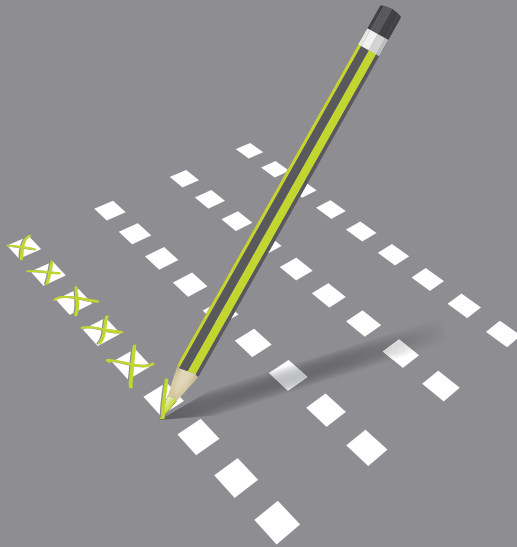




UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

LIBRARY  
SERVICES

# A short guide to multiple choice and short answer exams



Academic  
Skills Centre

How are multiple choice (MCQ) and short answer (SAQ) exams different to essay-based exams?

THEY TEND TO REQUIRE RECALL OF FACTS,  
RATHER THAN DISCUSSION OF IDEAS.



THEY OFTEN REQUIRE DESCRIPTIVE,  
FACTUAL RESPONSES RATHER THAN  
ANALYTICAL OR CREATIVE ONES.

WITH MCQS, THERE IS OFTEN A FOCUS  
ON CORRECT ANSWERS, RATHER  
THAN CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS.



WITH SAQS, BEING CONCISE IS KEY,  
AND THERE IS OFTEN A SPECIFIC NUMBER  
OF IDEAS OR FACTS THAT YOU NEED  
TO MENTION IN ORDER TO GET FULL  
MARKS IN A QUESTION.

# Revising for MCQs and SAQs

For MCQ and SAQ exams, you will need to know all of your course material well. Revising for these types of exams will probably involve learning large amounts of facts. Start as early as possible so that you can keep revisiting the information you need to learn.

## Revision strategies

### When organising your notes

- Pay particular attention to fundamental terms and concepts that describe important events or features, or that tie related ideas together.
- Make lists and tables. Concentrate on understanding multi-step processes, and on things that form natural sequences or groupings. Look for similarities and differences that might be used to distinguish correct choices from distracters in an exam.
- Highlight vocabulary and key definitions, and be sure that you understand them.
- Re-organise your material into questions. Record facts in the form of questions and answers.

### When revising

- Do not simply memorise definitions. Be sure that you know what the definitions mean.
- Write questions on index cards, with answers on the back, or on your phone or tablet. Carry them with you everywhere so that you can test yourself in spare moments.
- Set yourself challenges to condense key information into three sentences, or to fit it all onto one index card etc.
- Brainstorm possible questions with your friends.
- Practise on sample questions, if you have access to a study guide or old exams. If not, try making up your own.

# The exam

## Sitting multiple choice exams

There are many strategies for maximising your success on multiple choice exams. The best way to improve your chances, of course, is to study carefully before the exam. However, even a well-prepared student can make silly mistakes, or can fall prey to options that are designed to look very similar to the correct answer. Here are a few tips to help reduce these perils.

- Read the instructions for each question carefully. For example, you might be asked to 'Mark one correct answer', or you might be asked to 'Mark all correct answers.'
- Cover up the possible responses with a piece of paper or your hand while you read the stem/body of the question. Try to anticipate the correct response before you are distracted by seeing the options. Then, uncover the responses.
- If you see the response that you anticipated, circle it and then check to be sure that none of the other responses are better.
- If you find yourself taking a long time over one question, skip it and come back later.
- If you return to a question you have skipped and are still struggling, try a process of elimination. Eliminate any alternatives which are:
  - obviously wrong
  - completely unfamiliar to you from the course
  - the same ie, two answers that mean the same thing
  - grammatically/ semantically inconsistent (ie, don't make sense).
- Be sure that you have filled out the answer sheet according to the instructions given.
- Take time to check your work before you hand in the answer sheet. A multiple choice exam offers you no opportunity for 'partial credit.' If you ticked, circled or filled in the wrong option, your answer is 100% wrong, and you may be penalised.

### Negative marking in MCQ exams

It is very important that you know whether or not you will be penalised for getting answers wrong in your multiple choice exam. In some styles of exams, you lose marks for incorrect answers. This is called negative marking and its purpose is to prevent students from being able to pass through lucky guesswork.

