

10 Tips on Writing Good Multiple Choice Questions

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The multiple choice question consists of a stimulus called the STEM and a number of responses including the BEST ANSWER (the key) plus 3 or 4 INCORRECT OPTIONS (the distractors).

The Goal: By answering the question, students should be 1) making a prediction, 2) reaching a conclusion or 3) selecting a course of action.

1. The stem must present a PROBLEM that focuses on some IMPORTANT concept or principle in the course.
2. The stem should present the problem in the simplest form. To make sure the stem represents a problem always include a VERB in the statement.
3. Avoid unnecessary repetition of material in the options by including as much of the item as possible in the stem.

POOR: The mean

- a. Is the most frequently occurring score in a distribution
- b. Corresponds to the 50th percentile in the distribution
- c. Is the arithmetic average of the scores
- d. Is the measure of central tendency least influenced by the value of each score

BETTER: The mean of a distribution of test scores is the

- a. most frequently occurring score
- b. 50th percentile
- c. arithmetic average
- d. measure of central tendency least influence by the value of each score

Rule of Thumb- Long stems/short distractors
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4. After writing the stem, it is best to write the correct response first and then the distractors. Make sure that there is only ONE best answer. Make distractors appealing and plausible.
5. The difficulty of test items can be increased by making the distractors more homogeneous, requiring more discrimination on the part of the student.
6. Avoid giving irrelevant clues to the answer such as:
 - length of clue - the longest option is often the correct one because the developer has overwritten to ensure correctness.
 - grammatical clue - options complete the answer such as the stem ending in AN and only one option beginning with a word where the first letters a vowel, or one option begins with a verb and others with adjectives.
 - specific determiners - words like ALL, NEVER, and ALWAYS are generally found in incorrect options. Avoid words like USUALLY, FREQUENTLY, OFTEN or RARELY these terms do not have numerical definitions that are commonly shared by faculty or students.
7. Use positive statements. Negative statements confuse students. If necessary in the question, underline, capitalize or boldface negative wording.
8. Avoid using options such as ALL OF THE ABOVE or NONE OF THE ABOVE. Never use a negative statement with "none of the above".
9. Make certain each question is independent. Avoid letting one item provide a clue to the answer of another item.
10. When writing item stems and options, avoid lifting statements verbatim from the text because it encourages students to memorize.