How To Be Test Wise
Taking Multiple-Choice Examinations

The following is a list of cues for picking the correct alternatives on objective tests when you are not completely sure of your answer. The test wise student takes advantage of cues that the instructor inadvertently puts in when he/she writes the test. If you search for and make use of these cues when you are in doubt about a test answer, you will get a higher score.

I. Cues In The Alternatives

The first main type of cue concerns the list of alternatives in a multiple-choice item. Four factors are frequently associated with the correct alternative:

A. Most General Alternative

The correct alternative is often the most general, since the most general includes the most information. You will often find a list of items that have some very technical and specific alternatives and one alternative which is more general. Chances are the most general alternative is the correct one. For example:

1. The lungs
   a. Are solid and immobile, located within the chest.
   b. Are the only organs that insulin.
   c. Function primarily in respiration.
   d. Possess the sphincter of Oddi.

Even if you aren’t sure of the correct answer, you can see that alternative A, B, and D all deal with specific facts and details about the lungs. C deals with a main feature of the lungs, respiration. Since C is the more general answer and allows for more variability, it is the correct answer.

B. Length

The correct alternative is often the longest. Most tests are somewhat consistent about the length of correct answers. If you notice that most of the correct answers have been the shortest, then when you are not sure, pick the shortest. If on the other hand, most of the correct answers have been the longest, pick the particular trend for either the longest or the shortest, try the longest. For example:

1. \(3 + (7 + 1) = 3 + 7 + 1\) because
   a. \(3 + 7 + 1 = 11\)
   b. parentheses precede by an addition sign may be removed without changing the signs of any numbers inside the parentheses (the association law of division)
   c. division is indicated
   d. parentheses preceded by a minus sign may be removed

In this item, B is longest and therefore is most likely correct. In this case, it is correct.

C. Middle Value

The correct alternative is usually of middle value. If the alternatives range in value – old to new, early to late, big to small – and you are not sure which one is correct, eliminate the extremes and pick from the middle value or values. For example if the item reads:

1. The mature human being has how many teeth?
   a. 15
   b. 32
   c. 54
   d. 7

Eliminate the two extreme values, C and D. Since 54 and 7 are extreme alternatives, they are probably not correct. Therefore, you are left with two alternatives from which to pick your answer.
D. Two Alternatives Mean the Same

The correct alternative is probably not one of a pair of similar statements. If two alternatives mean the same thing and there is only one correct answer, you can eliminate both of them. Neither will be correct, and then make your choice from the remaining alternatives. Example:

1. The Treaty of Brest Litovsk was ratified by Moscow because:
   a. Tsar Alexander I wanted to prevent Napoleon’s invasion of Russia.
   b. Russia was unable to keep up with the armament manufacture of Austria.
   c. Russia could not keep pace with the military production of Austria.
   d. Nicolai Lenin wanted to get the Soviet Union of WWI.

Since alternatives B and C have similar meanings, choose your one answer from alternatives A or D. The correct choice is D.

E. Two Alternatives are Opposite

The correct alternative is probably one of a pair of direct opposites. If you notice that two alternatives have opposite meanings, one of them is probably correct. Here is an example:

1. The planarian has:
   a. An anterior brain.
   b. Three legs.
   c. Red eyes.
   d. A posterior brain.

Notice that alternatives A and D are opposite. Therefore, you would eliminate the other two alternatives because it’s rather likely that if two opposite alternatives are given, one of them is correct. In this item, A is the correct response.

F. Summary

Now let’s summarize and review the response cues. When you are given a list of alternatives and are not sure which is correct, look for the degree of generalization, the length, the middle values, and similarities or opposites in the statements. Pick the most general answer instead of a specific. Choose either the longest or shortest alternative depending on the trend seen in the rest of the test. If you have noticed no trend, pick the longest alternative. Eliminate the extreme values, and choose the alternative with a middle value. Also, if you find two alternatives with the same meaning, eliminate both of them. Neither is correct. If you find two alternatives with opposite meanings, choose one of them. The correct answer is most likely one of the two. That is the list of cues to be found in the alternatives.

