



*a podcast about
how we learn,
how we teach,
and how they overlap*

Episode 43 - How to Take Multiple-Choice, True/False and Matching Question Tests

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach and how they overlap.

Adam: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 43: how to take multiple-choice, true/false and matching question tests.

Now this is the fifth of our six-episode All About Tests.

And many students freak out at the idea of taking a test. Why?

Well, part of it is panic, but part of it is because they just don't understand how to study for or understand different kinds of test questions. So in this episode, and Episode 44, we're going to talk about how to study for, take, and ace the different kinds of test questions.

And we're going to start with multiple-choice, true/false and matching ones.

Dinur: So, basic test-taking strategies. If the test has directions, read them carefully first. It's worth taking a few minutes to understand what you're supposed to do before you start working on the test.

Do the same thing for any directions before a section of the test. Look over the entire test before you start answering questions. Figure out which questions are easy and which questions you need to take a little bit more time to be able to figure out.

Do your easy questions first and get them out of the way. This saves you time for harder questions, while you earn some points.

Adam: Now one of the things about the reading directions - I use a learning management system for my exams, and because of this particular learning management system, it has some glitches where, if you present the whole test to the students at once, about a third of the time it crashes in the middle of the test, and then the

students have to have the teacher come in, restart the test, reset everything. It's really annoying. So the only way to avoid that is to present the test one question at a time.

Because of that, in the directions, I put, "You are allowed to backtrack if you need to. You will see questions one at a time."

I had a student who had never read the directions. They came to me with the fifth quiz of the semester, the last quiz, and said "The hardest part is that I can't look at all the questions before I start, because once I go forward, it won't let me go back."

I'm all, "What?"

And she's all, "Well, that's just the way this is designed, right? I mean, if I go forward, I can't skip back after that."

And I said, "Have you tried that? Because that's how I set it up."

And she says, "...what?"

She had never read the directions. And she had taken four of the five quizzes for that semester, assuming that she could not move forward or back. And she never finished any of the quizzes. Why? Because she didn't read the directions.

So I've got to tell you, first thing you've got to do, and I'm going to emphasize this, read the directions before you start - because if you don't read them, and then you get tripped up like my student did - really, you have nobody to blame but yourself. Don't assume that it works a certain way.

And Dinur, I remember you and I were talking about this once, where you told your students, "Look over the whole test first, you know, if you've got a paper test," and you had a student say, "Am I allowed to do that?"

And you said something like, "I never said you couldn't!"

A lot of students don't realize it's okay to do that.

Dinur: Yeah, and I mean when I write my tests, I don't know what's easier for each student or what's tougher. So I tell my students, "Read through, figure out what's easier for you and what's harder. Save some time for those harder questions because you're timed - you may as well get your easy points early on. Save yourself some time so that you're not panicking as you go through the test."

Adam: Now, speaking of online tests. If the test is online and you're allowed any notes, jot down the easy question numbers and the harder ones. Just scroll through the whole thing first and go, "Okay, I know question one, two, three, four, six, seven, nine, ten..." Write down the ones that are easy. "I can do all those," right? And then go back and do them.

Then, you just need to find the ones you didn't write down, so "I didn't write down eight, so that's a harder question."

“Okay, now I've, I've done all the easy ones. I've done the 25 out of 50 that were easy. Now I'm going to search out the ones that are a little tougher.”

If you're taking a paper test, put a checkmark next to harder questions that you're like, “Okay, I can't do this one yet. I'll come back to it later.”

If the test is online, make a note of questions you skip, so that you can come back to them later.

Now, some of the strategies that we're going to talk about in a minute give keywords, or code words, that give you hints about what the right answer is. If you're taking a paper test, underline those words as you find them inside questions, or in question stems, or in answer options.

And finally, make sure you leave yourself a few minutes to check the test over, make sure you've answered all the questions, and make sure that you've given complete answers on essay questions or short answer questions, so that you haven't left anything out by accident.

Dinur: Now, for multiple-choice tests, a “stem” is the numbered part of a multiple-choice question, and an “option” is one of the choices you're given as a possible answer to a multiple-choice question.

So for multiple-choice questions, read the question part - the stem - and then each alternative answer. Do this for each answer. Sometimes the right answer will become obvious when you combine it with the stem.

When you see the option, “all of the above,” look at each option. Do they all fit the stem? If not, “all of the above” can't possibly be the right answer.

When you see the option, “none of the above,” make sure that none of the options fit the stem. If one of them does, it's probably the right answer.

Adam: Now, when it comes to true/false strategies, a “statement” is the numbered part of a true/false question.

So if you're not sure whether it's true or false, assume it's true.

Now if there is specific detail in the statement, then it's more likely to be true. So for example, “In this theory, this means blah,” or “In this theory, this means blah under these conditions.” Okay? Notice: the more detail you get, the more likely it is you're going to get something that's true.

