

ONLINE STUDENT RESOURCE GUIDE

Test-Taking Strategies: A Review

Taking exams demands sharp thinking and reasoning skills. This appendix is intended to show you how to approach all types of exams with an advantage and how to apply thinking and reasoning skills to objective exams.

Starting with an Advantage

One key to success on any type of examination is to approach it in a confident, organized, and systematic manner.

Bring the Necessary Materials

When going to any examination, take along any materials you might be asked or allowed to use. Be sure you have a watch and an extra pen, and take several number 2 pencils in case you must make a drawing or diagram or fill in an electronically scored answer sheet. Take paper—you may need it for computing figures or writing essay answers. Take along anything you have been allowed to use throughout the semester, such as a pocket calculator, conversion chart, or dictionary. If you are not sure whether you may use them, ask the instructor.

Time Your Arrival Carefully

Arrive at the examination room a few minutes early, in time to get a seat and get organized before the instructor arrives. If you are late, you may miss instructions and feel rushed as you begin the exam. If you arrive too early

(more than 15 minutes ahead of time), you risk anxiety induced by panic-stricken students who are questioning each other, trading last-minute memory tricks, and worrying about how difficult the exam will be.

Sit in the Front of the Room

The most practical place to sit in an exam is in the front. There, you often receive the test first and get a head start. Also, it is easier to concentrate and avoid distractions.

Listen Carefully to Your Instructor's Directions

Your instructor may give specific instructions that are not included in the exam's written directions. If these are detailed instructions, jot them down on your exam paper or on scrap paper.

Preview the Exam

Before you start to answer any of the questions, quickly page through the exam, noticing the directions, the length, the type of questions, the general topics covered, the number of points the questions are worth, and where to put your answers. Previewing provides an overview of the whole exam and helps to reduce anxiety.

Plan Your Time

After previewing, you will know the number and types of questions included. The next step is to estimate how much time you should spend on each part of the exam, using the point distribution as your guide.

Avoid Reading Too Much into Questions

Most instructors word their questions so that what is expected is clear. Do not anticipate hidden meanings or trick questions.

General Suggestions for Objective Exams

Before we examine particular types of objective exams, here are a few general suggestions to follow in approaching all types of objective exams:

- **Read the directions.** Before answering any questions, read the directions. Often, an instructor will want the correct answer marked in a particular

way (for example, underlined rather than circled). The directions may contain crucial information that you must be aware of in order to answer the questions correctly. In the items below, if you did not read the directions and assumed the test questions were of the usual type, you could lose a considerable number of points.

True/False Directions: Read each statement. If the statement is true, mark a T in the blank to the left of the item. If the statement is false, add and/or subtract words in order to make the statement correct.

Multiple-Choice Directions: Circle all the choices that correctly complete the statement.

- **Leave nothing blank.** Before turning in your exam, check through it to be sure you have answered every question. If you have no idea about the correct answer to a question, guess. You might be right!

Students frequently turn in tests with some items unanswered because they leave difficult questions blank, planning to return to them later. Then, in the rush to finish, they forget them. To avoid this problem, when you are uncertain, choose what looks like the best answer, and then mark the question number with an X or check mark so you can return to it; then, if you have time at the end of the exam, give it further thought. If you run out of time, you will have an answer marked.

- **Look for clues.** If you encounter a difficult question, choose what seems to be the best answer, mark the question with an X or a check mark so that you can return to it, and keep the item in mind as you go through the rest of the exam. Sometimes you will see some piece of information later in the exam that reminds you of a fact or idea.
- **Write your answers clearly.** If your instructor cannot be sure of the answer you wrote, he or she will mark it wrong. Answer with block letters on multiple-choice and matching tests to avoid confusion. Write or print responses to fill-in-the-blank tests legibly. Be sure that your answers to short-answer questions not only are written neatly but also are to the point and express complete thoughts.
- **Check over your answers before you turn in the exam.** As mentioned earlier, reserve some time at the end of the exam for reviewing your answers. Check to be sure you didn't use the same matching-test answer twice. Be sure your multiple-choice answers are written in the correct blanks or marked in the correct place on the answer grid. One answer marked out of sequence could lead to a series of answers being in error. If there is a separate answer sheet, verify that your fill-in-the-blanks and short answers correspond to the correct question numbers.

- **Don't change answers without a good reason.** When reviewing your answers during an exam, don't make a change unless you have a reason for doing so. Very often your first impressions are correct. If clues from a later test item prompt your recall of information for a previous item, change your answer.

