

CHAPTER 15

Multiple-Choice Test-Taking Tips

Sometimes You Don't Even Need the Answer Choices!

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All These Tips Are Interesting, But How Many Questions Do I Need to Get Right to Pass?

Finally, Remember to Apply Some of What You've Learned About Psychology

Overview

Two-thirds of your test grade depends upon your performance on the multiple-choice questions. You will take the multiple-choice section of the test first. It is comprised of 100 questions, and you will be allotted 70 minutes in which to answer them. The questions are arranged roughly in order of difficulty. Therefore, don't be alarmed if you have more trouble answering the questions that appear later on the exam; that's just the way it should be. Below, we have summarized a few test-taking strategies that we hope will help you with the exam.

Sometime You Don't Even Need the Answer Choices!

Once you've prepared for this test you'll see that in order to answer many of the questions on the test, you don't even need to look at the answer choices. In fact, it's a good test-taking strategy to try to answer multiple-choice questions before you look at the choices. That way, once you do look at the answer choices, you have a good sense of what you are looking for.

For example, consider the following question:

Tiger is extremely concerned about doing the right thing. He feels very guilty when he even thinks about doing something immoral or illegal. According to Freud, Tiger has a strong

If you are familiar with Freud's theory of personality, you could probably guess that the answer would be "superego" without checking the answer choices. In this case, you would then have a very easy job as the choices are:

- (A) id.
- (B) ego.
- (C) libido.
- (D) superego.
- (E) unconscious.

Here's another example:

A psychologist who subscribes to the biomedical perspective would be most likely to emphasize the importance of

In this case, the answer is slightly less obvious. You probably realize that it will have to do with concepts such as genetics, nature, and/or neurochemicals. Once you identify these potential answers, selecting the answer is, again, fairly simple. The choices are:

- (A) the environment.
- (B) hormones and neurotransmitters.
- (C) repressed impulses.
- (D) self-esteem.
- (E) attributional style.

The correct answer is B, as hormones and neurotransmitters are examples of the kind of neurochemicals the biomedical psychologists believe influence thought and behavior.

Read All the Answer Choices

Always read all the answer choices before making your final selection. Even though it is helpful to imagine what the answer might be without reading the answer choices, it is essential that you read and carefully consider all the choices presented. Occasionally, particularly on the more difficult questions, one of the answer choices will be appealing, but another answer is superior. Remember that on a multiple-choice test you are supposed to identify the BEST possible answer.

Narrow Down the Possible Answer

Sometimes the questions on the exam are more difficult than the examples above and you will not be able to identify the correct answer before reading the answer choices. That, then, is the beauty of the multiple-choice format. As mentioned

above, you should always carefully read each of the answer choices. When you decide a choice is incorrect, cross it out, and eliminate it from consideration. You will be able to use this method often to identify the correct answer.

When I Don't Know the Answer, Should I Guess?

The test is set up to correct for the impact of guessing by penalizing students a quarter point for every question they get wrong. Aware of this penalty, most students are overly cautious about guessing. Since there are five answer choices for each question, the laws of probability suggest that if you had no idea about the answer to five questions and guessed on each one, you would most likely get one correct and four wrong. Therefore you would gain a point for the one question you got right and lose a point ($4 \times \frac{1}{4}$) for the questions on which you guessed incorrectly; in other words, you would break even. However, on many questions you will be able to eliminate at least one of the answer choices. In such a situation you should definitely guess because the odds are that you'll end up with more points than if you omitted these questions.

Guess Smart

When you are not sure of the answer to a question and therefore are trying to eliminate incorrect choices, a few other suggestions about how to make good guesses on multiple-choice tests may help you.

1. Use your common sense.

Don't get so caught up thinking about what you learned that you forget to use your common sense. For instance, consider the following question:

What is the likely correlation between the amount of time students spend studying psychology and their scores on the AP Psychology exam?

- (A) -.80
- (B) -.25
- (C) .18
- (D) .62
- (E) .97

Assuming you know that "0" represents no correlation and that "1" is indicative of a perfect, direct relationship between the variables, your common sense can help you choose the answer. Since one would suspect that the relationship between these variables is a positive one, you are

choosing between choices C, D, and E. Although you probably don't have any idea of the exact correlation, .18 seems very weak; it suggests that studying hardly has any impact at all. Conversely, .97 seems too strong; clearly some of the variation in how people do on the test is due to factors other than time spent (e.g., prior knowledge, how rested they are, and test anxiety). Therefore, common sense dictates that .62 is the best of these choices.

2. *Use your knowledge of the psychological perspectives.*

Sometimes language used in the stem of the question can give you a clue about the right answer. Each perspective uses certain terms, and the correct answer will frequently use language from the perspective indicated in the stem of the question. For example, consider the following question:

How would a behaviorist like B.F. Skinner explain how people learn table manners?

- (A) Table manners are learned by interpreting events we have observed.
- (B) Table manners are learned as a result of reinforcement and punishment.
- (C) Table manners are a product of repressed childhood events in the unconscious.
- (D) Table manners are controlled by brain chemistry and evolutionary forces.
- (E) Table manners are learned by remembering and thinking about past social events we have experienced.

The stem of the question tells you that the correct answer must be one that a behaviorist would agree with, so you know you're looking for an answer that uses behaviorist terms and concepts. Options A and E use cognitive psychological terms (interpreting, thinking, remembering). Option C uses psychoanalytic language (repressed, unconscious), and Option D uses biopsychological language (brain chemistry and evolutionary forces). Only Option B uses terms from the behavioral perspective (reinforcement and punishment) so it must be the right answer.

3. *Avoid extreme answer choices.* Choices that contain words like *all* or *never* or *everyone* are rarely (notice I don't say *never*) correct.

4. *Be wary of answer choices that are very similar to one another.*

Remember, you're looking for the best answer. If some of the choices are so similar that one cannot be better than the other, neither can be the correct answer.

Budget Your Time

While most students find that they have enough time on the multiple choice section of the exam, you should make sure not to spend an undue amount of time on any of the questions. Wear a watch to the exam and make sure to note the time the section begins and when it is scheduled to end. Since you have 70 minutes to answer 100 questions, you have just over 2/3 of a minute for each question.

Read each question and use the techniques we have suggested. If you find yourself confused, skip the question and plan to come back to it once you have completed the section. If you are debating among several answer choices, choose one temporarily, but mark the question so that you will remember to review it once you have finished the other questions.

All These Tips Are Interesting, But How Many Questions Do I Need to Get Right to Pass?

Each exam is different. Assuming your essays are average (keep in mind that they will determine one-third of your grade), you need to earn approximately 60 points (after the guessing penalty) on the multiple-choice section to earn a "3," 70 points to earn a "4," and 80 points to earn a "5."

Finally, Remember to Apply Some of What You've Learned About Psychology

- It's better to space out your studying over many days than to cram for the same amount of time right before the exam.
- Studying is important, but so is sleep. You'll think better if you're well rested.
- According to the *Yerkes-Dodson law* (Chapter 8), a moderate level of arousal will help you perform well on the test. Although you do not want to be so anxious that you can't focus, you will want to "psych" yourself up for the test.