Now, if the statement contains extreme words like “always,” or “never,” or “only,” it's more likely to be false. “This is always this way.” “This never happens.” “This is the only thing.” Those are all probably false statements, because those extreme words? They tend to indicate “This isn't really true.” (And by the way, that doesn't just work for test questions. It also works for statements from politicians.)

Now, if the statement contains qualifying words like “many,” or “sometimes,” or “often,” that's also more likely to be false - because if it's not true all the time, and it's only true some of the time, then some of the time, it's false, isn't it?

If the statement tries to give you a reason or a justification, that's also more likely to be a false statement. Why? Because it's using wishy-washy words to justify what it says, instead of just making the statement outright.

And if a statement contains justifying words - "if," "because," "when," "since," - again, it's much more likely to be false.

Dinur: Now "more likely" doesn't mean "always." There are times where the question might be giving you specific conditions, and saying "Under these conditions, is this true?" So it's up to you, when you're taking that test, to use your knowledge and your best judgment to decide whether or not that works.

Now if we're looking at matching questions, a "stimulus" is the first half of the matching question and a "match" is the second half. So just like any other tests, read the directions first, read both lists of items to get familiar with them, and read them completely before you start matching the items.

Use one list as a jumping-off point. So for example, if you're matching up types of trees with specific names of trees, read through one of the lists first after you've read through the directions, and see what you can figure out. Find the match for the first item on the first list using the second list, and then, keep moving down.

Avoid guessing until you've matched everything you already know. Then, when you have fewer options left, use logic and reasoning to figure out which remaining items might match.

Adam: Now, another thing about matching questions. When you are looking at the list of matches, you may have five stimuli and nine matches, and you have to pick only five. Or you might have five stimuli and five matches, and the directions say "use each match only one time."

What do you do if you get something where you're pretty sure that there's a match that fits two stimuli? Look for a match that fits each of the other - each of those stimuli, only, by itself, and you'll have the right answer.

To create multiple-choice questions for yourself - we've already done some episodes that are aimed at teachers: how to write multiple-choice questions. Well, if you know that the test you're going to take is going to have multiple-choice questions on it, it makes sense to study in the format of the test.

When we had Gretchen Wegner on, this is something that she didn't really get to, but she hammered it into her coaches, when she was training us: "Study in the format of the test."

If it's multiple-choice, then your flashcards should be multiple-choice. If it's true/false, then you should have true/false flashcards. If it's matching, you should have matching - some kind of matching quiz for yourself, so that you can get in the practice of taking these kinds of questions.

So Dinur and I would recommend that you go listen to the two episodes that we've already done for teachers on how to write these kinds of questions, and then use that guideline to write the questions on your flashcards. So if you want to know how to write effective multiple-choice questions, go back and listen to episode 39 and that will tell you how to, how to write effective multiple-choice questions, true/false questions and matching questions.

So if you are writing a multiple-choice question, you want to make sure that you give yourself four options, all of which are at least plausible, but only one of them is right - to train your brain to really look for the one that is right, okay?

Give yourself a few that have “all of the above.” Maybe one of them should be “all of the above.” Maybe one of them should be “none of the above.” But most of the others shouldn't be.

And force yourself to read all of the options you gave yourself and pick the one that's right. Use the tricks that we've talked about for writing questions, so that you can write your own self-quizzes.

When it comes to true/false strategies, again, go listen to episode 39 and find out how to write good, true/false questions and then turn your flashcards into true/false.

If you know that you're going to have a test that has true/false and multiple-choice, make a list of every concept you need. Write a multiple-choice question for it and write a true/false question for it. That way, you'll have studied both of those things in the format of the test. It makes it much more likely that you'll be able to pass the test.

Now, when it comes to matching questions, that's kind of hard to fit on a flashcard, but what you can do is make two lists for each idea, or thing, or concept, or person, or event that you've got to learn: the name of the thing you're learning, and facts or ideas that you know about it.

So, for example, you might make a list for your exam on the Revolutionary War or the Revolutionary period in American history, and you've got George Washington.

So, what do you know about George Washington? Well, first president, leader of American Revolution.

And then Alexander Hamilton. Okay. He was the first Treasury Secretary. He wrote 51 of the Articles of the Federalist. He died in a duel with Aaron Burr.

All right. Thomas Jefferson, he was the third president. He wrote the Declaration of Independence.

Aaron Burr, he was the third vice president. He killed Hamilton in a duel.

And to study, what you're going to do is cover up the list of facts or ideas, and try to write as many of them down as you can next to the items that you're looking at. So you're going to cover up the list and then you're going to see “George Washington.” Okay? He was the first president. What else? Umm... First general in the American Revolution. OK, what else? Hmm...

And you'll just write down each of the things that you know about George Washington. Then compare what you wrote down with the list that you made. If you're missing anything, now you know what to study.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 43. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 44, when we'll talk about how to take written exams, including essay, short answer and fill-in-the-blank.

Dinur: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Adam: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

Dinur: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier.

Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!