

SUMMER 2025

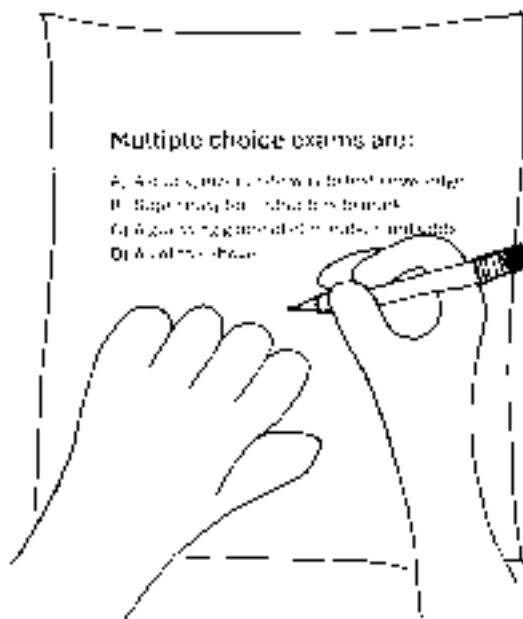
The Exam

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I had to write an exam last week. After some reflection, I realized that my last meaningful test was my pesticide licence way back in the spring of 1991. That's 34 years ago (in case you were struggling with the math – which I was, on last week's exam). At the end of the last millennium, my brain was functioning like a well-oiled contraption. I graduated with my BSc in 1990 (Go Aggies), took the Turf Managers Short course in the winter of 1991 (top of the class), and wrote the Environment Ministry's exterminator exam immediately afterward. I could store, and more importantly access, reams of facts on a moment's notice. Now, I sometimes struggle to remember my kids' names, or where I parked my truck at the airport. The 34 intervening years have not been kind to my ability to retain facts like the primary agricultural trade commodities between Canada and Kazakhstan. Turns out it's mostly tractor parts, if you were curious. Now my mind functions more like a poorly designed Rube Goldberg machine.

Part of the reason that my memory doesn't work well, is that my focus is poor. I'm likely to go off on a tangent about Kazakhstani combines at any time. This lack of focus is not new. I can honestly say that until I was 25 years old, I was barely paying attention to much of anything; and was distracted by nearly everything that crossed my path. I was singularly focussed on my desire to woo the young ladies of Guelph, but even that pursuit could best be described as, "flock shooting". No question - I'm as distracted as a Beagle on a planet full of squirrels.

The Internet has not helped. Not only is my phone a bottomless dopamine mine,



and the greatest distraction ever created, but when every known fact in the universe is sitting in my pocket – why would I waste the band width remembering... you know... stuff? Remember all the phone numbers you used to know, back when you actually had to dial them? Remember how many addresses you knew, when you were driving around without WAZE? Now that I can look up any fact, anytime, anywhere – I barely exercise my memory at all! Soon we will need our phones to remind us to breathe – it already tells me what / when / how much to eat, tracks my steps and sleep, and is my external memory hard drive.

Now, the test was pretty straightforward – one of those government program type deals where they really expect you to pass – but you won't, unless you read their study materials in advance. There will always be a question like, "Who was the Minister of Tourism in 1985, when bill 4756-85B was passed", or "How many minors can fish off a pontoon boat in Lake Erie, on a Tuesday

morning in June, while Jupiter is on the ascendant?" I tried to look that up, to see if Jupiter was ever on the ascendant in the month of June, but was distracted by Ticats highlights from the weekend. It's twenty-five minutes later now, and I've decided that it's an even funnier astrology joke, if I don't look it up. See how it works?

I passed the exam (not that I would admit it if I had failed), but it was surprisingly stressful. I forgot to bring a pencil to colour in the computer bubble reader thingie and had to borrow one from the guy behind me. I was BY FAR the oldest person in the room, apart from the octogenarian that the Ontario Government had contracted to be the proctor. But some of my

old exam habits came back to me quickly. I calculated how many questions I could get wrong and still pass. I crammed like an idiot at the last minute, instead of studying slowly in the weeks heading up to the exam. I didn't have the textbook and study materials until 30 hours before the scheduled test. Honestly, the only thing missing from my days at the U of Guelph, was that I couldn't buy the semester of notes from my buddy John (the going rate in the late 80's was a case of Canadian and a vending machine card), and that my roommate didn't crack a beer in the exam room while he was reviewing his answers.

Hopefully this will be my last exam, although it would probably be good exercise for my brain if I were to take some classes. I know that I'm extremely careful to ensure that I renew my Pesticide Licence every few years – lord help me if I ever need to write that one again. I might not be ready for retirement, but my academic skills have left the building. ■