

## Succeeding on Multiple-Choice Exams

### What Do Multiple Choice Exams Aim to Test?

"Items" (test questions) test several things. Some of these are *recall* (the ability to remember key ideas) and the *ability to apply ideas* (ability to interpret information by combining, computing, or applying theories to facts). Some tests evaluate your ability to *distinguish between ideas*. Always ask your professor what kinds of knowledge will be tested.

Tests are likely to emphasize key facts, concepts, terms, points that were important. Professors often emphasize important points by repeating them. Your job is to be able to distinguish what is important. Comparing notes with friends can help you learn how to do this; two heads are better than one.

Exams also test exam-taking skills. "Hares" (fast thinkers) tend to do better than "tortoises" (slower, often deeper thinkers). Success on multiple-choice exams is one indication of intelligence and learning, but not the only one.

### How Are Multiple Choice Exams Constructed?

1 correct option

2 or 3 attractive but slightly incorrect options ("distractors")

1 obviously incorrect option

- < items are usually sequenced in learning order to facilitate your recall
- < wording tends to be the same in at least two options so that nothing stands out
- < items rarely give away information you can use in answering other items
- < choices often mix two or more ideas to test your ability to discriminate
- < some answers are "red herrings" - not even related to the question
- < after they've tabulated the exam results, many professors discard (don't count) items that a large majority (more than 80%) misses because they may not accurately be testing students' knowledge
- < your professor's grading scale may be curved or pure percentage - ask if you have questions

### What Are Some Success Strategies for Multiple-Choice Tests?

#### During the semester:

- < Sit in the front of the classroom.
- < Attend regularly, listen carefully, and take clear, well-organized notes.
- < Study with other students and discuss course issues outside of class.
- < Make plot outlines and character and idea summaries as you read.

#### During the exam itself:

- < Make several "passes" through the test. On the first pass, answer all items to which you're confident you know the correct answer. This will give you a sense of rhythm and momentum and allow you unbroken concentration.
- < When you've finished answering all the questions that come easily to you, return to the difficult ones. Try to work through each question slowly, eliminating as many possibilities as you can. If you can eliminate two or more possibilities, it is probably worthwhile to guess; if you have no idea which answer is right, guessing is risky.
- < If a question confuses you, try writing out what you know about each option in the space

- next to it. You may find that this facilitates your recall.
- < Before you turn in your test, check that you've completed all questions you want to complete, and that your answers are correctly sequenced on the sheet.
- < Check that you've marked the correct "blips" on the answer sheet. If you have several erasures, redo your answer sheet on a clean scan-tron form so the machine doesn't penalize you for erasures.

## **How Can I Improve My Performance?**

Ask yourself the following questions:

### **BASIC ENGAGEMENT**

Are you a first- or second-year student? (Grades rise with increased academic experience.)

Is this the first test of the semester? (Grades tend to rise as the class progresses.)

Do you attend class regularly?

Do you complete the readings before coming to class?

Do you annotate your books to reveal major points?

Do you listen carefully to the professor or do you "tune out" at times?

Do you take complete notes in class?

Do you sit in the front of the room? (Front-seat students do better statistically.)

Do you participate actively in class discussion when the chance arises? (Even mental participation works, studies show.)

### **ABOVE-AND-BEYOND ENGAGEMENT**

Do you take notes as you read, either in your book or on a separate page?

Do you make plot and character outlines of works read in class?

Do you study with other students to make sure you're mastering major concepts?

Do you talk about the readings and/or the lectures outside of class?

Do you listen for possible multiple-choice questions or make up your own?

Do you tape - and listen again to - lectures?

### **AND IF YOU STILL HAVE PROBLEMS. . .**

If you're doing all these things but are still getting a C- or lower, see the professor. You may also want to invest in a tutor for this class.