

EXAM TECHNIQUE – MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAMS

A thorough knowledge of the subject is the most important thing you can take into an exam. You only get this by study and application. However, even when your knowledge is good, it's easy to get questions wrong because of poor exam technique.

Good exam technique will help you understand what the questions are really asking and what the answers are really saying. As with most skills, you can improve reading and interpretation with practice. Doing mock exams will help you get used to the language and style of test questions. It will also help ensure that your knowledge covers all aspects of the subject.

Here are some tips to help you get the best results you can in multi-choice exams.

I. Look out for 'common sense' questions

For example:

Which of the following is permitted for pipework used to supply a domestic gas fire?

- A. *Yellow polyethylene (PE) pipe*
- B. *Black cooker hose*
- C. *Pipe of suitable construction and material*
- D. *Copper pipe only*

In a well-written multi-choice test there should only be one correct answer per question. After you have read all of the above answers, you should be able to see that answer C *must* (in the legal sense) be true: gas pipe *must* be made of suitable material.

Answer D, although tempting, is wrong because it uses the word 'only' – meaning that nothing other than copper can be used. This is untrue; steel pipe, for example, can be used. You can put C as the answer straight away without spending time looking in books or standards to see if any of the other materials are permitted or not.

The best technique for dealing with common sense questions is to read all the answers. If one answer must always be true, it must be the correct answer.

2. Double-check that the answer you think you put is the one you actually put

Marking a wrong letter is a very common mistake in multi-choice exams. In a way it's the worst mistake you can make because it makes you think your knowledge is faulty. You waste time searching books to correct a misunderstanding that wasn't there.

Before submitting your answer sheet it is worth checking that you marked all your intended answers correctly.

3. Spot the 'NOT'

Questions sometimes contain the word 'not' in a way that means you have to give an answer implying unsafe practice. This can feel unnatural. For example:

Which of the following is not correct for an appliance that has been labelled At Risk?

- A. The appliance may be used with care*
- B. The appliance should not be used*
- C. The appliance should be turned off*
- D. Details of the At Risk situation should be recorded on a suitable form*

It would be easy to get this question wrong by skim-reading. We might notice 'At Risk' and then put B, C, or D because we know these things are true for At Risk appliances. More careful reading is needed to see that the correct answer is A – the answer that is *not* true.

4. Check you haven't missed out an answer

This is a less common mistake than 2, but one that is especially bad if you fail to leave a gap for the missing answer in your answer sheet. All your following answers will be for the wrong question. Even if you spot the error, it can be very confusing (and time-consuming) to have to go back and correct everything.

5. Get used to the words used in safety exams

Gas exams are based on legal and normative documents such as British Standards and Regulations. The language is often formal and full of legal terms. If you find this kind of English difficult, ask the invigilator for a dictionary. As an example, let's try rewording the following question into simpler English:

What actions should you take upon discovery of a gas odour which persists after completion of a satisfactory tightness test?

The harder words and phrases used in the question are given below, together with a more common word or phrase meaning the same thing:

upon discovery of	= on finding
odour	= smell
persists	= remains
after completion of	= after
satisfactory	= acceptable

Re-wording the question gives:

What actions should you take on finding a gas smell which remains after an acceptable tightness test?

So the question is really asking “what should you do if you can smell gas even though the system passed a tightness test?”. The smell must be coming from somewhere else. The correct action would be to call the Gas Emergency Service Provider.

Other difficult words used in safety exams and standards include:

adequate	= enough	impair	= make worse
adjacent to	= next to	incorporate	= have, include
adversely	= badly	notwithstanding	= in spite of
constitute	= be	permit	= allow
contravene	= go against	primary	= main
convey	= carry	thereafter	= afterwards
deemed	= said to be	undertake	= do
dwelling	= house or flat	verify	= check
forthwith	= immediately		

6. Spot the general case of the specific

Sometimes a question can be confusing because it gives unnecessary information:

Ventilation air for domestic open flue boilers of heat input greater than 40 kW net shall be:

- A. *Supplied through an openable window*
- B. *Supplied through a closable air vent*
- C. *Supplied by mechanical ventilation*
- D. *Free of contamination*

The wording of the question makes it look as though there is a special requirement for domestic open flue boilers of heat input greater than 40 kW. In fact, air vents for appliances over 40 kW have the same requirements as those for appliances 40 kW and under except that the vent size will be bigger. This is actually just another common sense question. The correct answer is D.

7. Spot the specific case of the general

Sometimes you can spot an incorrect answer by noticing that it is too specific:

Cookers installed in multi-occupancy dwellings should incorporate:

- A. *A thermocouple on each burner*
- B. *A flame supervision device on each burner*
- C. *A flame rectification FSD on each burner*
- D. *A liquid expansion valve on each burner*

Answers A, C, and D mention specific types of flame supervision device. In general, standards do not limit the technology of safety devices to specific types. A standard would say something more general such as 'a device that prevents gas flow to the burner in the event of flame failure'. Answer B (which does not specify the type of FSD) is correct.

8. Do the easy questions first

This method works for some people. You must have the confidence to mark an answer without looking it up. If you know a subject well enough you shouldn't have to reference everything. This will give you more time to reference the more difficult questions. Note that this is not the same as guessing answers or putting down the most likely answer; it's using your knowledge.

9. All of the above

Sometimes, even exams that claim only one correct answer per question have questions where all of the answers are true! Make sure you don't miss a last answer saying 'all of the above'. If you skim read it's easy to think one of the other answers is the correct one and throw away the mark. However, remember to read all the answers carefully and make sure that they are all true before answering 'all of the above'.