

Item Writing Guidelines
Continuing Education Unit
Bureau of Education &
Testing

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Items (or Question) Components

STEM: The portion of a "question" or "item" that presents the problem to be solved. It may be constructed as a question, or as an incomplete (lead-on) sentence.

OPTIONS: The alternatives or response choices from which to choose the correct answer to the examination item.

DISTRACTOR(s): Options which are INCORRECT choices. In a four-option format, there will be three distractors to each item.

KEY: The option which in the SOLE correct answer to the item. This term may also refer to the set of all correct answers to an examination form "grading key" [punch key of a scan sheet].

Item Writing Guidelines

STEM/STIMULUS ATTRIBUTES

All STEMS must:

- A. include wording that is CLEAR, CONCISE, AND UNOBSURE.
- B. be WITHOUT CLUES to the correct response.
- C. include all NECESSARY INFORMATION.
- D. be worded as positive statements.
- E. be worded as positive elements. [Avoid as much as possible negatives, e.g., “except,” “no”, or “not”, and avoid ABSOLUTES, e.g., “always,” “only,” “all,” “never.” If used they should be written with all CAPITAL LETTERS.]
- F. SPELL OUT names of departments or statutes in full. [Abbreviations common to the profession may be used.]
- G. include information that is at the candidate’s READING LEVEL [8th grade level].
- H. AVOID the use of the phrase “of the following.”
- I. usually be worded as questions, have question marks, necessary articles, and be complete sentences. [If incomplete sentence, the stem should be treated as a “lead on” sentence NOT have punctuation, e.g., NO COLONS.]
- J. be brief, complete, pertinent and unambiguous.
- K. contain ALL NECESSARY scenarios, exhibits, situations, case studies, diagrams, displays, or problem statements with the exam item.
- L. contain up-to-date and ACCURATE information.
- M. cover areas that are relevant to the profession AS PRACTICED IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA.
- N. cover areas that are FREQUENTLY USED in the profession.

OPTIONS/RESPONSE ATTRIBUTES

All OPTIONS must:

- A. have ONLY ONE KEY [e.g., the ONLY correct and clearly BEST answer.]
- B. have three options that are DISTRACTORS[e.g., incorrect choices.]
- C. include wording that is CLEAR, accurate and unobscure.
- D. have PLAUSIBLE distractors/FOILS [e.g., represent common errors.]
- E. have alternative responses that are all PARALLEL IN STRUCTURE [e.g., all are the same part of speech], and all agreeing grammatically and conceptually.
- F. have distractors that are NOT PARTIALLY CORRECT.
- G. AVOID the use of “NONE OF THE ABOVE” OR “ALL OF THE ABOVE.”
- H. avoid the use of clues in the option that may connect it to the stem {stem/key association}.
- I. avoid REPETITIVE WORDS OR PHRASES that can be better placed in the stem.
- J. NOT capitalize one word option that are common nouns.
- K. NOT show capitals for phrase/options that finish a sentence, yet end with the APPROPRIATE PUNCTUATION to complete sentences.
- L. use CAPITALS and end with the appropriate punctuation if the options are complete sentences.
- M. use capitals for PROPER NOUNS [names].
- N. have options that AGREE with the stem GRAMMATICALLY.
- O. have options that are approximately the same length.
- P. have options that are CONCEPTUALLY PARALLEL [e.g., have the same type of content].
- Q. avoid VERBAL ASSOCIATIONS that point back to the stem.
- R. have the FOUR-OPTION FORMAT arranged in logical order [e.g., ALPHABETICAL, CHRONOLOGICAL, or NUMERICAL.]
- S. avoid two distractors that are similar in meaning and, thus, easy as potential to eliminate answers.

Test Item Criteria Checklist

- The item measures a behavior specified by a task or measures knowledge regarding health, safety, and public welfare issues relevant to the profession as determined by law, rules, or other codes.
- The item is referenced specifically by law, rule, or accepted textbook and not just by “general trade knowledge.”
- The item clearly has only one correct answer.
- The item avoids “clues” in the correct answer [stem/key association] by providing common wording in the stem and options.
- The item avoids use of partially correct options or uses qualifiers.
- The item contains accurate and up-to-date content and information necessary to acquire and answer.
- The item content reflects and is written on a minimum entry-level knowledge, skill, and abilities [8th grade level].
- The item has no extraneous wording or information in the stem.
- The item avoids the use of negatives; if used, however, are clearly emphasized [i.e., **BOLD**: NOT, EXCEPT, etc.]
- The item uses proper grammar, and options match stem in parallel structure.
- The item avoids the use of repetition in options by placing such words in the stem.
- The item avoids the use of “all of the above” “none of the above”, “of the following” phrase, or “fill-in-the blank.”
- The item’s options arranged alphabetically, chronologically, numerically, or in logical sequence. [Note: After an item is in the Item Bank and begins to acquire statistics, it is better to not worry with the alpha order.]
- The item’s distractors are plausible.
- Capitalization and proper punctuation are used for options that are complete sentences or lead-on sentences, i.e. no colon.
- The item is clear, concise, and has an easily read writing style.
- The item must avoid bias: avoid any ethnic, cultural, racial, or religious stereotyping, and equal use of gender, [i.e., he or she, him or her.]
- The item has equivalent options as to length and similar content