

# Learning How to Take an Exam:

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*A Guide to University Learning*



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## STUDENT GUIDE:

Instructors design exams to test whether or not you've learned the material that they think is important. This may seem obvious, but there's an important point here. Tests are designed, and their design is usually very intentional. This means that if you identify the material that instructors feel is important, and make educated guesses about how they will assess it, you'll never be surprised by a well-designed test. If you're not surprised by the test questions and have studied the material, chances are you'll be successful. So how do you identify important material and make educated guesses about test questions? The simple answer is that you try to think like your instructor. While this may seem difficult, instructors give you a lot of hints and clues during the course, starting with the course outline and continuing through the textbook readings and lectures.

## University Exams

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New students often find university exams to be rather different from the exams they've encountered previously.

University exam questions often require you to:

- think about the relationships between key concepts and ideas
- integrate material from the text with material from the lecture and think about the relationship of one to the other
- cover multiple pieces of information at once to test your knowledge of course material
- apply the theoretical concepts covered in the text and lecture to new situations.

Instructors want to ensure that you've learned more than just the facts. They want you to understand the relationships between facts and to be able to demonstrate in exams how those facts and relationships integrate with other content. Pay close attention to examples, scenarios, and stories in lectures and texts because often these are meant to highlight or emphasize important relationships and concepts.

### Advice:

- Pay close attention to any examples or sample questions raised in lectures, because chances are your instructor is raising them for a good reason.
- Practise doing questions similar to the examples or sample questions, because it's likely the concept or connection is important and will show up on the exam.
- Don't just redo the examples you were given in class.
- With classmates, formulate sample test questions that apply the course material to new scenarios.
- Try creating concept maps to emphasize relationships.

## On Test Day

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On test day, you may find the following tips helpful:

- Wake up early, but ensure you try to get a good night's sleep.
- Most students have some degree of test anxiety. This is normal regardless of how much you have studied. Anxiety may be reduced if you studied effectively and feel well prepared.
- Consult your list of equipment needed for the test, such as pens, pencils, calculators, and equations. Take all that is required with you the day of the test.
  - Often during an exam students have to leave their backpacks in another spot, so ensure your equipment is in a clear plastic bag or can be easily carried to your seat.
  - Bring a water bottle with you to stay hydrated during the exam.
- Dress comfortably for the exam. Wearing layers helps you to deal with temperature variations.
- Try to get to the classroom or exam area a few minutes early so you can get settled into your seat and do a few relaxation techniques (such as deep breathing).
- If you have students around you who are panicking and talking about the test, keep some distance and simply walk around a bit to help clear your mind.
- Turn off your cell phone and any other electronic items that will disturb others.
- A cool, calm, and collected head is the biggest asset you can draw on while writing an exam. You can think your way through difficult questions and also avoid the costly little mistakes commonly made when rushing through a test.
  - Breathe in and out slowly.
  - Think positive thoughts.
  - Focus on the test and not the students around you.

## Test Taking Strategies

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### Look Over the Entire Test

- Once you receive the test, it's important to listen carefully to the instructor or proctor's verbal directions.
- Carefully read all the test instructions and questions.
- Before you begin responding to the questions, write down important formulas, processes, and keywords in a margin so you don't have to worry about forgetting them when you get to the questions (this is often called a "brain dump").
- Some tests have multiple parts and some have optional and mandatory questions, so ensure you completely understand what you need to accomplish before you jump into answering the questions.
- Sometimes (particularly with essay exams) you may be able to use your knowledge to answer more than one question. Reviewing the questions and quickly planning your answers before you start writing will help you to determine where it's best to use the information you have.

### Create a Time Budget

- At any given point during an exam, you should know the maximum number of minutes you have to spend on the current question or section before moving onto the next. Set strict time limits on each question to avoid running out of time.
- Build a time budget by taking the time allotted for the exam and subtracting 10 minutes. Next, divide this amount by the number of questions or sections. The result is how long you have to spend on each part.
  - Take a few minutes to double check your answers when you're finished or go back and add more insights to questions where you felt rushed.
  - For an exam with a small number of questions, mark right on the test pages the time when you should begin and finish each one. For an exam with many questions, divide the exam into roughly equal sections, then jot down the time you should begin and end each section. These recorded times should help you keep organized.
  - You can also divide the time available by the number of marks each question is worth. Only give each question the time it warrants and then move on to the next. You may get some marks for a part answer.

