

Types of exam questions and how to handle them

Multiple choice (MC) questions

MC questions are questions or statements followed by a list of alternative answers to choose from. Multiple choice exams are designed to test if you can apply your knowledge to identify correct answers and therefore often require you to engage in critical thinking, judgement or problem solving. Multiple choice exams are often designed to test your broad understanding of course content, therefore aim to revise key concepts as you progress through the teaching term and before the exam.

When answering multiple choice type questions:

- Check the number of questions to identify how much time you need to answer them all.
- Read the questions carefully.
- Try to think for yourself what the answer is before looking at your choice of answers.
- Read every alternative before choosing an answer.
- If you are unsure about an answer, use a process of elimination. Work out which ones are definitely wrong. You can usually rule out one or two options by doing this.
- Don't get stuck. If you don't know the answer, move on and come back to it later.
- Don't spend too long on any questions you are unsure of. If you have time to spare after completing the entire exam, re-review these questions – often you will get clues (or even answers) from other questions in the MC exam.
- Make sure that you answer the right question; if online, be careful that your answer choice is in the correct drop-down box).
- Be aware that many MC questions may be partially, but not fully true. These are designed to check the depth of your understanding. Therefore, ask yourself, which of the options is the most accurate and are all parts of the question true?
- Be careful of 'double negatives or other wording twists.

Example

Multiple choice questions require students to:

- a) write a short and concise answer in one or two sentences.
- b) choose one answer from a list of alternative answers or responses.
- c) write a response that follows the conventional structure of an essay.
- d) read all the alternatives before choosing an answer.

Correct answer: (b)

Short answer questions

These questions need a short and concise response. They are often designed to test recall of specific facts and provide an opportunity for you to demonstrate your understanding of your course content.

- Pay close attention to instructional words (the words that tell you what you need to do, e.g. explain, define, analyse). See the [Common instruction words in assessments Quick Guide](#) for more information.
- Look carefully at the limiting words in the question so that you know what to concentrate on.
- Manage your time well - Allocate more time to questions worth more marks.
- Keep it brief – don't include irrelevant information.
- Make sure paragraphs have a main idea, supporting ideas and a concluding sentence.
- Make sure the paragraph contains enough clear points to the mark value of the section, 10 points for a mark of 10.

Essay questions

These questions require an essay response. In final assessments essay questions may or may not come with a specified word limit. You need to judge how long your answer should be by using clues such as how many marks the question is worth and whether it is a compulsory or optional question. You are also restricted by how much time you have.

- Manage your time well. If there are multiple essay questions, look at them all before starting, identify the points allocated to each and prioritise the order in which you will answer the questions.
- Analyse the question. Look for the topic, the instructional words and any limiting words.
- Work out when you should finish each essay and write the time down as a reminder.
- Spend some time planning your essay. This may include deciding on your argument and thinking / creating a list of key points that will provide supporting evidence.
- Re-read the directions and be careful that you will answer the actual question on the test, (not the question you want to be on the test). You will lose marks if you don't answer the exact question, so ensure you don't write an essay that is unrelated to the question.
- Use your plan to write a clear introduction that tells the reader what the essay is about and what the main points you are going to discuss. Make sure that your key points / arguments are made early. It is a shame, and you will lose marks if you write a lengthy essay, but never make the key points necessary to properly address the question.
- If you get lost in the middle of the essay you can always come back to your introduction to get yourself back on track.
- Use a proper essay structure: a clear introduction, one (or two at the most) body paragraphs for each main point, a conclusion that summarises what you have talked about and how significant it is. (Go to [Writing and planning an essay Quick Guide](#) for more information on essay structure.)
- Show evidence and a clear line of reasoning. You can do this by using good linking words (see [Connecting your ideas: linking words Quick Guide](#)).
- Additionally, it is often appropriate to include information from key principles or models in your unit and link them to your key argument. In particular, when the essay relates to a case study, you will obtain more marks where you can demonstrate that you have 'applied' the knowledge rather than just restating key facts.
- If you are running out of time, give an outline in point form of what you were going to say in the rest of your essay. If you have written a clear introduction this will be quite easy.

Example

Question 5 (10 marks):

Multiple choice and short answer questions are good for testing facts but essays are better for testing reasoning. Discuss.

Open book

In an open book assessment, you are allowed to consult some texts/materials to help you to answer the questions.

- Don't be lulled into thinking that the words open book means that you can just look up everything you need to know! You must be well prepared and know your material. If you try to look up everything you need to know you will never finish. Therefore, make sure that you have a good understanding of the key ideas and themes for the course before the exam. The open books are there to refresh your memory and double-check key facts and principles. It's too late to learn new information.
- When revising, remember to tag, bookmark or index relevant information so that you can find it quickly.
- Notes or texts should be used to support your answer, not to find your answer.
- Prepare your open book material so you can find information quickly. This may include post-it notes marking key chapters, annotate key components of your textbook and highlighting keywords and phrases.
- Find out exactly what you are allowed to take into the exam and make sure you have your own copy of the permitted texts/material.

Check the [SCU Learning Zone](#) for more related Quick Guides.