
Test Strategies for Objective Tests

When taking objective exams, your goal is to find the correct choice among the possible answers provided. You want the **best** choice: the one that answers the question most completely and accurately. However, even when you have adequately prepared for a test, choosing the correct answer is not always easy. Knowing some test taking strategies may help you have a better chance of choosing the correct answer.

These guidelines are not a magical formula for success and do not replace thorough studying. However, the strategies can help you to logically and critically think about objective test questions and make “educated guesses” when necessary.

TRUE-FALSE EXAMS

- Strategy 1 For a statement to be true, each part must be true. One detail can make an entire statement false.
- Example:* Jean Piaget made some revolutionary discoveries about child behavior during the nineteenth century.
- Answer:* **False.** Although Piaget did make discoveries about child behavior, he did so during the **twentieth** century.
- Strategy 2 True-False questions may use words called “absolutes” or “qualifier”s. Absolute words imply there are no exceptions to the facts stated in the question. Examples of such words are *never, none, always, all, every, only*. These words tend to make a statement false (but not always). Qualifiers such as *some, few, often, many, frequently* limit meaning, thus allowing exceptions and possibilities that can make a question true (but not always).
- Example 1:* Everyone should exercise daily.
- Answer:* **False**, due to the word *everyone*. There are many people who should not exercise daily, and people who may be unable or prohibited from doing any exercise.
- Example 2:* All types of cars have some type of engine.
- Answer:* **True.** Even though the absolute term “*all*” could tend to make this question false, the qualifier “*some*” makes the question more general and allows for possibilities (“some type of engine”: doesn’t have to be the familiar gasoline-driven engine).
- Example 3:* Children sometimes have emotional problems following their parents’ divorce.
- Answer:* **True**, because the qualifier *sometimes* limits the scope of this statement, allowing for exceptions.
- Example 4:* The word *steep* is usually a verb.
- Answer:* **False**, despite the qualifier *usually*, which indicates something less than “always”. The word “steep” is more frequently used as an adjective (steep hill) than a verb (to steep tea). In this case, the best test taking strategy was: knowing your vocabulary!

Strategy 3 Double negatives (two negative words in a sentence) tend to indicate a positive relationship in standard English usage, just as in algebra multiplying two negative numbers equals a positive number.

Example: Aspirin is not an illegal drug.

Hint: Cancel the negatives to turn question into a positive statement, then select your answer. (**Aspirin is not an illegal drug** = Aspirin is an legal drug.)

Answer: **True.**

Strategy 4 Be careful with negatives! Adding negatives such as *not* do not necessarily make a statement false. **Hint:** Re-phrase the sentence to help you clarify what is being asked or stated if the negative words confuse you.

Example 1: California is *not* a state in Canada.

↳ **Re-phrase:** Canada does not have a state called California OR California is not in Canada.

Answer: True (California is not in Canada.)

Example 2: It is *not* true that Canada is north of the U.S.

↳ **Re-phrase:** “not true” means incorrect or false. So, rephrased, the question is: It is incorrect that Canada is north of the U.S.

Answer: False (Canada is north of the U.S.)

MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAMS

It is important to read multiple choice questions very carefully. Often, answer choices are designed to be similar so that your professor can determine that you really have learned the material to the level he/she expects. Whenever possible, after you read the question or *stem*, first try to answer it in your own words without looking at the answer choices. Then, select the choice that best matches your answer.

The following strategies can help you make educated guesses if you are unsure about an answer. If you do not know what the answer is, you can think critically and at least determine what the answer is not. These strategies can help you narrow the range of possible answers, thus increasing your chance for a correct response.

Caution: These examples are more simplistic than what you will find in your actual course exams. But, they can help you develop effective test-taking skills.

Remember: the key to test-taking strategies is to think carefully about what the question is asking and use logic, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Strategy 1 Look for answers that are grammatically correct. For example, using “*an*” indicates an answer beginning with a vowel. Select answers that match the stem for being plural or singular.

Example: Small salamanders are:

A. mole

B. tarpon

C. cowl

D. newts (“salamanders” is plural, so the answer needs to be plural.)

Strategy 2 Look for root words in the answers that are similar to words in the stem.

- Example:* If an individual *dies* without a will, it is called:
- A. the principle of primogeniture
 - B. dying** intestate (Even if you didn't know any of the terms in choices a, b, c, this answer is a likely choice because it contains a similar word to that in the stem.)
 - C. testamentary freedom
 - D. illegal

Strategy 3 If there is a range of numbers or values, choose a middle value.