## Proceed from Easy to Hard

- Most students don't answer exam questions in the order they are given. Don't worry if your answers are out of sequence; in most cases the order is irrelevant. Always answer the easiest questions first.
- Advantages:
  - Focuses your energy on the questions you know the most about, ensuring you get maximum points on these.
  - Gives you a better chance of getting through the more difficult questions.
  - Helps stimulate your mind and prepare you for answering harder questions.
  - Reduces panic when you get to the harder questions.

## Outline Essay Questions

- Read each question carefully.
  - Note and underline key words and concepts.
  - Pay special attention to what the question is asking you to do (e.g., analyze, compare, or evaluate) and structure your answer based on this.
- Use the margin of the exam or scrap paper to jot down all the points you can recall that are relevant to the question.
  - Record only a few words for each point to save time and space.
  - Write the words that come to your mind right away.
- Plan your approach by creating a quick outline for your answer to each question. It may seem like a waste of time, but two or three minutes doing this could result in a well-written answer.
- Review the question and check the words that you underlined.
  - Make sure your points adequately address the question.
  - Number these points in the order that you want to present them. This will help with a quick organization of the essay.
- Begin writing your essay.
- Pay attention to the time limits to ensure you have enough time to write about each point.
- Go back and re-read the essay checking for clear writing and proper spelling and grammar.

## Check Your Work

- If you have extra time at the end of the exam, go back and check your work.
- In general, when reviewing short or multiple choice answers, you should only change an answer if you have a specific reason for doing so (for example, you remembered a new piece of information). Even if you're not entirely sure that your answer is correct, it's usually better to keep it than to switch to another answer at the last minute.
- If you still have time after your first round of review is over, go through and check again, perhaps checking from back to front. You may notice new mistakes.
- It's tempting to relax after finishing your exam and to hand it in early in front of your peers, but it's better to use any extra time for checking answers.

## Multiple Choice Questions

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### Is there a formula?

Some students (and instructors) claim that there is a "formula" for creating multiple choice questions. This formula dictates that there is:

- one answer which is obviously wrong
- one answer which is tricky and designed to trap you if you misread the question
- two answers which are very similar, one of which is the correct one, and ...
- often an 'All of the above' or 'None of the above' thrown in to make a total of five.

While this may be true in some circumstances, it's certainly not true all the time. Making this sort of assumption is likely to lead to mistakes and wrong answers. Likewise, "When in doubt, pick C" may be a comforting rule, but your instructors have heard this rule too, and many will try to distribute correct answers equally among all choices. So, if you have to guess the answer to a particular question, put your trust in your own knowledge and reason, not in some magic formula or rule, and make a truly educated guess.

### Take a Systematic Approach

Multiple choice questions come in various formats ranging from straight definitions to analogies to problem solving. Among a selection of responses, there's one correct (best/true) answer. Careless mistakes are often made when students rush through the "stem," or first part of the question, and miss important information. Try this approach to make sure you read each question thoroughly.

1. Cover up the answers before you read the question (called the stem).
2. Read the stem carefully, perhaps several times.
3. Process the stem:
  - Underline key words
  - Translate the question into your own words.
4. Predict an answer.
5. Uncover the alternatives and read all of them carefully, even if the first choice seems correct.
  - Watch for small but important words, called modifiers, which may help in answering the question. Examples include always, only, most, all, never, completely, best, worst, smallest, largest, etc.
  - Be wary of "multiple response" answers such as "All of the Above", "None of the Above" or some combination of choices. You'll need to treat each of these responses as true/false situations and answer accordingly.
  - In general, don't choose responses that include words you don't know or never have seen.
6. Identify the best response.

This is just one approach, but it is a good way to systematically work through multiple choice questions, especially when the entire exam is multiple choice.

## Difficult Questions

If you've followed the steps in the previous section and you're still not sure of an answer, it's tempting to keep re-reading and re-working the question. The language of multiple choice questions can sometimes lead to confusion about what the question is really asking. Be careful not to waste valuable time by "worrying through" these questions.

