

The Art of Guessing

Although using “tricks” to work through the test instead of taking the time to consider each multiple-choice question is not recommended, there are some techniques you can use to improve your results. Although you may be quite prepared for the exam, there may be times when you will not know how to read a graph, or will not really understand a multiple-choice question, or believe that you do not have enough information to answer an essay question. For these situations, guessing, if it is done well, can work to your advantage.

Basically, there are two circumstances in which you should resort to guessing strategies:

1. When you are stuck on a problem.
2. When you are short of time.

Guessing Strategies

The odds of guessing correctly, however, improve if you can rule out even one of the answers. The odds in your favor increase further as you rule out more answers in any one question. Use these strategies to help you:

1. After reading the question leader, stop and try to answer without looking at the choices. Once you think you know the answer, look to see if it is a choice. If not, go back and read all the choices.
2. Eliminate wrong answers one by one. Do not jump to the answer that you think is correct. While elimination does take more time, it is more likely to provide correct answers. In the rush of the test it is easy to select an answer that looks right at first, but on more careful reading does not answer the question. In addition, answer elimination may provide a clue to a misread answer you would have otherwise overlooked. Finally, reread the question, as if you were reading it for the first time. Now choose your answer from your remaining answers based on this rereading.
3. Time management: In the MC of the exam you will have 80 minutes to respond to 100 multiple choice questions, or one question every 48 seconds. This doesn't leave much time for fooling around.
4. Practice as often as you can to become familiar with the format and wording of these questions. Remember that this practice also helps you in learning the material as well.
5. “Never” and “always.” It is rare for an answer to be true in relation to these words, but it is still a possibility. When you see these words, focus on them and consider them carefully.
6. Combination Answers: Some multiple-choice answers will contain statements such as “both (A) and (B)” or “all of the above” or “none of these.” Do not be distracted by these choices. Multiple choice questions have only one correct answer and do not ask for opinion or personal bias.
7. Quickly go through each choice independently, crossing off the answers that you know are not true. If, after eliminating the incorrect responses, you think there is more than one correct answer, group your answers and see if one of the choices matches yours. If you believe only one answer is correct, don't doubt yourself because of multiple answer possibilities.
8. “Stick with your first guess”: Although you have probably heard that your first guess is usually right, some research has shown that when students change their answers on multiple choice questions, about two-thirds of the time they go from wrong to right answers. This makes sense if you have reconsidered the question and have good reason to change your answer. This only makes sense, of course, as you would never expect a random guess to be better than one obtained through good, hard, step-by-step, conscious thinking that enables you to select the answer that you believe to be the best.