

Educational Assessment Australia

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Writing Good Assessments 2009

Writing Multiple-Choice Items

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Materials Selection:

CONTENT/CONTEXT

1. Is the **content/context** interesting and stimulating?
2. Is there enough substance on which to draw items?

Language Considerations (1)

Text/Content level

- **Length and density: accessible to test-takers?**
- **Presentation: structurally appropriate?**
- **Level of thought required: cognitively appropriate?**
- **Is the text a good model of the language?**

Language Considerations (2)

Linguistic level

- 1. Are the words, expressions and sentences suitable for the target audience?**
- 2. Frequency of use of words/ expressions – high or low or suitable?**
- 3. Difficulty level?**

Terminology in multiple-choice items

- ✓ **Stimulus**: text and/or graphical material on which the questions are based
- ✓ **Item set**: a collection of items all of which draw on the same stimulus material
- ✓ **Item**: the whole multiple-choice question including the answer choices
- ✓ **Stem**: a question or an incomplete statement which presents the problem to be solved
- ✓ **Key**: the correct answer or response
- ✓ **Options**: all possible answers (the key and distractors)
- ✓ **Distractors**: the incorrect alternatives

Guidelines to writing a good m-c item (1): the stem

The **stem** must

- ✓ present only a single issue/problem/idea and not multiple issues
- ✓ be clear and unambiguous
- ✓ contain the bulk of the item's content (words), especially as it relates to ALL the options
- ✓ avoid giving away the KEY (e.g. using adverbs of frequency like 'only', 'always')

Guidelines to writing a good m-c item (1): the options

The **options**

- ✓ contain ONE and only ONE **key** – that melds together with the other options
- ✓ ‘appear’ homogeneous or work in pairs
- ✓ contain **distractors** that ‘work’ – resemble the key in length, in linguistic form
- ✓ contain **distractors** that are plausible but incorrect
- ✓ contain **distractors** that do not overlap with, or are similar in content/idea to the **key**
- ✓ NOT contain **distractors** that are directly opposite to the key (reduces no. of options, increases chance score)
- ✓ avoid using frequency adverbs e.g. *always, only, never*

the chance score

- Keep the **chance score** at 25%!
- Bad items enable test-takers to score when they don't know the answer
- It is important, post test, to do
 - an item analysis
 - a distractor analysis