

## Use Strategies Targeted to Answering Specific Types of Test Question

Every type of question requires a particular approach, use these strategies below:

➤ **Essay questions.** Essay questions, with their emphasis on description and analysis, often present challenges because they are relatively unstructured. Unless you're careful, it's easy to wander off and begin to answer questions that were never asked. To prevent that problem, the first thing to do is read the question carefully, noting what specifically is being asked. If your essay will be lengthy, you might even want to write a short outline.

Pay attention to keywords that indicate what, specifically, the instructor is looking for in an answer. Certain action words are commonly used in essays, and you should understand them fully. For instance, knowing the distinction between "compare" and "contrast" can spell the difference between success and failure.

Use the right language in essays. Be brief and to the point in your essay. Avoid flowery introductory language. Compare the two sentences that follow:

*"In our study of world literature, it may be useful to ponder how the Canterbury Tales came to represent such an important milestone in the field, and it will be seen that there are several critical reasons why it did have such an impact."*

*"The Canterbury Tales were groundbreaking for several reasons."*

The second sentence says the same thing much more effectively and economically.

Essays are improved when they include examples and point out differences. Your response should follow a logical sequence, moving from major points to minor ones, or following a time sequence. Above all, your answer should address every aspect of the question posed on the test. Because essays often contain several different, embedded questions, you have to be certain that you have answered every part to receive full credit.

➤ **Short Answer and fill-in questions.** Short answer and fill-in questions basically require you to generate and supply specific information in your own words. Unlike essays, which are more free-form and may have several possible answers, short answer and fill-in questions are usually quite specific, requiring only one answer.

Use both the instructions for the questions and the questions themselves to determine the level of specificity that is needed in an answer. Try not to provide too much or too little information. Usually, brevity is best.

➤ **Multiple-choice questions.** If you've ever looked at a multiple-choice question and said to yourself, "but every choice seems right," you understand what can be tricky about this type of question. However, there are some simple strategies that can help you deal with multiple-choice questions.

First, read the instructions carefully to determine whether only one response will be correct, or whether more than one of the choices may be correct. In most cases, only one choice will be right, but in some cases instructors may want you to check off more than one answer.

Turn to the first question and read it carefully. *Before you look at the possible answers, try to answer the question in your head.* This can help you avoid confusion over inappropriate choices.

Next, *carefully read through every possible answer.* Even if you come to one that you think is right, read them all—there may be a subsequent answer that is better. Look for absolutes like "**every**," "**always**," "**only**," "**none**," and "**never**." *Choices that contain such*

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*absolute words are rarely correct.* For example, an answer choice that says, “A U.S. president has never been elected without having received the majority of the popular vote” is incorrect due to the presence of the word “never.” On the other hand, less-absolute words, such as “generally,” “usually” often,” “rarely,” “seldom,” and “typically” may indicate a correct response.

*Be especially on guard for the word “not” which negates the sentence. (“The one key concept that is not embodied in the U.S. Constituting is....”)* It’s easy to gloss over “not,” and if you have the misfortune of doing so, it will be nearly impossible to answer the item correctly.

*If you’re having trouble understanding a question, underline key words or phrases, or try to break the question into different short sections.* Sometimes it is helpful to work backwards, *Jeopardy* style, and look at the possible answers first to see if you can find one that is clearly accurate or clearly inaccurate.

*Use an educated guessing strategy*—which is very different from wild or random guessing. Unless you are penalized for wrong answers (a scoring rule by which wrong answers are deducted from the points you have earned on other questions, rather than merely not counting at all toward your score), it always pays to guess.

The first step in educated guessing is to eliminate any obviously false answers. The next step is to examine the remaining choices closely. Does one response choice include an absolute or qualifying adjective that makes it unlikely (“the probability of war always increases when a U.S. president is facing political difficulties”)? Does one choice include a subtle factual error? For example, the answer to a multiple choice question asking why Columbus took his journey to the new world that says “the French monarchy was interested in expanding its colonial holdings” is wrong because it was not the French, but the Spanish monarchy, that funded his journey.

➤ **True-false questions.** Although most of the principles we’ve already discussed apply equally well to true-false questions, a few additional tricks of the trade may help you with this type of question.

Begin with a set of true-false questions by answering the ones you’re sure you know. But don’t rush; it’s important to read every part of a true-false question, because key words such as “never,” “always” and “sometimes” often determine the appropriate response.

If you don’t have a clue about whether a statement is true or false, here’s a last-resort principle: Choose “true.” *In general*, more statements on a true-false test are likely to be true than false.

➤ **Matching questions.** Matching questions typically present you with two columns of related information, which you must link, item by item. For example, a list of terms or concepts may be presented in one column, along with a list of corresponding definitions or explanations in the second column. The best strategy is to reduce the size of both columns by matching the items you’re most confident about first; this will leave a short list in each column, and the final matching may become apparent.