- Example:* As late as 1800, less than ___ percent of the world's population lived in cities of 20,000 or more.
- A. 1
 - B. 3**
 - C. 10**
 - D. 15

Note: Always use your background knowledge or logical thinking to help you choose answers. In this question, you are looking for the number of people that would likely be living in larger cities in 1800. Since you know most people were still living on farms or in rural areas 200+ years ago, it is more likely the lesser value of 3 (answer B) would be correct.

Strategy 4 Eliminate silly or suspicious choices. Choose options that make sense based on logical reasoning and your background knowledge. In the following example, you must identify "Washo". In this example, assume that you know Washo's fame is related to research in the field of psychology.

- Example:* 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.

Strategy 5 Be sure the right choice is the **best** choice. At first glance, answer *B* seems to be the correct answer for the following question. However, your options reveal that *D* is a better choice.

- Example:* If you do not understand a question during a test, you should
- A. ask a friend to explain it to you.
 - B. skip that question.**
 - C. look it up in your textbook
 - D. ask your instructor for clarification.**

Note: Both B & D are correct. But, D is the best answer. When choosing the best answer, you need to consider the context in which you learned the information, examples or other information emphasized by the professor during lectures and discussions, and information contained in your text book. If your choice is marked wrong, and you can present an informed and clear explanation for your chosen answer, make an appointment to meet with your professor to discuss it.

Strategy 6 Responses that look like the word to be defined are usually incorrect.

- Example:* An illusion is
- A. something that is not really there.**
 - B. an allusion.
 - C. the same as elusive.
 - D. another word for illustration.

Allusion, elusive, illustration all resemble the word *illusion* and are thus called "distractors" because they look appealing and divert your attention from the correct response. Distractors tend to be poor choices.

Strategy 7

Watch for responses that are essentially the same.

Example: The chemically inactive substances used in experiments to determine drug effectiveness are

- A. prescription medications.
- B. federally controlled pharmaceutical products.
- C. similar to physician-prescribed drugs.
- D. placebos.**

Choices *A, B, C* are the same thing, stated in different ways. Prescription medications (A) are federally controlled (B) and physician prescribed (C). Since these responses are the same, they cannot be the correct choice (assuming you are allowed to choose only one answer, which is typically how most exams are designed.)

References:

Longman and Atkinson. (1999). College Learning and Study Skills. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

Guidelines for Taking Multiple Choice Exams, Purdue University.

Materials from Brigham Young University Learning Center, author and source unknown

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PRACTICE TEST

Directions: Read each question carefully. For each question, eliminate as many incorrect options as possible using the strategies described in this Idea Sheet. Mark the option that you determine is the correct answer.

1. Laws do nothing to diminish discrimination.
True ___ False ___
2. Patients should not ask doctors questions because this develops poor relationships between doctors and patients.
True ___ False ___
3. Categorization involves placing a word in several contexts in order to remember it.
True ___ False ___
4. Mentally healthy people
 - a. never change their goals.
 - b. are always happy when alone.
 - c. are sometimes anxious or afraid.
 - d. never examine their mistakes.
5. Milk is considered an excellent food because
 - a. milk tastes very good to many people.
 - b. milk is relatively cheap considering that it is a superior food product.
 - c. milk contains many vitamins and minerals.
 - d. milk is used in the preparation of a variety of food products.
6. The best example of the use of short-term memory is:
 - a. reciting the key points of what you have just read.
 - b. repeating a phone number that was just told to you.
 - c. remembering the concept of categorization and discussing it on an essay exam.
 - d. remembering the name of a friend whom you have not seen for eight years.
7. The term *hidden delinquency* refers to the fact that
 - a. many delinquent acts are performed in backward areas, not known to the general public.
 - b. many delinquent acts are never brought to official court attention.
 - c. many neighborhoods make a practice of hiding delinquents from the police.
 - d. Wealthy families do not notice when their children are delinquent.
 - e. Social agencies shield delinquents from the police.
8. Modern theories of punishment for crime say that
 - a. retribution is a morally defensible notion in Western society.
 - b. if the punishment is severe enough, an individual will desist from committing a crime.
 - c. no punishment should be eliminated.
 - d. all punishment should be eliminated.
 - e. punishment should be aimed at rehabilitation.
9. When statistics have been procured by unbiased and sound technical methods
 - a. they are mathematically precise.
 - b. they can serve as important clues.
 - c. they are "fool proof" in their use.
 - d. they can tell you exactly what you want to know.
 - e. they define very clearly the nature and seriousness of the problem.
10. There is an average of one probation officer for every ___ children coming to the attention of the courts.
 - a. 15
 - b. 30
 - c. 60
 - d. 90

ANSWERS TO PRACTICE TEST

1. Laws **do nothing** to diminish discrimination.

True ___ **False** ___

Strategy: “*Do nothing*” is absolute, allowing no exceptions. Certain laws in fact do something to help diminish discrimination.

