there are several things you should do differently.

While Studying, Practice What Tests Demand of You and Study What You Don't Know

1. **Exams demand that you retrieve information from your "knowledge warehouse".** Therefore, if all you do is read, you're not practicing what you'll have to do on the test. **Retrieval, like any other skill, must be practiced.** After carefully and actively reading over a section, try to recover what you know about it by writing down the main points on a piece of scrap paper. This makes you practice retrieval and it also diagnoses whether or not you know the topic. If you can't recall what's in the section, you must go back go over it. In this way you also reward yourself for understanding the material. This will increase the likelihood that you will pay active attention to what you're reading the first time through. You'll also to finish your studying sooner.
2. **MC exams ask you to discriminate between very similar alternatives, typically between a correct answer and several incorrect "foils".** *The foils are usually taken by the instructor from the same or nearby sections of the book as was the correct answer.* Learning the subtle differences between the alternatives in each question is another reason that you should study your readings section by section (i.e., often 2 or 3 pages at a time), never going on to the next section until you can retrieve the full contents of the section on your scrap paper.
3. **After your initial studying is complete, diagnose your knowledge of assigned readings using sample MC questions** (e.g., from the student workbook, previous tests that may be available, or even items that you and/or your friends in the class make up to share with each

other). If you get any of the answers incorrect on the sample questions, restudy those sections from which the item(s) came using the techniques suggested above, including the practice of retrieval.

4. In the final stage of study, **you might review the assigned reading by going over the circled and underlined words, using them to reconstruct the contents of the section.** Practicing retrieval by recalling the information in each topical section as soon as you finish reading it over.

5. Get a good night's sleep!

The End