If your exam penalises wrong answers, only answer questions if you are reasonably confident that you have figured out the correct answer. If negative marking is **not** used in your exams, answer all questions, even if you have to guess.



### TOP TIP!

See our *Short Guide to Memory Techniques* for advice on recalling facts.

### True or False Questions

- Read the statement very carefully.
- If EVERY part of the statement is true, the answer is true.
- If only ONE part is false, the answer is false.
- Look out for negatives eg, 'It is not the case that...'
- Take care with comparative statements eg, 'X is more likely when Y than when Z.'
- Look out for words like 'always' and 'never.'

(This information has been adapted from: University of Bradford (2010), 'Dealing with Multiple Choice Questions'. Available from: [www.brad.ac.uk/learner-development/media/LearnerDevelopmentUnit/Documents/AcademicSkillsResources/ExamSuccess/Infosheet-Answering-MCQs.pdf](http://www.brad.ac.uk/learner-development/media/LearnerDevelopmentUnit/Documents/AcademicSkillsResources/ExamSuccess/Infosheet-Answering-MCQs.pdf))

### Sitting short answer exams

Short answer questions could require responses of up to a page. There is usually a specific number of points to include in order to get full credit. It is important to identify exactly what the question is asking you to do and to be as succinct and precise with your answers as possible.

- State your points clearly, so that each point stands out from the others. If necessary, start a new sentence for each. Avoid combining several points into a complex answer.
- Do not pad out your answers with waffle to make it look like you know more about the topic.
- Be concise and don't feel that you have to include unnecessary information just to make a short answer longer. They are called short answers for a reason!



### Conclusion

The key to these kinds of exams is preparation. Give yourself plenty of time to learn, revise and practise. Keep calm in the exam, read carefully, and try to do justice to all that preparation.

Make sure you know whether you will be penalised for wrong answers, and remembered that individual questions may have their own specific instructions.

For some memory tricks to help you to learn facts, check out our *Short Guide to Memory Techniques for Revision*.

### Further reading and references

Online resources on revision and exam technique:

Open University. *Revision and examinations*. Available at: [www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/revision-and-examinations.php](http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/revision-and-examinations.php) (Accessed 22nd June 2017)

Oxford Brookes University. (2012) *You and exams, Upgrade study advice service*. Available at: [www.brookes.ac.uk/services/upgrade/study-skills/exams.html](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/upgrade/study-skills/exams.html) (Accessed 22nd June 2017)

Skills4study Campus. (2012) *Examinations*. Available at: [www.palgrave.com/Institutions/Birmingham.html](http://www.palgrave.com/Institutions/Birmingham.html) (Accessed 22nd June 2017)

University of Bradford. (2010) Learner Development Unit, *Dealing with Multiple Choice Questions*. Available at: [www.brad.ac.uk/learner-development/media/LearnerDevelopmentUnit/Documents/AcademicSkillsResources/ExamSuccess/Infosheet-Answering-MCQs.pdf](http://www.brad.ac.uk/learner-development/media/LearnerDevelopmentUnit/Documents/AcademicSkillsResources/ExamSuccess/Infosheet-Answering-MCQs.pdf) (Accessed 22nd June 2017)

### Articles on revision and memory techniques by Ed Cook, for *The Telegraph*:

Cooke, E. (2013) 'Revision: how to break down complex concepts,' *The Telegraph*, 23 Feb. Available at: [www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9888492/Revision-techniques-how-to-learn-complex-concepts.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9888492/Revision-techniques-how-to-learn-complex-concepts.html) (Accessed 22nd June 2017)

Cooke, E. (2013) 'Revision techniques: How to learn boring facts.' *The Telegraph*, 26 Jan. Available at: [www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9826494/Revision-techniques-How-to-learn-boring-facts.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9826494/Revision-techniques-How-to-learn-boring-facts.html) (Accessed 22nd June 2017)

Cooke, E. (2013) 'The real test of learning? Not forgetting.' *The Telegraph*, 9 Feb. Available at: [www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9855799/The-real-test-of-learning-Not-forgetting.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9855799/The-real-test-of-learning-Not-forgetting.html) (Accessed 22nd June 2017)

Cooke, E. (2013) 'Why do spider diagrams work?' *The Telegraph*, 5 Feb. Available at: [www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9839678/Spider-diagrams-how-and-why-they-work.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9839678/Spider-diagrams-how-and-why-they-work.html) (Accessed 22nd June 2017)

*Academic Skills Centre. June 2017.*



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

**Library Services**

Edgbaston, Birmingham,  
B15 2TT, United Kingdom

[www.birmingham.ac.uk](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk)

Designed and printed by

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

**creativemedia**