2. Patients **should not** ask doctors questions because this develops poor relationships between doctors and patients.

True ___ **False** ___

Strategy: “*Should*” is a form of the verb “to be”. To be verbs tend to be absolute (but not always!). “*Should not ask questions*”, in this context, implies no deviation from this advice in any situation. It is too absolute, thus false.

3. Categorization involves placing a word in several contexts in order to remember it

True ___ **False** ___

Strategy: Okay, this one was a bit tricky. You need to know your vocabulary and use your good critical thinking skills. “*Categorization*” means organizing into groups based on some classification. Putting a word into “*context*” means to attach a meaning to the word based on the surrounding facts, events, environment. So, the definition of categorization in this question is not correct.

4. Mentally healthy people

- a. never change their goals.
- b. are always happy when alone.
- c. **are sometimes anxious or afraid.**
- d. never examine their mistakes.

Strategy: A, B, D use absolute language.

5. Milk is considered an excellent food because

- a. milk tastes very good to many people.
- b. milk is relatively cheap considering that it is a superior food product.
- c. **milk contains many vitamins and minerals.**
- d. milk is used in the preparation of a variety of food products.

Strategy: Choose the **best** answer. All of the choices are correct. But, if this question came up in NFS 1020 Human Nutrition, it is most likely that “*excellent food*” would relate to nutrient content - containing vitamins and minerals.

6. The best example of the use of short-term memory is:

- a. reciting the key points of what you have just read.
- b. **repeating a phone number that was just told to you.**
- c. remembering the concept of categorization and discussing it on an essay exam.
- d. remembering the name of a friend whom you have not seen for eight years.

Strategy: The question even gives you the hint: “*best example*”. Both A and B are correct, but B is the best example, especially if this is a test in Psychology 1010, covering a chapter about memory and cognition.

7. The term *hidden delinquency* refers to the fact that
- many delinquent acts are performed in backward areas, not known to the general public.
 - many delinquent acts are never brought to official court attention.**
 - many neighborhoods make a practice of hiding delinquents from the police.
 - Wealthy families do not notice when their children are delinquent.
 - Social agencies shield delinquents from the police.

Strategy: Okay, in this question you really have to think logically and carefully. The key terms are “*hidden*” and “*delinquency*”. “A” is silly or stereotypical language; “C” is not likely, because “*many*” neighborhoods “*make a practice of*” is absolute language, also suggesting a stereotype or opinionated statement; “D” is not likely as it is too dissimilar to the other answers and not in context; “E” you know is false, because social agencies do work with law enforcement. Answer “B” is the best choice: not bringing acts to official court attention meets the meaning of the key words “*hidden delinquency*”.

8. Modern theories of punishment for crime say that
- retribution is a morally defensible notion in Western society.
 - if the punishment is severe enough, an individual will desist from committing a crime.
 - no punishment should be eliminated.
 - all punishment should be eliminated.
 - punishment should be aimed at rehabilitation.**

Strategy: Here you will use the strategy of absolutes or qualifiers, but in a less obvious way. “A” is questionable, be careful of false assumptions or questions that might be more personal opinion than fact. “B” is too absolute in the conclusion it is offering; “C” and “D” use absolute language (“all”, “no”).

9. When statistics have been procured by unbiased and sound technical methods
- they are mathematically precise.
 - they can serve as important clues.**
 - they are “fool proof” in their use.
 - they can tell you exactly what you want to know.
 - they define very clearly the nature and seriousness of the problem.

Strategy: Pay attention to the key word(s) and think about what the question is asking you. Rephrase it, if necessary. “*When statistics have been obtained by objective (unbiased) and valid (sound) methods*”, then what? “A” is absolute: statistics are not mathematically precise in themselves, even if using unbiased and sound methods. “C” is absolute: “*fool proof*”, meaning no way to be mistaken. “D” is absolute: telling you “*exactly*”. “E” is absolute: defining “*very clearly the nature and seriousness*”. Even with unbiased and sound methods, the statistics in themselves may not very clearly define a problem. Only “B” allows possibilities and exceptions and describes the characteristics of statistics.

10. There is an average of one probation officer for every ___ children coming to the attention of the courts.
- a. 15 b. 30 c. 60 d. 90

Strategy: Don’t choose a strategy without careful thinking if you don’t know the answer. One strategy could be to choose a middle value. That would make “B” and “C” possibilities. But, think about the context in which you learned the information. Was it in a Sociology or Psychology or Social Work class? Did you learn about the lack of necessary services for children in the court system? Does the question relate to something you learned about reforms where more money is being spent to hire additional probation officers? No correct answer is given for this question. The objective is to help you understand that you need to use solid reasoning and background knowledge, as well as test taking strategies, to help you choose correct answers.