Item Writing Guidelines

General Guidelines

1) Do Not Use Trick Items

- Items are tricky either intentionally or accidentally.
  - Trick items are unfair to examinees and threaten the validity of the test.
  - Trick items measure test-taking skills more than the intended construct.
  - Trick items heighten test anxiety and cause examinees to mistrust the intent of all other items.
- Causes of unintentional trickiness.
  - Trivial content
  - Discrimination between options is too fine
  - Overlapping options
  - Irrelevant content
  - Single answer allowed, but multiple correct answers possible
  - Ambiguity in either the stem or options

2) Measure a Single Construct

- If an examinee incorrectly answers an item that has multiple constructs, it is impossible to know which construct is not mastered.
- Items are generally scored dichotomously, so the only inference that can be made is that the examinee knows the entire item or none of the item.
- Compound items heighten test anxiety and can lower the perceived validity of the exam.

3) Avoid Opinion-Based Items

- Never ask "What would you ... do", " ... use", " ... try", etc. The examinee's answer can never be wrong.
- Use caution when asking for the "best" thing, or the "best" way of doing something, unless it is clearly the best amongst the options.
- If differences exist between any experts' opinion about what the "best" is, then avoid using it.
- Qualify the standard for "best" (i.e., according to ...).

4) A void Absolute Modifiers such as always, never, only and none.

- The use of absolute modifiers in options makes it easy to eliminate options, increasing the guessing probability.

5) Avoiding Excessive Verbiage

- "Verbosity is an enemy to clarity." (Haladyna, 2004)
- Wordy items take longer to read and answer, meaning fewer items can be presented in a fixed amount of time, reducing reliability.
- Write items as briefly as possible without compromising the construct and cognitive demand required.
- Get to the point in the stem and present clean, clear options for the examinee to choose.
- Avoid unnecessary background information.

6) Avoid over-specific or over-general content

- Over-specific content tends to be trivial.
- Over-general content tends to be ambiguous.

7) Use Novel Content

- Do not repeat exact wording from training materials.
- Repeated wording tends to test recall and recognition, rather than learning.

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10) Keep Items Independent

- Content should be independent from item to item.
- Don't give the answer away to one item in the stem of another.
- Don't make answering one item correctly dependent on knowing the correct answer to another item.

11) Write items to a sixth grade reading level.

- Use appropriate vocabulary for construct
- Use necessary technical terms & content
- For everything else, use the simplest words and sentence structure possible

12) Do not teach.

- The purpose of certification is to verify knowledge.
- Do not introduce new material nor reinforce material the examinee should already know.

Guidelines for Writing the Stem

1) Write the stem in the form of a question.
2) Place the main idea in the stem.
3) The examinee should be able to know immediately what the focus of the item is by just reading the stem.
4) The examinee should be able to answer the question without reading the options.
5) Make the stem a complete sentence, containing all information necessary to answer the question.
6) Keep the stem as brief as possible.
7) Move repeated words from the options into the stem, when possible.
8) Avoid negative words such as “not” or “except”.

Guidelines for Writing the Options

1) Make the correct answer always correct.
2) Make the distractors always wrong, but attractive (plausible) to examinees that are not minimally competent.
3) A void "All of the above" and "None of the above" as options.
4) A void inadvertent clues:

- Do not always make the correct option the longest.
- Do not repeat words in the options that are in the stem (clang associations).
- Don not use specific determiners, such as, always, never, all, every, etc. They are so extreme that they are seldom the correct answer.
- Keep options homogeneous (parallel) in content, length, and grammatical structure.

5) All items should have at least one correct option and one distractor.
6) At least four options are preferable, but three are sufficient.
7) Order the options in either logical or numerical order, if one exists. Otherwise, sort shortest to longest.
8) A void humor.

Guidelines for Writing Distractors

1) Use logical misunderstandings or misconceptions.
2) Use common errors.
3) Use familiar terms, key-words, structures, or ordering.
4) Use statements that are correct or true but do not answer or address the stem (question).
5) Avoid opposing statements.
6) Use correct concepts, but “mixed up.”