Guidelines for Taking a Multiple Choice Exam

> **WARNING:** These guidelines are not meant to replace good study techniques nor are they a magic formula for success. They will demonstrate how multiple choice questions are written and how you can logically think about them!

Introduction

Why do multiple-choice exams seem so confusing? Reading a multiple-choice question is a different reading task. Because there are so few words, each word is weighted very heavily. Not understanding the meaning of even one word can skew your interpretation of the question and the way in which you will answer it.

I'm going to model how you can correctly read and logically think your way through the answering of various multiple choice questions excerpted from exams in various disciplines. We'll also note the level at which the question is written. Many questions will be at a basic definition level while others will be at a more difficult level - often they will ask for an interpretation or application of the concepts learned.

You'll have the opportunity to apply four rules or guidelines to example questions. You'll then practice using these guidelines on a worksheet with 11 questions. You'll find that these rules or guidelines will help you narrow the number of possible options and be better able to choose the BEST answer when appropriate.

Format of a Multiple Choice Question

The sexual division of labor
A. no significance in our society because all men are created equal.
B. is the same in all societies.
C. is culturally ordained and differs from society to society.
D. is culturally insignificant in preliterate societies.
E. doesn't exist in a kibbutz

Before attacking the first question you know it's important to be aware of the formatting of a multiple-choice question.

You know that a multiple-choice question consists of a stem or the question statement and four or five options which complete that stem. You are to carefully and thoroughly read the stem. You may need to reread a stem several times to ensure comprehension. In addition, you may want to paraphrase the stem - put it in your own words to ensure understanding. After reading the stem you try to anticipate or recall the correct answer. You know that this will often help you avoid reading too much into the question.

You read through all the options. Eliminate those that are obviously wrong and then choose the correct option based on your studying. If the answer does not appear to be there at first, you consider how the answer might be paraphrased in one of the options. You understand that the professor wants to know if you can recognize the correct answer if it is rephrased or set up a little differently.

We'll begin with a couple of questions at different levels simply to show you how to effectively *read* a multiple-choice question.

Definition or Literal Level Question

I read the stem once or twice noting the key words - "endogamy means" and realize I'm simply choosing a definition of this word. This is probably the easiest type of question the professor can ask. It is simply a literal level question. This information was probably given to me quite clearly either during lecture or in the textbook.

Other key words are "choose a mate". I do not need to paraphrase this stem. I realize that I'm looking for the second part of the definition of endogamy. If I can't recall the answer immediately I might use the word part en- meaning within as opposed to ex or exogamy meaning without.

As you listen to the explanation note reasons for eliminating options on this worksheet.

> Endogamy means that one must choose a mate from
> A. an outside group.
> B. a group which is more rich than his own.
> C. a poor group.
> D. an educated group.
> E. within the confines of his own group.

Application Level Question

This question presents a hypothetical situation. Key words are: *origins of temperamental* or *constitutional personality differences*. This is an example of a question that seems to be a "trick" question. You know that it's going to be more difficult because you not only need to recall some definitions but you need to visualize how they can be applied in real life situations.

You probably never had a case study about Billy before but if you think carefully about the key words you recognize that you have studied these terms or concepts previously. Here are the options available to us.
As you listen to the explanation note the reasons for eliminating options on this worksheet.

> Billy, at age of two months, is very active and wriggles frequently. The findings of a study on the origins of temperamental or constitutional personality differences would predict that
> A. Billy will be very quiet and docile by age 5.
> B. Billy will succeed in school.
> C. Billy will very likely be active and unable to sit still for long as a small child.
> D. Billy will be neurotic.

Four Guidelines for Eliminating Options

We are going to discuss and apply four rules or guidelines for eliminating options when reading a multiple choice question.

Rule 1: Eliminate options containing 100% words

Words such as always, no, never, everywhere are 100% words and usually false. Also forms of the verb "to be" are 100% words. They do not allow for exceptions. Words such as sometimes, probably, may etc. are weaker words and usually are true because they allow exceptions.

Some options you will examine are obviously 100% words while others are not. See if you can discover these. Also remember that the most inclusive or longest statement often is true simply because it takes more words to make a true statement.

Directions: *Read the stem carefully underlining key words and paraphrasing its meaning. Since you have not previously studied this material you won't recall the correct answer. Instead draw a line through the letter of the option(s) that seem obviously wrong based on this rule. You'll find that you have 20 seconds to complete this task. As you listen to the explanation write the reasons for eliminating options on this worksheet.*

The key words in this question are **two brothers - same family - cultural environment.**

> The example of the two brothers reared in the same family and cultural environment given in the text points out that they:
> A. would have the same attitudes in life.
> B. would both be attracted to the same types of people
> C. may show very different needs for personal recognition from those around them.
> D. are treated in a similar way.
> E. will always be lifelong friends.

Rule 2: Eliminate options that do not match the question being asked in the stem; choose options that directly answer every part of the stem

After studying for long periods you may be tempted to pick an option you know is a correct statement without rechecking to see if it closely matches every part of the stem. Underlining the key words in the stem helps you identify the question being asked. You can also count the number of parts in the question.

This question has two important parts. Note that the author is giving you a time frame as well as a treatment goal to use in choosing your answer. In this question the key words in the stem are *treatment goal* and *at the time of arrest.*

> At the time of the arrest of a juvenile, the primary treatment goal is:
> A. to pick up the juveniles on suspicion in high delinquency areas so as to protect the public.
> B. to teach the child a lesson by giving him a sample of what it is like to be a criminal
> C. police handling that will not further damage juvenile attitudes toward the law.
> D. getting the child before a judge so he will get court experience.
> E. to fingerprint him so that he will be on record.

Rule 3: Eliminate silly or suspicious wording suggesting a stereotype; choose options that make sense based on logical reasoning and your background knowledge

You have learned a lot of information during your lifetime. It makes sense to take advantage of what you know. Also be extremely cautious of wording that is stereotypical. It is usually a distracter.

You may have read about Washo in newspaper or magazine articles. Here we are simply identifying Washo. In this case you do know that Washo's fame is relevant to research in the area of psychology.

> Washo is:
> A. one of the teaching assistants for this course.
> B. a chimpanzee that was taught American sign language.
> C. a gorilla who became a sexual deviant in captivity.
> D. the world's only known talking chimpanzee.

Rule 4: Eliminate options containing 100% words

You are probably very good at answering true/false questions. Your job then is to treat each option as a true/false statement. Remember that if more than one option is true in relationship to the stem, you'll answer all of the above even if you're not sure about the third or fourth option. The same true/false reasoning works for options written as none of the above or both C and D.

> The effects of high levels of pollution can be seen in:
> A. increased mortality during periods of increased pollution.
> B. increased hospital admissions particularly for those with asthma, emphysema, and other lung diseases.
> C. increased complaints of eye and nose irritation.
> D. all of the above.
> E. none of the above.