

# Mastering Multiple-Choice Exams

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 distractors** 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 questions stem ha 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*



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