To master multiple choice questions, understand how professors create them.

First, they select an important concept to test your understanding.

Next, they generate the correct answer.

Finally, they generate *distractors* to test how well you understand concept.

*Distractors* are choices that can look, sound or mean about the same thing as the correct answer, but are incorrect because they are either:

- too specific (include extreme modifiers such as always, never)
- too general (they leave out a piece, make answer vague)

Try these strategies when faced with multiple choice exams:

1. Cover up the answer and read only the **stem** (the question or statement). Underline or circle key words.

2. Analyze the stem, noting how the meaning changes with:
   - Qualifiers (i.e. usually, sometimes)
   - Modifiers (i.e. always, never)
   - Negatives (i.e. not, none, un__, dis__, etc.)

3. Try to answer the question before reading choices.

4. Identify and eliminate distracters to help narrow your choices:
   - Note similar answers
   - Note grammatically incorrect choices
   - Can an answer be correct with extreme modifiers (i.e. always, never)?

5. Re-read remaining choices as true/false statements.

6. Stuck?
   - **Scan test questions for clues** and information that might help
   - **Make notes in the margin** to help you recall content
   - If all else fails, guess!

Sample:

The following question stem has a **qualifier** that suggests one choice is the best answer among several plausible alternatives.

What is *chiefly* responsible for the increase in the average length of life in the USA during the last fifty years?

- a. Compulsory health and physical education courses in public schools.  *(Distractor)*
- b. **The reduced death rate among infants and young children.** *(Correct Answer)*
- c. The safety movement, which has greatly reduced the number of deaths from accidents. *(Distractor)*
- d. The substitution of machines for human labor. *(Distractor)*

From: *How to Better Prepare Multiple Choice Test Items: Guidelines for University Faculty.*
http://testing.byu.edu/info/handbooks/betteritems.pdf

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