

MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST ITEM WRITING RULES

1. Each test item must measure an important task outcome.

*The situation around which an item is to be built must be important and based solely on **NEED TO KNOW** knowledge, skills, attitudes or safety directly related to the associated task. Avoid testing for nice to know information, unimportant details, unrelated bits of information and material that is irrelevant to the designated task.*

2. Address a single clearly formulated problem in the stem of the test item.

The task addressed in the stem of the test item must be so clear that a student can understand it without reading the alternatives. A good check on the clarity and completeness of a multiple choice stem is to cover the alternatives and determine whether the question can be answered without seeing the choices.

3. State the stem of the test item in simple, clear language.

The wording used in the stem of a multiple choice test item must be stated as precisely as possible and must avoid the use of complex words and sentence structure. Anyone who possesses the knowledge or skill being measured must be able to select the correct answer.

4. Put as much of the wording as possible in the stem of the test item.

Avoid repeating the same material in each of the alternatives. By moving all common content to the stem, it is usually possible to clarify the problem further and reduce the time the student needs to read the alternatives.

5. State the stem of the test item in a positive form, whenever possible.

*A positively phrased test item tends to measure more important learning information because it requires knowing or doing the correct or best method or most relevant information rather than the **poorest** method or the **least relevant** information. Being able to identify answers that do not apply to the task provides no assurance that the student possesses the desired knowledge or skill.*

6. Emphasize negative wording whenever it must be used in the stem of a test item.

In some instances, such as potentially dangerous situations, a negative emphasis in the stem of a test item may be required. For example, knowing NOT to cross the street against a red light must be taught and tested directly. When negative wording is used in the stem of a test item, it must be emphasized by being underlined, capitalized, or bolded.

7. Make certain that the intended answer is correct and clearly the best choice.

There must be only one correct answer and it should be unquestionably correct to well-informed student. Be certain that none of the distracters could be defended as the correct answer. Alternatives used as distracters must be plausible but incorrect.

8. Make all alternatives grammatically consistent with the stem of the test item.

Most test item writers are very careful to ensure that the correct answers are phrased so that it is grammatically consistent with the stem. Where most test item writers are apt to slip is by using inconsistent tense, article, or grammatical form when stating the distracters. Common mistakes are incorrectly using “a” or “an” in the stem or distracter. This would indicate to the student that the correct answer begins with either a consonant with the use of “a” or a vowel with the use of “an”.

9. Avoid verbal clues that might enable students to select the correct answer or eliminate an incorrect alternative.

Some verbal clues include: using the same or similar words in both the stem and correct answer, stating the correct answer in textbook language or stereotyped phrases, stating the correct answer in greater detail (longest alternative), including absolute terms in distracters (such as never, always, all, none), including two responses that all inclusive (all of the above & none of the above), and including responses that have the same meaning.

10. Make the distracters plausible and attractive to the uninformed.

The distracters are a key feature in multiple choice questions and should be appealing to the students who lack the knowledge or skill called for but should not confuse the informed student (such as partially correct answers).