

Anatomy of a Test Question

Stem or Lead Line - introductory statement or question that elicits the correct answer.

Responses or Options – 1 correct “answer” plus 3 incorrect “distractors”. Always list the correct answer first.

Rationale – Brief statement explaining the testing point.

References – Author, Title, Publisher, year, page

Follow a specific question writing plan

1. Survey the general content domain of your writing assignment.
2. List or select specific content areas within the domain.
3. Highlight the most important areas, such as those in which practice has changed.
4. Identify and write out the exact testing point.
5. Select the cognitive ability to be tested – knowledge, synthesis, judgment.
6. Select the cognitive task to be tested.

Common pitfalls

- Presenting a real case
- Writing the stem before determining the testing point
- Lack of one clearly best answer
- Adding unnecessary or misleading information
- Testing more than one point
- Including unintentional clues to the correct answer
- Using “What would you do?” or “What do you believe?” as these statements can not be tested
- Avoid the use of gender pronouns
- Using flawed question formats – negative question, true/false, none of the above, all of the above

Try to

- The stem should be clear enough to provide the examinee with sufficient information to anticipate the type of answer before looking at the responses.
- Include in the stem all words that would otherwise have to be repeated in each of the responses.
- All responses should be grammatically consistent with the item stem, and all responses should be parallel.
- Distractors should represent unsafe practices or commonly held misconceptions and should be plausible.
- If the item calls for an evaluation or judgment, be sure to provide the authority or source of the judgment.
- Items should be written to assess knowledge of meaningful facts and concepts, not trivial information.
- Stems should be as succinct as possible.

Review, reflect and rewrite

Let go of ego and ownership and trust the committee process