Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine



Middletown

REACH Program

Week 5

**Working with MCQs**

Multiple choice examinations are used by basic science and clinical clerkships to evaluate knowledge base. Thus, good skills in answering multiple choice questions are useful throughout medical school. Most students can increase their scores on multiple choice examination from 5 to 15% by practicing good test taking techniques regardless of who wrote the examination.

Good test taking skills includes:

*(Taken from http://som.uthscsa.edu/StudentAffairs/testtaking.asp)*

1)  The single most frequent error students make in multiple choice examinations is to misread, and therefore, misinterpret questions. Many students read the possible answers of the question before they have checked to insure that they understand the question. Often they find a possible answer to the misunderstood question, and, of course, the answer is incorrect. There is a simple process that will cut down the errors made by misreading the question.

First, cover the possible answers with your hand and then read the question. Ask "what is this question asking"? Rephrase the question in your own words until you understand the question. Then, without looking at the answers, ask yourself "what do I know about that"? Jot this down in the margin of your exam paper.

Next, review the answers carefully, marking out those that you know to be incorrect. In a well written question, there will usually be two choices left after mark out. Again, question yourself, "what do I know about this or that"? This interrogation will get you into the memory banks where the knowledge is stored.

2)  Many medical students have a high error frequency on "negatively phrased" questions. These are "all are correct except" type questions. You are looking for the one "False" response. After making sure that you have read the question correctly and understand the question, simply write a big F along side the answers to remind you about the needed "False" answer.

3)  Anxiety and fatigue cause students to miss question for which they know the answer. Both conditions show up as a rather specific pattern of errors which can be corrected once the reasons are known.

There are basically two types of error patterns caused by anxiety. Many students are very anxious when they begin an examination. Gradually, the student becomes more composed and the anxiety diminishes. Students with this type of anxiety will answer more questions incorrectly in the first one-third of the examination than in the middle or last one-third.

An error string is a cluster of three or more errors in a row usually caused when a student gets a surge of adrenalin. This second pattern of errors caused by anxiety occurs because students believe they made and error or became angry at the examination (psychological projection). Since a sudden surge of adrenaline is not conducive to mental concentration, it is likely that errors will be made in the questions that follow.

One way to correct the first pattern of errors is to carry out a 20-30 minute test warm-up session just prior to the examination. This is done by taking a few questions from an old examination without the answers. Find a quiet place and practice reading and rephrasing the questions. The idea is to get yourself thinking about the subject material and to begin to concentrate. Some students will wear earphones and play soothing music, perhaps something of Mozart while doing this. It works.

The second pattern of errors caused by a burst of adrenalin can be handled by letting the panic sensation subside before going ahead. Keep in mind that all questions have the same weight and that one question becomes heavier only if you allow the adrenalin surge to affect you to make more errors.

Fatigue patterns usually show up in the last one-third of an examination unless a student is so tired when he/she comes into the examination that they do not think clearly. This is the usual fate of all night crammers.

A sure cure for the fatigue pattern of errors is to get a good nights sleep before an examination, to eat a healthy diet with little if any caffeine intake, and, to exercise properly to release tension and manage stress. Cramming is a sure way to lose points due to fatigue.

4)  Passing over questions that are difficult and/or changing answers both can contribute to a higher frequency of error than lack of knowledge base would cause. In the first case, leaving questions unanswered generates anxiety since students tend to keep thinking about going back to answer them and wondering if they can answer them. We have already seen what anxiety does to concentration. Students do not need the extra baggage caused by leaving questions unanswered and then having to come back to answer them. Changing answers is another common behavior in test takers. To see if changing answers is of benefit to you, go back through old exams and note where you changed answers. Tally the changes by noting those where right was changed to wrong, wrong was changed to right, and wrong was changed to wrong. If you have a consistent positive score, please continue to review and change. Most students gain little from changing answers and only take time away from working on other questions.

A positive test taking characteristic is to approach each question as a problem to be solved, process the question in the time allotted per question, give your best answer, move on to the next question and leave worry about the preceding question behind.

Additional MCQ Test Taking Tips

* Try to anticipate the correct response before you read and are distracted by all the options provided.
* Responses that use absolute words, such as "always" or "never" are less likely to be correct than ones that use conditional words like "usually" or "probably."
* The longest response is often the correct one, because the instructor tends to load it with qualifying adjectives or phrases.
* Look for verbal associations. A response that repeats key words that are in the stem is likely to be correct.
* Try turning the stem into a True or False question and choose the most true answer.
* Eliminate options you know to be incorrect.
* If two options are opposite each other, chances are one of them is correct. If two alternatives seem correct, compare them for differences, then refer to the stem to find your best answer.
* Pay attention to key words in both question stems and answer choices. However, be wary of making quick key word associations: sometimes the context, or another clue in the question, requires you to think beyond simple word association.
* When a question is hard, don’t dwell on what you don’t know. Think about what you do know about the topic, anything that’s related, a definition, a concept, and work from there. Often, this can be enough to eliminate several answer choices and kick start your thinking on a question.
* If you’ve narrowed it down to a choice of 2 answers, re-read the question, remind yourself exactly what is being asked, and look for any clues you haven’t yet used. Now re-read the 2 choices carefully, thinking about the wording, how each clue in the question relates to each choice, and how the choice relates to the question being asked.
* Don’t change your answers without very good reason. Your first instinct is probably good. If you are going to change, you need to satisfy two conditions: you need a very good reason why your initial choice was wrong; and you need to be sure of a clear rationale for why your new choice is better.

**Sources:**

**http://som.uthscsa.edu/StudentAffairs/testtaking.asp**