

Question Writing Guidelines

General

- **MOST IMPORTANT:** The questions should be important, have learning value, and be related to learning objectives. A suggested strategy is to underline important ideas and information that you would like to remember from the chapter. Then after reading the chapter, write out the number of questions you planned for that chapter using the best of the underlined material.
- When entering exam questions into our course developers module, type in a Section title or Chapter heading for the group of questions coming from that section or chapter. For example, “Chapter 3: Preventing Substance Abuse in the Schools” All first letters of key words in the title should be capitalized.
- For book courses try to include all the Chapter titles in the exam and at least one question for each Chapter. The Chapter titles provide a syllabus of the course material and are helpful for the exam taker.
- Each exam item should be independent of the other items in the test (the information in one question should not help to answer another item).
- Keep in mind that experts encourage multiple-choice items to be prepared as questions rather than incomplete or fill-in-the-blank statements. We would like at least half of the questions to be multiple choice type questions with 4 possible answers. Questions with less than 4 possible answers are acceptable, but should be counted as true/false.
- Be careful not to get carried away with percent type questions (i.e. where exam takers have to select the correction number or percentage from a range of numbers). We recommend keeping percent type questions to less than 10% of the exam questions.

Question Stem

- State the stem of the question in simple, clear language. (The stem is the part of the test item that states the question). Avoid vaguely worded questions that imply different meaning than what was indicated in the text.
- Since questions can be used to remind the user of important points in the material, consider stating an important point in one sentence followed up with a question in the second sentence.
 - Example: “Breakthrough products develop sales demand at a natural rate, which follows the S-shaped curve, slow at first, then fast, and then leveling off. What term do academics use for this natural rate?”
- Whenever possible, include in the stem all words that would otherwise have to be repeated in each of the responses.
- State the stem of the item in affirmative form, wherever possible.
- Emphasize negative wording whenever it is used in the stem of an item. (e.g. NOT)
- Although “knowledge” questions are the easiest to develop, keep an eye open for developing a few good higher-level thinking questions, such as, “comprehension” or “application” questions.

- Example formats of higher-level thinking questions (underline words represent the shell structure of the question). The shell can be easily adapted to your course material by replacing the word or phrase that is not underlined.
 - *Which would be another name for a scavenger?*
 - *Which is an example of osmosis?*
 - *What is the cause (purpose, reason for) of the appearance of the aurora borealis on some nights and not on others?*
 - *What would happen if there were no sunlight for 30 days?*
 - *What is the best (worst, most important, least important) method of studying for essay tests?*
 - *Which of the following would have had the greatest influence on the thinking of average citizens in colonial times?*
 - *In what way are typing and using a computer similar?*
 - *Which question best illustrates the application of higher level thinking?*
- *Which of the following best describes the way students learn?*

Answer Alternatives

- Make certain that the intended answer is correct or clearly best.
- Avoid verbal cues that might enable learners to select the correct answer or to eliminate an incorrect alternative (e.g. stating the correct answer in greater detail, using modifiers, such as “sometimes,” “may,” “usually,” “always,” or “none”).
- Make the distracters plausible and attractive to the uninformed. (Distracters are wrong alternatives). Avoid ridiculous alternatives.
- One suggestion for formulating answer alternative (distracters). First, identify the correct answer and note the class of things to which the correct answer belongs. Then identify distracters that fit within that class. For example, if the correct answer is “deer” the distracters can all fit within the class of “grazing wild animals”.
 - The grazing of which wild animal poses problems for farmers in the Southeast?
 - A. Turkey
 - B. Cow
 - C. Bear
 - D. Deer
- Vary the relative length of the correct answer to eliminate length as a clue.
- Use the alternative “all of the above” or “none of the above” with caution. If those type of options are used, then let the phrase stand by itself without adding on to that option with a clarifying statement.
- Vary the position of the correct answer in a random manner.

Grammar

- Try to keep question stems in the singular voice with the correct grammar agreement for each question option.

- Make all answer alternatives grammatically consistent with the stem of the question and parallel in form.
- Follow standard rules of grammar.
- If the stem ends with a period or question mark and the answer alternatives are single words or short phrases, don't place a period at the end of the answer alternatives. The answer alternatives should have the first letter capitalized.
 - What makes up the color orange?
 - A. Red and yellow
 - B. Green and blue.
- Question stems should end with a colon (:) when the answer alternatives come at the end of the stem. The answer alternatives to stems that don't complete a question sentence should be in lower case unless an answer choice is a proper pronoun (i.e. name like "George", etc.). However, keep in mind, experts encourage multiple-choice items to be prepared as questions rather than incomplete statements.
 - The best way to make a milk shake is to ask:
 - A. your mother for directions.
 - B. George to make it for you.
- If the answer alternatives combined with the sentence stem is a complete sentence, then use a period at the end of the answer alternatives.
 - According to the author, the increased funding for mental health services is:
 - A. needed.
 - B. not needed.
- If the answer alternatives stand alone as a sentence, then capitalize the first letter of the first word and place a period at the end of the sentence.
- If it will improve the effectiveness of the item, bend any of the standard grammatical rules in special cases