

ITEM-WRITING GUIDELINES/RULES/ SUGGESTIONS/ADVICE AS DERIVED FROM 46 AUTHORITATIVE TEXTBOOKS

Source: Haladyna, T.M., and Downing, S.M. (1989). A taxonomy of multiple-choice item-writing rules, Applied Measurement in Education. p. 37-50.

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Multiple Choice Tests

General Item-Writing (procedural)

1. Use either the best answer or the correct answer format.
2. Avoid the complex multiple-choice (Type K) format. (e.g., A and D; A and C, All the above; None of the above; A, B, and C; etc.)
3. Format the item vertically, not horizontally.
4. Allow time for editing and other types of item revisions.
5. Use good grammar, punctuation, and spelling consistently.
6. Minimize examinee reading time in phrasing each item.
7. Avoid trick items, those which mislead or deceive examinees into answering incorrectly.

General Item-Writing (content concerns)

8. Base each item on an educational or instructional objective.
9. Focus on a single problem
10. Keep the vocabulary consistent with the examinees' level of understanding.
11. Avoid cuing one item with another, keep items independent of one another.
12. Use the author's examples as a basis for developing your items.
13. Avoid over-specific knowledge when developing the item.
14. Avoid textbook, verbatim phrasing when developing the item.
15. Avoid items based on opinions.
16. Use multiple-choice to measure higher level thinking.
17. Test for important or significant material; avoid trivial material.

Stem Construction

18. State the stem in question form or completion form (*note: recent research findings favor question form over completion*).
19. When using the completion format, don't leave a blank for completion in the beginning or middle of the stem of the question (*note: recent research findings favor question form over completion – thus, avoid completion format*).

20. Ensure that the directions in the stem are clear, and that wording lets the examinee know exactly what is being asked.
21. Avoid window dressing (excessive verbiage) in the stem.
22. Word the stem positively; avoid negative phrasing.
23. Include the central idea and most of the phrasing in the stem.

General Option Development

24. Use as many options as are feasible; more options are desirable (*note: recent research suggests four to five options*).
25. Place options in logical or numerical order.
26. Keep options independent; options should not be overlapping.
27. Keep all options in an item homogeneous in content.
28. Keep the length of the options fairly consistent.
29. Avoid, or use sparingly, the phrase “all of the above.”
30. Avoid, or use sparingly, the phrase “none of the above.”
31. Avoid the use of the phrase “I don’t know.”
32. Phrase options positively, not negatively.
33. Avoid distractors that can clue test-wise examinees; for example, avoid clang associations, absurd options, formal prompts, or semantic (overly specific or overly general) clues.
34. Avoid giving clues through the use of faulty grammatical construction.
35. Avoid specific determiners, such as “never” and “always.”

Correct Option Development

36. Position the correct option so that it appears about the same number of times each possible position for a set of items.
37. Make sure there is one and only one correct option.

Distractor Development

38. Use plausible distractors; avoid illogical distractors
39. Incorporate common errors of students in distractors
40. Avoid technically phrased distractors
41. Use familiar yet incorrect phrases as distractors
42. Use true statements that do not correctly answer the item.
43. Avoid the use of humor when developing options (*note: recent research suggests benefits for humor properly inserted into exams, yet more research is necessary*).

ADDITIONAL ITEM-WRITING GUIDELINES

Matching Items

44. Use only homogenous subject matter.
45. Do not have the same number of items and options.
46. Arrange the list of responses in a logical order.
47. Keep the list of items brief.
48. Always place the entire task on the same page.

True-False Items

49. Avoid statements that are too general
50. Do not use negatives or double negatives.
51. Do not use long, complex sentences.
52. Do not include more than one idea.
53. If you are using an opinion, indicate the source.
54. True-false statements should be the same length.
55. Include the same number of true-false statements.
56. Do not use specific qualifiers such as: always, never, all, none, usually, sometimes, occasionally, may, or could.

Essay Questions

57. Frame questions so that the examinee's task is explicitly defined.
58. Specify the value and an approximate time limit for each question.
59. Employ a larger number of questions that require relatively short answers rather than only a few questions that require long answers.
60. Do not employ optional questions.
61. Verify a question's quality by writing a trial response to the question.
62. Prepare a tentative scoring key in advance of considering examinee responses.
63. Score all answers to one question before scoring the next question.
64. Make prior decisions regarding treatment of such factors as spelling and punctuation.
65. Evaluate essay responses anonymously.

Oral Examinations

66. Prepare a list of questions that will be used with all students.
67. Have at least two people evaluate the student.
68. Video/audio tape responses.

Short-Answer Items

69. A direct question is generally preferable to an incomplete sentence.
70. Structure an item so that the required response is concise.
71. For incomplete-statement types, restrict the number of blanks to one, or at most, two.
72. Place the blank near the end of an incomplete sentence or in the margin for a direct question.
73. Blanks for answers should be equal in length.
74. Provide sufficient answer space.