Techniques for Taking Multiple-Choice Tests

Multiple choice is the most frequently used type of exam and is often the most difficult to answer. The following suggestions should improve your success in taking this type of exam:

- **Begin by reading each question as if it were a fill-in-the-blank or short-answer question.** Cover up the choices and try to answer the question from your knowledge of the subject. In this way, you will avoid confusion that might arise from complicated choices. After you have formed your answer, compare it with each of the choices, and select the one that comes closest to your answer.
- **Read all choices first, considering each.** Do not stop reading after the second or third choice, even if you are certain that you have found the correct answer. Remember, on most multiple-choice tests your job is to pick the *best* answer, and the last choice may be a better answer than any of the first three.
- **Read combination choices.** Some multiple-choice tests include choices that are combinations of previously listed choices, as in the following item:

The mesodermal tissue layer contains cells that will become

- skin, sensory organs, and nervous systems.*
- skin, sensory organs, and blood vessels.*
- bones and muscle.*
- stomach, liver, and pancreas.*
- a and c*
- b, c, and d*
- a, c, and d*

The addition of choices that are combinations of the preceding choices tends to make items even more confusing. Treat each choice, when combined with the stem, as a true or false statement. As you consider each choice, mark it true or false. If you find more than one true statement,

then select the choice that contains the letters of all the true statements you identified.

- **Use logic and common sense.** Even if you are unfamiliar with the subject matter, you can sometimes reason out the correct answer. The following test item is taken from a history exam on Japanese-American relations after World War II:

Prejudice and discrimination are

- harmful to our society because they waste our economic, political, and social resources.*
- helpful because they ensure us against attack from within.*
- harmful because they create negative images of the United States in foreign countries.*
- helpful because they keep the majority pure and united against minorities.*

Through logic and common sense, it is possible to eliminate choices *b* and *d*. Prejudice and discrimination are seldom, if ever, regarded as positive, desirable, or helpful since they are inconsistent with democratic ideals. Having narrowed your answer to two choices, *a* or *c*, you can see that choice *a* offers a stronger, more substantial reason why prejudice and discrimination are harmful. The attitude of other countries toward the United States is not as serious as a waste of economic, political, and social resources.

- **Examine closely items that are very similar.** Often, when two similar choices are presented, one is likely to be correct. Carefully compare the two choices. First, try to express each in your own words, and then analyze how they differ. Often, this process will enable you to recognize the right answer.
- **Pay special attention to the level of qualifying words.** Qualifying words are important. Since many statements, ideas, principles, and rules have exceptions, be careful in selecting items that contain such extreme qualifying words as *best*, *always*, *all*, *no*, *never*, *none*, *entirely*, and *completely*, all of which suggest that a condition exists without exception. Items containing words that provide for some level of exception, or qualification, are more likely to be correct. Here are a few examples of such words: *often*, *usually*, *less*, *seldom*, *few*, *more*, and *most*. Likewise, numerical answers that are about in the middle of a range of choices are probably correct. In the following example, notice the use of the italicized qualifying words:

In most societies

- a. values are highly consistent.
- b. people often believe and act on values that are contradictory.
- c. all legitimate organizations support values of the majority.
- d. values of equality never exist alongside prejudice and discrimination.

In this question, items *c* and *d* contain the words *all* and *never*, suggesting that those statements are true without exception. Thus, if you did not know the answer to this question based on content, you could eliminate items *c* and *d* on the basis of the level of qualifiers.

- **Some multiple-choice questions require application of knowledge or information.** You may be asked to analyze a hypothetical situation or to use what you have learned to solve a problem. Here is an example taken from a psychology test:

Carrie is uncomfortable in her new home in New Orleans. When she gets dressed and leaves her home and goes to the supermarket to buy the week's groceries, she gets nervous and upset and thinks that something is going to happen to her. She feels the same way when walking her four-year-old son Jason to the park or playground.

Carrie is suffering from

- a. shyness.
- b. a phobia.
- c. a personality disorder.
- d. hypertension.

In answering questions of this type, start by crossing out unnecessary information that can distract you. In the preceding example, distracting information includes the woman's name, her son's name, where she lives, why she goes to the store, and so forth.

- **Jot down the essence.** If a question concerns steps in a process or order of events or any other information that is easily confused, ignore the choices and use the margin or scrap paper to jot down the information as you can recall it. Then select the choice that matches what you wrote.
- **Avoid the unfamiliar.** Avoid choosing answers that are unfamiliar or that you do not understand. A choice that looks complicated or uses difficult words is not necessarily correct. If you have studied carefully, a choice that is unfamiliar to you or contains unfamiliar terminology is probably incorrect.
- **Eliminate choices that are obviously false.** Treat each choice in a troublesome question like you would a statement on a true/false test.

- **Be careful of “all of the above” and “none of the above” questions.** This type of question can be particularly difficult, since it usually involves five choices and can lead to confusion. To make it easier, first try to eliminate “all of the above.” If even *one* choice is incorrect “all of the above” will be incorrect. If you think that at least *one* of the choices is correct, you can eliminate “none of the above.” If you think two choices are correct but you are unsure of the third one, you should choose “all of the above.” When questions such as these occur only a few times in a test, “all” or “none” is probably the correct choice.
- **Make educated guesses.** In most instances, you can eliminate one or more of the choices as obviously wrong. Even if you can eliminate only one choice, you have increased your odds on a four-choice item from one in four to one in three. If you can eliminate two choices, you have increased your odds to one in two, or 50 percent. Don’t hesitate to play the odds and make a guess—you may gain points.

