Multiple Choice Test Questions

One of the most commonly used test questions, the multiple choice question, consists of two parts. The first part, known as the stem, normally begins with an incomplete sentence. The second part is a series of choices, known as options, for completing that sentence. Your objective is to find the option that best completes the stem. Here is an example:

Stem → A major result of the Civil War was that the

a. economic system of the South came to dominate the United States economy.

b. Federal Government’s power over the States was strengthened.

Options → c. members of Congress from Southern States gained control of the legislative branch.

d. the Federal Government adopted a policy of neutrality.

In this question, connecting option (b) to the stem results in a true statement.

The stem - the statement or question

Read the stem as if it were an independent, free-standing statement. Before looking at the choices, anticipate the phrase that would complete the stem, and then compare each answer choice to the anticipated answer. It is important to read each choice, even if the first choice seems to be the answer, because a better answer may be listed.

The options - also known as distracters

The basic strategy for answering multiple choice questions is to first eliminate the distracters and select the correct answer from the remaining options. Reasoning ability is a very important skill for doing well on multiple choice tests.

Some tips for answering multiple choice test questions:

- Read all choices carefully before making a decision.
- Eliminate choices that are obviously wrong.
- Read each stem/option combination as if it were a true-false statement. If a statement is obviously false, cross it out.
- Beware of words like not, but, except, never and only. Underline these words; they specify the direction and limits of the answer. They are often incorrect because few statements have no exceptions.
- Look for familiar phrases from texts, notes or professors.
- “All of the above” options are often correct. They can encompass much information. If you are able to identify at least two options that are correct, “all of the above” is a strong possibility.
- Use hints from questions you know to help you answer questions you don’t. Try to relate each answer to the stem to evaluate which one logically completes each thought.
- Make educated guesses. Eliminate options any way you can.
- Always have a good reason for changing your answer; your first response is usually the correct one.
- Never leave a multiple choice question unanswered. If there are 4 choices, there is a 25% you will receive full credit even if you guess.