If you're unsure of an answer, you have two choices:

1. **Skip the question and come back to it later**  
or
2. **Attempt to decode the question in more detail**

The following techniques may help:

- Pay attention to absolute terms such as "never," "always," or "none." They often (but not always) indicate that the statement is false.
- Pay attention to the use of negatives, such as "not," "unless," or "none."
- Look for information that might distract you from the real purpose of the question.
- Rephrase a stem in your own words; for example, try changing a question to a statement. Be careful, however, not to lose sight of the original meaning of the stem.
- Treat each alternative as a true-false statement, and search for the one true statement amid the answers.
- If you're debating between two similar answers, try identifying which is the worse answer, rather than which is the better one.
- If you have run out of time and you still don't know the answer, if there is no penalty for wrong answers - guess.

Keep in mind that these techniques will not work for all questions, and that they can be time-consuming. If some of these techniques seem helpful, make sure you familiarize yourself with them in a practice exam well before the midterm or final exam.



## UNIVERSITY EXAMS TOP TEN TAKEAWAYS

1. Be prepared to go beyond material covered in the lectures and textbook. Think about relationships between concepts.
2. Get enough sleep, have all your materials ready, dress comfortably, avoid panicky students, and try to stay calm on test day.
3. Look over the entire test first to get an idea of what types of questions you'll be answering.
4. Write down any formulas, processes, and keywords in the margins as soon as you get the test.
5. Create a time budget by taking the total time given and dividing it up by sections or questions.
6. Do the easy questions first.
7. For essay questions, take a few minutes to plan out what you're going to write.
8. Spend ten minutes reviewing the exam at the end.
9. Multiple choice questions do not always follow a specific formula. Don't fall into the trap of "picking C when in doubt" or following other sketchy advice. Read each choice and pick the best correct answer.
10. For multiple choice questions, try covering up the choices before reading the question. Predict your own answer before you read the choices.

### PRACTICE ACTIVITY:

The purpose of this activity is to practise your test taking skills by writing a multiple choice quiz. The quiz will test your understanding of the psychology content from the textbook reading and the lecture in the previous sections.

The quiz has ten questions and is intended to be seven minutes long. A ratio of 1.5 questions per minute is often used for multiple choice exams. Try to stick to the time limit; it's important to see how far you can get in the time allowed. If you don't finish in the allotted time, make note of how far you got, and then try to finish the rest of the test. This will give you a chance to try every question.

### Instructions:

1. Have a piece of paper in front of you so that you can record your answers.
2. Have a clock or your cellphone nearby so that you can determine when your seven minutes for the quiz starts and ends.
3. Using your understanding of the psychology content, read and answer each question. Try to apply the test taking strategies discussed in this guide.
4. A tip is provided below each question to provide suggestions on what to look for when determining the correct answer.
5. When you're finished the quiz, go to the Answers section (located directly below the quiz) to determine your score.

## Sample Quiz

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1. Which of the following is incorrect?

- A) The range of a data set is never equal to the variance of the set
- B) Standard deviation is the average of the squared deviations from the mean
- C) The variance of a data set is never equal to the standard deviation
- D) Range and standard deviation are both useful pieces of information
- E) None of the above

Tip:

The important word in this question is "incorrect." Read each choice. Consider if the choice is true or false. The word "never" appears in two of the statements (a and c). "Never" is a word that may help you in determining if the choice is true or false.

2. Which of the following is not a descriptive statistic?

- A) The median height of any ten of your classmates
- B) The mean IQ of all Canadian males
- C) The mode weight of half the shipping traffic in the Suez Canal
- D) The standard deviation of the heights of any ten of your classmates
- E) The mean time it took 73 people to finish the Boston Marathon

Tip:

The important word in this question is "not." Underline this word on a test. There are five possible choices and all are plausible and roughly equal in length. Read each statement and determine if it's true or false. Also remember that you're looking for statements that could be termed a "descriptive statistic" - look for a situation that would be used for this term.