II. Cues in The Relation Between Stems and Alternatives

The next group of cues are found in both the stem and the alternatives. In this group are factors within the stem of the item which will help you to choose the correct alternative. We will call this group relationship cues, since the relationship between the stem and alternatives is the main feature.

A. Grammatical Agreement of A and An

In a test item, the correct alternative should agree grammatically with the stem. For example, a stem ending with the word an calls for a response beginning with the letters a, e, i, o, or u. A stem ending with the word a calls for an alternative beginning with any other letter. This example illustrates this rule of grammatical agreement:

1. A biologist who specializes in the study of the relationships of an organism to its environment is known as an:
   a. Ecologist
   b. Structuralist
   c. Taxonomist
   d. Naturalist

Since the stem ends with the word an, the correct alternative must begin with a vowel. The only one that fills this requirement is ecologist. A is the correct answer.
B. **Singular and Plurals**

If the stem uses the word *is* then the correct alternative will be a singular word. If the stem has the word *are*, find an alternative with a plural, or a word which means more than one object. For example:

1. Important in feeling pain are:
   a. Bone
   b. Ear
   c. Muscle
   d. Nerves

Since the stem calls for a plural answer (notice the words are in the stem) the correct alternative must be plural. The only possibility is nerves. Even if you weren't sure of the answer, you could choose D, the only plural, and you would be correct.

C. **Word Association**

The third category of relational cues utilizes word associations and synonyms. In items giving these cues there will be a word in the stem which has a direct relationship with a word in one of the alternatives. Look at this example:

1. The Strong-Campbell Vocational Interest Blank is used to measure
   a. Aptitudes
   b. Interests
   c. Achievement
   d. Adjustment

The word interests in the stem matches alternative B. This is a very direct clues as to which alternative is correct. This is almost a give-away item. Of course, this cue will not be 100% effective, and there will be times when a direct association is not correct. In general, however, the cue is a good one.

You might also find items with word association cues that are not quite as obvious, but are still direct clues. Here is an example:

1. Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* deals with
   a. The difficult life of a factory worker.
   b. The politics of the French chateau country.
   c. The court of King Edward III.
   d. The limitations of European existentialism.

Notice that the name of the book is *Hard Times*. The phrase “difficult life” in alternative A has about the same meaning as “hard times.” Therefore, even if you had never read the book, you would be able to guess the correct alternative.

III. **Specific Determiners**

A. **For False**

There are specific determiners for False. Absolute words, like always, generally indicate that the statement is false. This is because there are very few absolutes, and it takes only one exception to make the statement false. The following is a list of specific determiners which are associated with incorrect statements:

1. always
2. never
3. only
4. necessarily
5. merely
6. must
7. all
8. none
9. impossible

These words in a statement suggest that the statement holds all of the time with no exceptions. Since there are exceptions to most statements, statements using these words are usually false.
B. For True

There are specific determiners for True. These words are associated with correctness. Such words are less absolute and allow for exceptions and variability. When you see one of these words in a statement, you can predict that the statement will be true. The list of specific determiners that indicates correct statements is

1. often  
2. seldom  
3. perhaps  
4. generally  
5. may  
6. usually

Now look at this example:

1. T   F   It is generally sunny during the summer.

What is the specific determiner in the statement? The word generally. This word is not absolute; therefore, the statement is probably true.

If the item had read:

1. T   F   It is always sunny during the summer.

You could guess that the statement is false. This statement means that there are never any days without sun during the summer. This is obviously not true. The word generally in the first example allows for some exceptions and would, therefore, be true. Watch for these specific determiners.

Absolute words in either a True-False item or in multiple-choice alternatives probably indicate a false statement. Less absolute words which are associated with correct items probably indicate true statements.

IV. Inter-Item Cues

There may be clues in one item which tell you about another. They are called inter-item cues. When you have a question or a doubt about the correct answer for an item, keep your question in mind as you do other items. You will find that there may be information given in the stem of another item that will help you answer the one that gave you problems. The information given in the items may also help you reconsider an answer you had already made. You may find information that will cause you to change a previous answer. This cue is very important because necessary information may be given to you right on the test. For a better score, it is important to utilize these informational cues as well as the probability cues that we have been discussing. And remember, it is a good idea to change answers. You’ll gain more than you’ll lose.