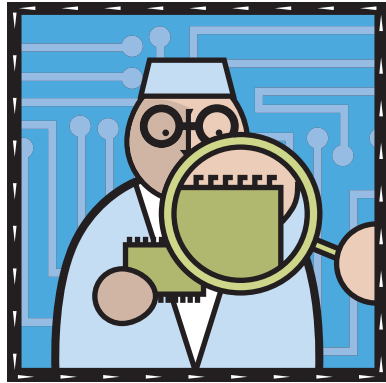




Testing 101: What You Need to Know

by Pamela A. Stone, TFS Partner Author

Multiple-choice, true-false, take-home, short answer, which type of test question is best? Multiple-choice and true-false questions take longer to prepare, but are quick and easy to grade. On the other hand, tests consisting of short answer or essay questions can be prepared quickly, but they require more time to grade. Is one better than the other? Well it depends....



How Do I Choose the Best Type of Question to Use?

When testing on clear-cut facts, definitions or procedures, multiple-choice and true-false questions work well. There is only one correct answer. This answer was given in the textbook or during lecture. Little interpretation is allowed for these questions.

Tests that require calculations may use multiple-choice questions or require students to show the procedures used to determine the answer. If tests involve abstract concepts or questions subject to opinion, there may be a variety of responses available. In this case, tests requiring students to write their answers are best.

Occasionally, you can combine these two methods. Multiple-choice math questions that require students to show calculations provide two advantages. First, the tests can be quickly graded. Second, you can review the calculations for those questions the students missed.

True-false Close Up

You have the option with true-false and multiple-choice to require students to explain their response. This adds a short-answer component and generally improves the accuracy of the assessment. You may choose to disregard the written response portion if the correct answer was chosen, or you may use it to better determine students' level of understanding.

Although students may defend a wrong answer, you may find their explanation has merit and they deserve credit. Perhaps, you will find they present a different point of view or they may have misunderstood the question in the first place.

The material covered by the test and the time available to prepare and grade the tests is important. Using a variety of test formats can provide you with a better understanding of what students have learned and the material about which they are still confused.

What about Take Out?

Most teachers still give traditional, in-class tests that are monitored and perhaps timed. This is meant to put all students on equal footing. They cannot easily copy from each other or look up answers in their notes or textbooks. This also allows teachers to limit the time students take to complete the test. These are good reasons for in-class tests, but you may decide the benefits of take-home tests far outweigh security concerns.

Many students do feel less stressed when completing their exam over the weekend. If short-answer or essay questions are given, students have time to formulate their responses. You may cover more material and require more comprehensive responses. You may also include a portion of the grade for writing skills and encourage students to write clearly and concisely using proper spelling and grammar.

Is Open Book OK?

Another alternative is open book or open note tests. This style test allows students to review the material during the testing period. The disadvantage is the excessive amount of class time that is needed for testing. Many students want to look up the answers, relying on their books or notes, and have difficulty completing the test within a reasonable length of time.

Whichever Type Test You Choose Don't Forget to Hold a Review Session Prior to Test Day

Whether tests are given during class or not, it's important to prepare students. If the book and notes are not permitted, students need more time to review the material. If the test is take-home, students need enough time to complete the test. Students should be informed of your grading policies regarding spelling and grammar and have time to ask about questions they find confusing.

Most students will benefit from your consideration of these basic testing concepts and recommendations. Good tests accurately measure a student's grasp of the course content and provide an additional learning experience at the same time.