3. The standard deviation of a normal distribution is always equal to:
- A) The average of the squared deviations from the mode
  - B) The difference between Z scores of 1 and  $-1$
  - C) The median score minus Z at  $-1$
  - D) Both A and B
  - E) Both A and C

Tip:

This is a question that has three choices plus two choices that are a combination of the first three. The question is a completion statement that has two key words: "always equal." Read each choice and consider if it would be "always equal" to the standard deviation of the normal distribution. If you find only one of the first three choices could be possible, then you can rule out d) and e). If you find two of the first three choices to be possible, consider d) and e) as other possible answers.

4. In a normal distribution:
- A) The mean is equal to the mode
  - B) The mode is equal to the median
  - C) 68% of scores fall within one standard deviation of the mode
  - D) Both A and B
  - E) All of the above

Tip:

This question begins with "In a normal distribution" and assumes that you are completing the sentence with the most correct answer. There are three choices: one combination choice and one "all of the above" choice. You need to treat each choice as a true or false statement. If you immediately know that choice "a" is correct, then you need to move onto "b" and "c" and consider if they too are correct. Choice "c" will really need your consideration for being true or false as it will allow you to ignore or consider choices "d" and "e."

5. If we know the standard deviation of a normal distribution, we can:
- A) Determine the mean
  - B) Determine the mode
  - C) Determine the median
  - D) Describe the variability of the distribution
  - E) All of the above

Tip:

This question is asking about the relationship between the standard deviation of a normal distribution and mean, mode, median, and variability. Think back to what you've learned about these concepts, and treat each question as a true or false statement to rule out each choice. If more than one choice seems correct, then consider the final choice (E - All of the above), but don't jump to that before considering the individual choices.

6. Z scores:
- A) Divide a normal distribution into equal-sized pieces
  - B) Are equal to the standard deviation of a data set
  - C) Are equally spaced on a normal distribution
  - D) Both A and C
  - E) All of the above

Tip:

Because this question begins with "Z scores," you must consider the answers as a completion of this phrase. Note that the first three choices all have the word "equal" in them, but use the word differently each time (e.g., equal-sized, equal, equally spaced). Concentrate on the use of the word "equal" to decide which statement (or a combo of two or all of them) will correctly complete the sentence.

7. The normal curve:
- A) Is always bell-shaped
  - B) Has a variance equal to the square of Z at 1
  - C) Is symmetrical about Z at 0 (zero)
  - D) Both A and C
  - E) All of the above

Tip:

This question is a statement that needs to be completed with the most correct answer. Treat each statement as a true or false answer. If you are positive that more than one statement is correct, then you need to consider the last two choices. The only way to rule out the last two choices (both a and c; all of the above) is to ensure that there is only one correct answer from "a," "b," or "c."

8. In a normal distribution:
- A) The top 4% of all scores fall above Z at 2
  - B) The lowest 16% of all scores fall below Z at -1
  - C) The middle 66% of all scores fall between Z at 1 and Z at -1
  - D) All of the above
  - E) None of the above

Tip:

This question calls on your understanding of the normal curve and the distribution of scores. It might be best to draw a diagram of the normal curve and label the percentage of scores that fall in each standard deviation. Label Z on the normal curve too. When you have completed this, the answer to the question should be much clearer and will allow you to read each statement with a reference diagram.

9. A vertical line drawn down the middle of a normal curve:
- A) Represents Z at 0 (zero)
  - B) Represents the median frequency
  - C) Divides the scores into two equally-sized groups
  - D) Both A and B
  - E) Both A and C

Tip:

This is a question that requires a small normal curve distribution diagram to help you understand the three choices presented to you. You only have to rule out three possible answers. If you label the normal curve with all the proper titles and distribution of standard deviations, the diagram will help you determine the correct answer.

Given a test on which the scores were normally distributed, where 98% of the class passed, more people received a score of 72% than any other score, and a passing score was 50%, answer the following question:

10. The average score on the test was:
- A) 50%
  - B) 63%
  - C) 76%
  - D) None of the above
  - E) Not enough information

Tip:

This question requires some work on your part. There is an introductory scenario given before the question is asked. Read the scenario and underline the important information. Be aware that extra information might be presented to throw you off or be used for other questions later on the test. You may need to draw a diagram and/or do some calculations with the content you have studied.

### Quiz Answers:

1. B
2. B
3. C
4. E
5. D
6. C
7. D
8. B
9. E
10. D