Guidelines for Constructing Multiple-Choice Items

A standard multiple-choice question consists of two standard parts: a problem (stem) and a list of suggested solutions (options). The stem is best written in the form of a complete question or statement. The list of options contains one correct or best option (answer) and a number of incorrect or inferior options (distractors). See example below:

3. What is chiefly responsible for the increase in the average length of life in the USA during the last fifty years?

- stem

- options

  distractor — a. Compulsory health and physical education courses in public schools.

  answer — *b. The reduced death rate among infants and young children

  distractor — c. The safety movement, which has greatly reduced the number of deaths from accidents.

  distractor — d. The substitution of machines for human labor.

This document provides guidelines to writing good multiple-choice items and concludes with a checklist when reviewing each multiple-choice item.

**Test items**

- Construct each item to assess a single written objective.
- Make sure the item can be answered without looking at the options.
- Avoid “tricky” and overly complex items.
- Avoid textbook, verbatim phrasing
- Use proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- Present the answer in each of the option positions approximately an equal amount of times, and in random order.

* Focus on important concepts; don’t waste time testing trivial facts.

**Stems**
• Base each problem on a specific item stated clearly in the stem.
• Include as much of the item in the stem, but do not include irrelevant material.
• State the stem in positive form (in general).
• Avoid superfluous information.
• Avoid negatively phrased items (e.g., those with except or not in the lead-in question).
• Don’t begin stems with the phrase, “Which of the following is true (or false)?” or “Each of the following statements is correct EXCEPT.”

**Options**

• Word the options clearly and concisely.
• Use plausible distractors.
• Include one and only one correct or clearly best answer in each item.
• Write options that are grammatically consistent and logically compatible with the stem; list them in logical or alphabetical order.
• Write distractors that are plausible and the same relative length as the answer.
• Avoid using absolutes such as, always, never, and all in the options; also avoid using vague terms such as usually and frequently.
• Avoid using none of the above or all of the above
• Do ask questions with a varying number of options.
• Keep the options mutually exclusive.
• Keep the options homogeneous in content.
• Keep the options free from clues as to which response is correct.
• Keep options parallel in form.
• Keep options similar in length.

**References**


*Testing Memo 10: Some Multiple-choice writing Do’s and Don’ts.* Blacksburg, VA: Office of Management and Research Services, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.