


Winter January 23rd, 2013

Brainstorm: How to Take a Multiple Choice Test

John J. Medina Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/brainstorm>

 Part of the [Neuroscience and Neurobiology Commons](#)

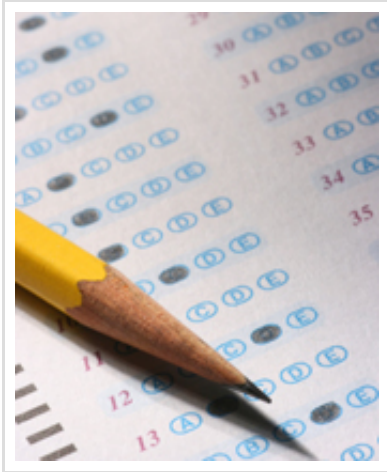
Recommended Citation

Medina, John J. Ph.D., "Brainstorm: How to Take a Multiple Choice Test" (2013). *Brainstorm*. 24.
<https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/brainstorm/24>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Publications at Digital Commons @ SPU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Brainstorm by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ SPU.

How to Take a Multiple Choice Test

By: John Medina | Posted: January 23, 2013



In this blog section, we are going to explore the science behind study habits. Most of these topics will concern myth busting, and we begin this segment with a whopper.

Myth No. 1: *Don't change your answers on a test because the first guess is most likely to be the correct one.*

This is nonsense, though the notion remains persistent on many academic campuses today.

The roots of this tenacious idea may be understandable. For many years, psychologists (especially the American variety) worshiped at the strange feet of Sigmund Freud. The world's first psychoanalyst had an almost obsessive preoccupation with the unconscious mind — whatever that is — and championed a psychotherapeutic technique called “free association.” This is where you, as the patient, in response to a few leading questions from the therapist, are supposed to say the first thing that pops into your head. Why? The first words out of your mouth are considered to be a premium in this technique. They are thought to be the most uncensored, most revealing, perhaps most accurate reflection of your psychological interiors.

Free association was never about multiple choice tests, though perhaps it is easy to see how things could get twisted. It is a short hop to generalize the value of “putting down the first thing that comes to mind” on the therapist's couch to “putting down the first thing that comes to mind” on a multiple choice test.

But it is still a myth.

There is empirical support for my strong statement, mostly because somebody actually did some measuring. Way back in 1984, a group of researchers combed over 20 studies investigating this first responder notion, and in a most ingenious way: They looked at the effects of changing your answer after (a) you put something down; (b) you felt bad enough about your

answer change your mind; and (c) you altered your answer by erasing your first choice and putting down an alternative.

Here's the bottom line: Pay close attention that "I-feel-bad-enough-about-my-answer-to-change-it" feeling during a multiple-choice test.

A whopping 58 percent who changed their answer in response to some internal hesitancy actually did themselves a favor, transforming an incorrect answer into a correct answer. About 20 percent went the other way: changing a correct answer into an incorrect answer. The remaining 22 percent were floundering, changing an incorrect answer into another incorrect answer.

Does that mean you should change your answer in response to every insecurity you bring to a test question? Those of you with test anxiety might look at these data and say "Big deal. I feel insecure about *any* answer I put down!" Is there a way out for people who, when taking tests, feel every answer they remember should be questioned? There most certainly is. And I will address this issue the next time we talk about testing, which should be in a few weeks.

In the meantime, pay close attention to your objections when taking these tests. You may actually have more insight than Sigmund Freud.

For further reading:

Kruger *et al* (2005)

Counterfactual thinking and the first instinct fallacy.

J Pers & Soc Psych Bull 18: 725–735

Benjamin, LT *et al* (1984)

Staying with initial answers on objective tests: Is it a myth?

Teach Psych 11: 133–141

Comments

ONE COMMENT TO "HOW TO TAKE A MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST"



Anne Hagerman Wilcox says:

January 24, 2013 at 3:14 pm

As a graduate of SPU's MAT program and now as a professor of education at Whitworth University—I will be following this new topic with keen interest!

Wanted to say hello to you and the family as well. You may remember that I attended the C.S. Lewis conference in 1994 with you and your wife and several other SPU conferees. I was also a member at UPC—and benefitted deeply from Kari's ministry there.

Thanks for the topic!
Anne