

## A Revised Taxonomy of Multiple-Choice Item Writing Guidelines<sup>1</sup>

### Content

1. Every item should reflect specific content and a single specific mental behavior, as called for in the test specifications.
2. Base each item on important content; avoid trivial content.
3. Use novel material to test higher level learning. Don't use exact textbook language in test items, to avoid testing only recall of familiar words and phrases.
4. Keep the content of each item independent
5. Avoid overspecific and over general content.
6. Avoid opinion-based items.
7. Avoid trick items.
8. Keep vocabulary simple and appropriate for the examinees tested.

### Formatting Concerns

9. Use the question, completion, and best answer versions of conventional MC, the alternate choice, true-false, multiple true-false, matching, and the context-dependent item and item set formats, but avoid the complex MC format.
10. Format the item vertically, not horizontally.

### Style Concerns

11. Edit and proof items.
12. Use correct grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.
13. Minimize the amount of reading in each item.
14. Ensure that the directions in the stem are very clear.
15. Include the central idea in the stem, not the options.
16. Avoid window dressing (excessive verbiage).
17. Word the stem positively, avoid negatives such as NOT or EXCEPT. If negative words are used, use the word cautiously and always ensure that the word appears capitalized and in bold type.

### The Options

18. Develop as many effective choices as you can, but research suggests three is adequate.
19. Make sure that only of these choices is the right answer.
20. Vary the location of the right answer according to the number of choices.  
Balance the answer key, insofar as possible, so that the correct answer appears an equal number of times in each answer position.
21. Place the choices in logical or numerical order.
22. Keep choices independent; choices should not be overlapping in meaning.
23. Keep choices homogeneous in content and grammatical structure.
24. Keep the length of choices about equal.
25. *None-of-the above* should be used carefully.
26. Avoid *All-of-the-above*.
27. Phrase choices positively; avoid negatives such as NOT.
28. Avoid giving clues to the right answer, such as:
  - a. Specific determiners including *always, never, completely, and absolutely*.
  - b. Clang associations, choices identical to or resembling words in the stem.
  - c. Grammatical inconsistencies that cue the test-taker to the correct choice.
  - d. Conspicuous correct choice.
  - e. Pairs or triplets of options that clue the test-taker to the correct choice.
  - f. Blatantly absurd, ridiculous options.
29. Make all distractors plausible.
30. Use typical errors of students to write your distractors.
31. Use humor if it is compatible with the teacher and the learning environment.

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1. Quoted from and adapted from Haladyna, Downing, & Rodriguez, 2002, p. 312.