five steps to multiple-choice success

relevant to CAT Scheme Papers 1, 2, 3 and 4, and Professional Scheme Papers 1.1 and 1.2

easy as... a b c d?

Multiple-choice questions (MCQs) feature in many of the CAT and Professional Scheme exams. Whether you are taking paper or computer-based exams, the following five-step approach to preparing for MCQs will help ensure that you aren't left guessing.

1 Proper preparation and rehearsal
2 Good time allocation
3 Careful question reading
4 A logical approach
5 Sensible emergency procedures

Proper preparation and rehearsal

It is important to appreciate that there are a limited number of ways in which certain learning outcomes can be tested by MCQs. This means that, with lots of practice, you will start to recognise familiar patterns. Try to get hold of as many relevant MCQs as possible, practise each one at least twice and, on the second attempt, highlight those that you get wrong, so that you can attempt these one more time just before the exam.

When you practise MCQs, it will help you to better allocate your time if you tackle them in batches – 10 at a time is a sensible number. Try and think of fun ways to practise – perhaps hold a quiz with some of your friends who are also studying. If you commute on public transport, this is also an ideal time.

As you work through the questions, make sure you become more and more familiar with your calculator. Do you know how to use all the functions? What is the most efficient way to calculate a percentage? And, of course, just in case of emergency, take an identical spare calculator into the exam so that you don't waste time fumbling with unfamiliar buttons.

If you are going to sit a computer-based exam, make sure you trial the software first – visit **www.accaglobal.com/colleges/cbe_demo** for ACCA's online demonstration.

Good time allocation

If you are sitting an exam worth 100 marks in three hours, you should aim to spend 1.8 minutes on each mark. If the exam is two hours, the corresponding time allocation is 1.2 minutes per mark. Of course this is much easier said than done. A good technique is to batch questions. So, if each question is worth two marks, and the exam is two hours long, you will need to complete each batch of 10 questions in 24 minutes (1.2 minutes x 2 marks x 10 questions). Make sure that you have double-checked your time allocation strategy before you go into the exam.

Remember that you don't need to attempt the questions in order – this is equally true whether you take the paper-based or computer-based exam. Within each batch of questions, focus initially on those that don't require calculations. For example, you either know or don't know 'Which of the following is not a fundamental accounting concept?' – so this is a question you can deal with quickly. If a question looks as if it involves a lot of calculation, it may be worth doing it a bit later on.

Careful question reading

Consider the following question:

Ericsonen, a limited liability company, purchased a machine on 12 October 2003 for $16,000. The company has a year end of 31 December and depreciates machinery at 30% per annum using the reducing balance method. A full year's depreciation is applied in the year of acquisition and none in the year of disposal. The machine was sold on 3 January 2006 for $7,000. What is the profit/(loss) on sale?

Where did you start to read the question? At the beginning? This is often an ineffective approach. Try to look for the requirement – this is usually at the end of the question – just before the four alternative answers.

In reading this question, first identify the requirement (*profit/(loss) on sale*), then think about what information is needed (*proceeds and net book value at disposal date*), and then try and find this information from the question. This approach takes some conscious practice, but eventually becomes automatic.

When you are reading, be careful about the words *do* and *do not*, or *true* and *false*. In a paper-based exam, a good technique is to write T (for true) or F (for false) on the question. In a computer-based exam you can make notes on a piece of scrap paper. The most important point at the reading stage is not to read the four suggested answers if they are numerical. This wastes time and may cause confusion.

A logical approach

Above all, remember that no-one will ever read your workings or assumptions. In paper-based exams, some candidates waste a lot of time setting out meticulous workings in their answer book.

If you know how to do the question, try and decide on the answer before you look at the four options. If time allows, double check that you haven't picked up the wrong information, but don't waste time trying to decide on how the examiner arrived at each of the options that you have discounted.

Sensible emergency procedures

There is no negative marking in MCQ exams – so even if you guess the answer you have a one in four (25%) chance of getting the question right. Sadly, some candidates leave questions unanswered or, even worse, spend precious time writing a note to the examiner about running out of time.

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