

## **Multiple-Choice Exams: Myths, Misconceptions, and How to Conquer Them**

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Multiple-choice exams have existed for more than 70 years—so have the myths surrounding them. Still, many students believe such tests put them at a disadvantage. Thus, it would be worthwhile to dispel some of these myths, and then find out the best way to prepare for them.

### **Myth #1 “They measure only isolated facts, not what I really know.”**

In truth, since a multiple-choice question can be answered usually within a minute, many questions can be asked in a given period of time. Thus, coverage of topics can be more comprehensive than other kinds of tests such as essay and short-answer.

Further, the more questions you have to answer, the less likely your overall performance will suffer if you encounter problems with a single topic. By contrast, since essay and short-answer questions tend to be highly selective, your overall performance will suffer if you are unsure you addressed the question correctly.

### **Myth #2 “You just have to memorize.”**

Actually, properly designed multiple-choice questions test your capacity to understand a body of complex and sophisticated information, and to reason and analyze using that understanding. In other words, multiple-choice questions demand the same sort of capacities as other kinds of tests such as essay and short-answer tests.

Granted, you must know terms and their definitions. Even more crucial, however, is gaining a thorough understanding of a subject’s particular discourse that will enable you to interpret and apply your understanding come test time.

### **Myth #3 “Your need to know the little tricks.”**

We’ve heard this advice before: “When in doubt, choose the longest answer;” “Choose one of the ‘inner’ answers” (i.e. not the first or the last); “Eliminate distracters that contain extreme modifiers” (always, never etc.), and so forth. Multiple-choice tests, after all, contain “trick questions.”

In reality, multiple-choice questions are straightforward. What makes particular questions difficult has nothing to do with the multiple-choice format, but with the complexity of understanding needed to answer the question.

## **Myth #4 “You should stay with your first answers.”**

Conventional wisdom suggests that if you change an answer, you are more likely to change to a *wrong* answer. Research suggests otherwise:

- Anywhere from 57% to 96% of students change their answers, with a median of 84%.
- The proportion of items changed is around 3%.
- Wrong to Right — 57.8%
- Right to Wrong — 20.2%
- Wrong to Wrong — 22.8%

A word of caution: The success of your answer depends on your reason for the change. While your judgment usually improves when you take time to reflect, it worsens when your mind fills with doubt or anxiety.

## **So, How Do I Prepare?**

### **Toughen up.**

Many students aren't tough enough with themselves about whether they really know and understand things. Instead, they passively browse and highlight text in the hope that information will stay vaguely in their minds.

Mastery, by contrast, demands self-questioning, searching for connections and relationships, making clear distinctions between terms, concepts, theories, and processes, and seeing how the details fit together to form “the big picture.”

### **Pair up.**

Study pairs or groups work best when people who are roughly equal in their knowledge, diligence, and motivation use each other to consolidate their grasp of material they have already studied individually.

What doesn't work: just hearing other people's quick summaries of what they've read.  
What does work: asking pertinent questions and responding with fully elaborated explanations. Only then does the information become fixed in long-term memory.

### **Quiz yourself—ruthlessly.**

Old exams, end-of-chapter questions, and study guides—all are useful for testing what you know and identifying areas you need to work on. Making up your own questions and answering them is also an excellent way to test your knowledge. After all, why wait for your professor's study guide when you can create one of your own?

Sources: David Palmer, *Multiple Choice Tests*, Center for Student Development, McMaster University, 1999 and Ludy T. Benjamin, et. al., “Staying With Initial Answers on Objective Tests: Is it a Myth?” *Teaching of Psychology*, Vol. 11 No. 3, 1984 pp. 133-141.