Multiple Choice Tests:

Tips and Traps

Multiple choice tests offer some advantages

• Instructors teaching large groups of students need an assessment technique that is manageable. In many cases, the most practical way to perform an assessment is with a M/C test.

• M/C tests are easy to grade.

• Test-writers can get feedback on their construction of questions based on the relative performance of strong and weak students. (In terms of statistics)

Multiple choice tests also have weaknesses

• High quality questions are hard to construct.

• Results don’t always reflect knowledge. An incorrect response does not give any information about a student’s thinking. However, in some multiple choice tests, the structure of the questions allows for a brief comment or explanation.

• They are sometimes used inappropriately. To assess a student’s ability to synthesize information, a different type of question is required.

A skilled test writer will avoid using

• the options “all of the above” or “none of the above”

• negative language in the stem

• clue words that “give away” the answer.

• opinion-based questions. M/C tests are objective tests.

• verbatim repetition from the text.

• too much language that confuses the reader or obscures the meaning
It is very difficult to create M/C test questions with 4 or 5 plausible answers. Some questions will probably be poorly constructed. Here are some strategies to remember when writing M/C tests:

1. Don’t spend too much time on any one question. If you are stumped, move on to another question and come back to the difficult questions later.

2. Try to answer the question before looking at the options. Then choose the option that best matches your answer.

3. Make sure that you read all options. Read every word, and re-read both question stem and options (if necessary) to make certain that you understand everything that is presented. The best answer will be relevant to the course.

4. You can usually eliminate some of the options. When you have narrowed your choices down to two, read each option carefully and make the most informed choice that you can.

5. As a last resort, choose option B or C. Be careful with this, though. Look for the option that best answers the question.

6. Re-phrase the question and read each alternative as a statement. This may help you eliminate an option, or may help you see the information more clearly.

7. “None of the above” can be a crutch answer for a test-maker (when s/he runs out of ideas for options.) It is almost never the best choice. Another technique that test-writers use when they can’t think of a better option is to include a jargon-filled option that is meaningless to students who know the material.

8. Be careful of verbatim passages; they look plausible, but may not answer the question.

9. It is not true that you should never change your answers. Ignore that advice. However, don’t change your answer out of nervousness; change it if you are certain that you should.

10. If you really don’t know the answer, always guess unless there is a penalty for wrong answers.

11. Watch for qualifiers: Words like “always, never” will often eliminate an option. Words like “seldom, frequently, sometimes” are preferable. However, note that they could be interpreted in a variety of ways – making them a bit ambiguous.

12. Ignore the pattern of answers. You may have lots of answers of the same letter in a row.