Multiple-choice examinations

Introduction

It is certainly not the case that you don't have to study as hard for a multiple-choice exam, that you can pass them with just a few tricks, or that they only test factual knowledge. The same conditions apply to these tests as to other types of tests.
The brain is programmed to investigate 'signal words' and deviating words. As described earlier: when information comes in, the brain immediately starts searching for similar networks, associations, patterns, and previous connections. It's automatic. That's just how it works. For multiple-choice questions, the brain scans the key words from both the question and the four possible answers. Has it seen this before? Are there already any known connections? What does it think about this? And so on. It costs a lot of energy (technically: oxygen, glucose and water). The brain primarily scans for words that it recognises. But checking whether it recognises something and actually knowing the answer to the question are really two different things! You're not really interested in just recognising things – you want an answer to the question.

Approach

1. Do the exam in three rounds.
By working in rounds, you first pick the low-hanging fruit. You harness your brain's capacity to achieve the best chance of success. At the start of the exam, the oxygen and nutrition (glucose) levels in your brain are at their highest. Your brain is at its most productive. Take advantage of this: in the first round, answer all the questions that you know straight away. In the second round, answer the more difficult questions. In the last round, tackle the most difficult questions.

2. Cover up the answers. Reformulate the question as if it were an open question. Work out this open question on a separate blank sheet of paper.
Imagine that this question is asked during an exam:

'There is scarcity in the economy when
A the resources exceed the possibilities
B there are insufficient resources in relation to the needs
C there is insufficient need for a particular good in relation to resources
D there are sufficient resources to meet the needs'

The signal words are 'economy - scarcity - resources - needs - a good'. If you let your brain do its own thing, it's going to focus on those signal words. It will scan the signal words, looking for links and connections. That creates a lot of activity in your head, and doesn't necessarily produce an answer. That's not what you want.

So, start by turning it into an open question. For example: 'When is there scarcity in an economy?' The question makes its way straight into the brain, like one-way traffic. That saves a lot of time and energy, and your brain can calmly work on finding the right answer much quicker. Work out the answer on a separate piece of paper. That way, you can then review the route your brain's Sat Nav took to get there. Did you go the right way? Or were you using the wrong map, or did you take a wrong turn or way too many detours?

Work out your answer on the separate sheet of paper. Then look at the four answers. When you look at those answers, ask yourself: 'Which of the answer options is most similar to the one I have worked out?'

(If you are not allowed to use an extra sheet of paper during an examination to work out answers (or if a faculty does not provide practice exams), ask the student representatives to officially request this. If that doesn't help, kick up a bit of a fuss. You are entitled to this and they are two basic factors for successful learning and reproduction.)

3. Inserting the answers and dealing with doubt
What if your answer doesn't immediately give you a hit when you see the answer options? If you ask yourself the question: 'Which answer most closely resembles my own?', you can often discount two answer options that you know are incorrect. Insert the two remaining answers in the question and see which one makes the most sense: 'There is scarcity in the economy if [answer 1]', and 'There is scarcity in the economy if [answer 2]'.
If this doesn't help, mix things up a bit. If you're not sure on a conscious level, try thinking about the question on a subconscious level. How certain are you that option 1 is true, on a scale of 1 to 100? And option 2? Go for the first number that comes to mind! Suppose you arrive at 79 and 81. Then your doubts are understandable: the scores are very close to each other. You are right to be a bit hesitant. But 81 is still 2 more than 79, so go for the option that scored 81.

4. In all cases, you should only change your answers if you have thought about them and have changed your perspective. Your first choice is often better than a changed answer. Make a note of this during an exam. For each question, indicate the extent to which you are sure of your answer on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is '100% sure'). Also highlight any questions that you ended up changing. You'll need that information later for the analysis:
- If you changed an answer, how sure were you of your first answer?
- And did you change it for the better?

If you incorrectly changed all the answers to questions that you were '100% sure' of (5), then the solution is very simple: next time, don't do it! If you notice that you correctly changed answers to questions that you scored a 2 or 3, then it's a good idea to keep doing that.

In particular, students with good social skills seem to have difficulty with this type of test. They seem to be wired to be flexible and accommodating: 'Yes, but it might also be that, let's not rule that out...' 'If we look at it that way, I do indeed see the possibility that...'. If this applies to you, be aware that a multiple-choice exam is not the same as a social or political arena. Your social skills can't really help you in this type of exam. Other rules apply here – to succeed, all you have to do is follow them. Give it a try!

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