Multiple-Choice Exam
Writing Strategies

(.......Avoiding the guess work)

Revised 2008
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Introduction

Success in writing multiple-choice exams depends primarily on your ability to achieve the following three goals:

1. Study effectively and appropriately store the information in your head.
2. Successfully retrieve this information at exam time.
3. Understand the structure and complexity of the items on multiple-choice exams.

The workbook, “Enhancing Your Study Skills” focuses on the first goal by outlining effective study strategies. If the information is not correctly stored in your head, you will have difficulty retrieving it when needed. The content in this workbook focuses primarily on the second and third goal.

The specific objectives of this workbook are to:

1. Identify the two main structural components of a multiple choice exam questions.

2. Describe a five step test-taking strategy to use when answering multiple choice exam items.

3. Compare the levels of thinking processes assessed in multiple choice exam questions.

4. Discuss learning strategies for each of the levels of thinking processes presented.
Structural Components of Multiple Choice Exam Questions.

The entire multiple-choice question is called an **item**.

Each **item** consists of 2 parts: **Stem** and the **Options**

![Diagram showing item structure with Stem and Options]

**Stem:** The purpose of the stem is to present a problem in a clear and concise manner. The stem should contain all the details necessary to answer the question. The stem is usually presented as a complete sentence that asks a question.

**Options:** These are all the possible answers offered within an item. There are usually 4 options from which to choose. The best response option is called the “**correct answer**”. The other options are incorrect and are called “**distracters**”.

**Example:**

**Item**

What type of health assessment focuses on the specific presenting problem of the client?

a) Complete
b) **Episode ***

c) Follow-up
d) Emergency

**Options**
5- Step Exam Writing Process

- Cover the options
- Read stem (Key words)
- Picture in head
- Uncover
- Match
Levels of Thinking

Your professional regulating body has identified four levels of thinking which are involved in giving safe and effective patient care. The multiple-choice exams you write reflect these levels, thus ensuring that you are a safe practitioner. These levels are reflected in the following diagram.
Level 1: Knowledge/Comprehension

Responding to knowledge items requires you to know facts; to recall or remember information and to understand the significance of this information. These questions test your knowledge of the basic information that forms the foundation of your nursing practice such as: facts, definitions and terminology. They also test your ability to translate, interpret and determine the implications of the information you studies.

Helpful study strategies include:
- any technique that enhances memorization such as mnemonics and index/flash cards
- Asking yourself How or Why questions. (Why is this information useful/important.)?
- Small study groups are very helpful as it allows for the sharing of impressions, opinions and examples

Examples:

*The purpose of percussion is to assess underlying tissue*

  a) consistency
  b) density **
  c) texture
  d) turgor

*When assessing the skin temperature of a client, the practical nurse should use*

  a) her fingertips
  b) the ulna surface of her hand
  c) the dorsal surface of her hand **
  d) the palmar surface of her hand
Level 2: Application

Responding to application items requires a higher level of understanding than just knowing or comprehending. It requires you to show, solve, modify, change, use or manipulate information, to take concepts you have learned earlier and apply them in a new, concrete, practical situation. These concepts could be theories, principles, rules of procedure, generalizations or ideas.

Helpful study strategies include:
- Relating new information to what you already know.
  (Relating any new material to your collection of knowledge, experiences, attitudes and feelings)
- Recognize commonalties. (Many principles and theories can be used in a variety of different ways)

Example:

Which response should the practical nurse make when a client tells her that she has had abdominal pain for three days?

a)  “Point to where it hurts.”**
b)  ‘Have you eaten anything in the last 8 hours?”
c)  “Have you had any operations on your abdomen?”
d)  “We’ll talk more about your pain latter in the interview.”
Level 3: Critical Thinking

Responding to critical thinking items requires you to **interpret a variety of data, recognize the commonalities, differences and interrelatedness among presented ideas.** (e.g., identify priorities of care, evaluate the effectiveness of nursing actions). This is the highest level of thinking process assessed in multiple-choice exam questions.

Helpful study strategies include:
- Focusing on recognizing differences in material,
- Discussions in small groups using case study analysis
- Using a “**what if?**” type of question approach.

Example:

*Which of the following is the most useful information to obtain when completing a health history on an eighty-year-old man?*

a) Functional ability  
b) Childhood illness  
c) **Current health promotion behaviour**  
d) General health for past 20 years
General Guidelines for Answering Multiple Choice Exam Questions

➢ Use the 5 step process for answering multiple choice questions: (Cover options, read stem, picture in head, uncover, match)

  ▪ Remember to watch for key words and phrases such as only, best, first.

  ▪ Ensure you understand what is being asked in the stem by rephrasing the question in your own words.

➢ Changing exam answers is not a good idea if you are making the change simply on “guess work”. Research has shown that in many cases, the first answer that pops to mind is more often the correct one. Trust your intuition!

Conclusion

This workbook has provided an overview of the structural components of multiple-choice exam questions. It has discussed the three levels of thought processes used when answering these questions and given you related examples. Key strategies in the 5-step process for answering multiple-choice exam questions include cover options, read stem, picture answer in head, uncover options and match the answer on paper to the picture in your head. If you have tried these strategies and are still having writing multiple-choice exams, please do not hesitate to contact a Guidance Counsellor.
References


Web Resources

1. The University of Calgary’s Test-Taking Advice: Especially for the Multiple-Choice Challenged  
   www.ucalgary.ca/counselling

2. The University of Toronto’s Suggestions for Coping with Multiple-Choice Questions  
   www.calss.utoronto.ca/learning

3. The University of Guelph’s Suggestions for Multiple-Choice Exams  
   www.lib.uoguelph.ca/assistance