Exercise

Directions: The following multiple-choice items appeared on a psychology exam. Study each item and use your reasoning skills to eliminate items that seem incorrect. Then, making an educated guess, choose the letter of the choice that best completes the statement.

- a** 1. Modern psychological researchers maintain that the mind as well as behavior can be scientifically examined primarily by
- observing behavior and making inferences about mental functioning.
 - observing mental activity and making inferences about behavior.
 - making inferences about behavior.
 - direct observation of behavior.
- d** 2. Jane Goodall has studied the behavior of chimpanzees in their own habitat. She exemplifies a school of psychology that is concerned with
- theories.
 - mental processes.
 - the individual’s potential for growth.
 - naturalistic behavior.

- c 3. If a psychologist were personally to witness the effects of a tornado upon the residents of a small town, what technique would he or she be using?
- a. experimentation c. observation
 b. correlational research d. none of the above
- d 4. A case study is a(n)
- a. observation of an event.
 b. comparison of similar events.
 c. study of changes and their effects.
 d. intense investigation of a particular occurrence.
- c 5. Events that we are aware of at a given time make up the
- a. unconscious. c. consciousness.
 b. subconscious. d. triconscious.
- b 6. Unlocking a combination padlock
- a. always involves language skills.
 b. always involves motor skills.
 c. seldom involves concentration skills.
 d. seldom involves memory skills.
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Achieving Success with Standardized Tests

At various times in college, you may be required to take standardized tests. These are commercially prepared; they are usually lengthy, timed tests that are used nationally or statewide to measure specific skills and abilities. Your score on these tests compares your performance with that of large numbers of other students throughout the country or state.

Preparing for the Test

Use the following suggestions for preparing for standardized tests:

- **Find out as much as possible about the test.** Meet with your advisor or check the career center to obtain brochures and application forms. Find out about its general content, length, and timing. Determine its format and the scoring procedures used. Know when and where the test is given.

- **Take a review course.** Find out if your college offers a preparatory workshop to help you prepare for the test.
- **Obtain a review book.** Review books are available to help you prepare for many standardized tests. Purchase a review book at your college bookstore, a large off-campus bookstore, or through the Internet. If you cannot purchase a review book, you may be able to borrow one from your college library or public library.
- **Begin your review early.** Start to study well ahead of the exam so that you can fit the necessary review time into your already hectic schedule.
- **Start with a quick overview of the test.** Most review books contain a section that explains the type of questions on the test and offers test-taking strategies. If a brief review of the subject matter is offered, read through it.
- **Take practice tests.** To become as comfortable as possible with the test, take numerous timed practice tests and score them. Make your practice tests as much like the actual test as possible. Work at a well-lighted desk or table in a quiet setting and time yourself carefully.
- **Review your answers.** Thoroughly review the questions you answered incorrectly. Read through the explanations given in your review book and try to see why the keyed answer is best.
- **Keep track of your scores.** Keep a record of both your total score and subtest scores on practice tests. This will help you judge your progress and can give you insights into areas of weakness that require extra review.

Taking the Test

Use the following suggestions to get as many points as possible on a standardized test:

- **Arrive in the exam room prepared.** Get to the testing site early so you can choose a good seat and become comfortable with the surroundings. Wear a watch, and bring two sharpened pencils with erasers (in case one breaks) and two pens (in case one runs out).
- **Get organized before the timing begins.** Line up your answer sheet and test booklet so you can move between them rapidly without losing your place. Carefully fill out your answer sheet.
- **Skim the instructions.** This can save you valuable time. If you have prepared yourself properly, you should be very familiar with the format of the test and the instructions. A quick reading of the directions will be all that is necessary to assure yourself that they have not changed.

- **Work quickly and steadily.** Most standardized tests are timed, so the pace you work at is a critical factor. You need to work at a fairly rapid rate but not so fast as to make careless errors.
- **Don't plan on finishing the test.** Many of these tests are designed so that most people do not finish. So work on the easier questions first, and make a mark next to the harder ones so you can return to them if time permits.
- **Don't expect to get everything right.** Unlike classroom tests or exams, you are not expected to get most of the answers correct.
- **Find out if there is a penalty for guessing.** If there is none, then use the last 20 or 30 seconds to randomly fill in an answer for each item that you have not had time to complete. The odds are that you will get one out of every five correct. If there is a penalty for guessing, guess only if you can narrow the answer down to two choices. Otherwise, leave the item blank.
- **Check your answer sheet periodically.** If you have skipped a question, make sure that later answers match their questions. If the test has several parts, check to see that you are marking answers in the correct answer grid.
- **Don't just stop if you finish early.** If you have time left over, use it. Redo marked questions you skipped. Review as many answers as you can. Check over your answer sheet for stray marks and darken your answer marks.