

# Strategies for Different Test Formats

---

Tests come in a variety of formats, each requiring different levels of thinking and presenting different kinds of challenges. Your instructors will likely inform you about each test format in your classes. If not, you should ask when you review in-class for the test. Here are some tips to help you succeed whether you're facing an exam of multiple choice or essay questions, or some combination of formats.

## General

---

As soon as you receive your test, start with a brief preview of its content. Read the directions. What question formats are being used? What content is being covered? What are the point values of each question or each set of questions? Asking these questions will get your mind focused, spark information recall, and help you budget your time.

Once you've previewed the test, start by answering the easy questions. Matching or multiple choice sections are a good place to start, as they sometimes contain information that will be useful throughout the exam. This will give you confidence and help you relax.

Write down anything you've had trouble remembering and that you reviewed last minute. Try to relax and proceed to the tougher questions or sections. Unless you are under a tight time limit, be deliberate. Read directions and questions carefully and don't rush.

## Matching

---

Matching usually consists of dates, people, places and vocabulary.

- Read the directions carefully.
- Read each column before you answer.
- Check to see if there are equal numbers of items in each column, as sometimes instructors will include more items than necessary.
- Match what you know first.
- Cross off options you have used to avoid confusion and narrow your options as you move through the section.
- Use process of elimination for matches you're not sure about.

## True/False

---

Students often prefer true/false questions because there's at least of 50/50 chance of picking the right answer, but true/false questions can be tricky.

- Your task on a true/false test is simple, but read the directions carefully. Be sure scores are not tallied by a total of correct answers minus incorrect answers. If that's the case, don't guess.
- Read each statement carefully. Pay particular attention to absolute (or 100%) terms like all, always, every, none, or never, as well as mitigating terms like many, some, most, usually, frequently, and generally. Testing out these absolute or mitigating terms will lead you to the correct answer.
- Remember that if any part of a statement is false, the entire statement is false.

- Pay attention to double negatives as they cancel each other out and make a positive. Not unlawful means legal.

## Multiple Choice

---

Students often favor multiple choice questions because they don't require answers generated from scratch. Instructors like multiple choice questions because they're easy to grade. However, multiple choice questions, when properly conceived, can require a higher order of thinking. When taking a test that features multiple choice questions:

Read all questions carefully.

- Attempt to answer the question before surveying the answer options, as wrong options could distract or confuse you. Cover the answer options to avoid looking at them if you have to. But still consider all the options once you look at them, even if you are pretty sure you know the answer.
- If you don't know the answer, mark down your first instinct and make a note to come back to the question later. (A question mark in the margin works.) Other questions may provide clues that will help you when you come back to questions you're unsure about.

Some useful strategies to increase the probability of identifying the correct answer are as follows:

- Employ a process of elimination to narrow your options. First identify options that could not be correct and cross them off. If you can't narrow the option pool down to one answer, you can at least give yourself better odds if you have to guess.
- Pay attention to All of the Above questions. Remember if two statements appear true and you are unsure of the third statement, then the choice of All of the Above is most likely correct.
- Check to make sure answers fit grammatically in the question. Usually, answers that do not fit grammatically in the question can be eliminated.
- Unless you have good reason, don't change any of your answers. Anxiety can cause us to second-guess ourselves.

## Short Answer

---

Short answer questions require you to generate the answer. The benefit to these types of questions is that they test your ability to articulate, be creative, and organize your answer. They also give you an opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of context related to the question.

- Read each question carefully, and be sure that you know what is being asked. Sometimes short answer questions consist of multiple components. Answer all the components.
- Be thorough and concise in your answer. A short answer shouldn't be an essay, but it does give you an opportunity to present information that proves that you've read, listened, researched, and studied course materials.
- Don't leave a short answer question blank. Write down whatever you know that is related to the question. You may earn partial credit.

## Essay Questions

---

Many students dread having to write essays as part of an exam. However, essay questions or exams consisting entirely of essays can be the most forgiving forms of testing because they're less limiting in how you can respond to a prompt. Generally, essay questions direct you about what type of essay you're expected to write and provide you with a prompt.

- Read the directions and the prompt carefully. Make sure you understand what type of essay you're being asked to write and that you understand the prompt. Pay close attention to the terms used in the prompt. Commonly, test questions will include terms like analyze, evaluate, critique, compare and contrast, respond, synthesize or argue. Make sure your answers conform to the requirements of the question. If you aren't clear about what you're being asked to do, ask your instructor.
- Make some notes before you begin writing. Include at least a thesis and an outline of major points that support your thesis.
- In an essay exam, you need to make a central claim and support that claim with evidence and reasoning. Your thesis statement is a short version of the central claim you are making. Use the prompt to help construct your essay. For example, if the prompt asks you to make an argument about the strategic importance of George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River in the American Revolution, write something like "George Washington's crossing of the Delaware was perhaps the single most significant strategic maneuver of the American Revolutionary War. It propelled the colonies to victory."
- Your outline should cover the points that support your thesis and provide you with guidance for topic sentences in each of your paragraphs.
- State your thesis at the beginning of your essay.
- Once you start composing your essay, skip lines to give yourself room to add or edit when you reread your draft.
- Use specific details from your course materials—textbook, the content of lectures and/or discussion, etc.—for evidence to support your points. Specificity is the key to crafting a convincingly persuasive essay.
- Include a conclusion that summarizes your thesis and main points if you have time.
- You have some leeway on written essays; your instructor isn't expecting perfection. But do the best you can on spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Write as neatly as you can.
- Read your essay once you've finished; revise and edit where necessary. Don't be afraid to mark through some of your content and draw arrows to indicate reorganization if you have to.

Also check out this guide from the University Writing Center on [writing essay exams](#).

### **COMMON TEST QUESTION TERMINOLOGY:**

---

**Argue** – Take a stand on a debatable topic, using evidence and/or reasoning to support your claims.

**List** – Provide a numbered list of words, sentences, or comments

**Outline** – Organize a series of main ideas supported by secondary ideas, etc.

**Define** – Give the exact meaning of a term or concept, but no details; this is often a matter of giving a memorized definition

**Criticize** – Issue your own judgment or opinion based on reasons; good and bad points should be included

**Summarize** – Provide a brief, condensed account of the main ideas; omit non-essential details

**Trace** – Describe the progress or history of something or how something came to be from beginning to end

**Describe** – Explain, with details and examples, the subject the question is asking about. Imagine that you are painting a picture with words.

**Diagram** – Make a chart, graph, or geometric drawing with labels to explain an event, development, or phenomenon

**Compare/contrast** – Show, in detail the similarities (when comparing) and differences (when contrasting) between two things—events, developments, phenomena. Your goal is not just to state the similarities or differences, but to make a point about what we can learn from considering the similarities and differences.

**Discuss** – Consider or examine a topic or position by presenting contexts, pros and cons and/or differing views, with details

**Justify** – Support a position or decision by providing reasons and rationale

**Analyze** – Break a subject down into its component parts, describe or evaluate each, and describe the relationships among the parts.

**Evaluate** – Make a judgment about the value or effectiveness of something; defend your evaluation by establishing criteria by which you make the judgment