



## General Rules for Item Writing

---

1. **Minimize the reading load and level.**

Items that require a lot of reading increase the time that examinees need to complete the test.

2. **Base each item on an important outcome or objective.**

For classroom tests, this may mean writing one or two items to address a course or unit objective. It is important that the content is not trivial and that the item is written at a cognitive level congruent with the instruction.

3. **Use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling.**

Errors in grammar and spelling can confuse (even mislead) the examinee and have a negative effect on performance.

4. **Avoid cuing between the items of a test.**

Review the items that are used to construct the test to ensure that one item does not give away the answer to another item.

5. **Avoid making test items that are dependent on one another.**

When writing context dependent items (grouped items based on a scenario), that if the examinee misses one item, it will cause him/her to miss another.

6. **Randomize the key among the options if possible.**

Try to ensure that you have an equal number of A's, B's, C's etc (or 1, 2, 3s) for the key. This rule helps ensure that test-taking strategies cannot be used to "guess" the answer (e.g., "when in doubt, select C [or D]").

7. **If you are new to item writing, have a coworker read and edit your tests for clarity.**

Even experienced writers can benefit from having another person read over the test to critique it.

8. **Avoid using too many multiple-select items.**

These slow the examinee down and can be confusing.

---



## General Rules for Increasing Difficulty of Test items

1. **Avoid defining or identifying the problem by name or diagnosis in the stem.**

Describe the problem by giving clinical assessment data, behaviors or statements by the client or others that must be analyzed in order to determine the problem or condition.

- 2. Avoid test items created from general concepts taken directly from textbooks.**  
These items tend to test recall. Write the stem to reflect how the clinician might encounter this problem in a real setting with a specific patient situation. Include clinical data in the item. This usually results in a higher level of cognitive thinking. The item stem will not be found directly in the text and the student must really comprehend the information in order to apply it to a realistic situation.
- 3. Write items with situations that require the tester to prioritize.**  
These items require the person to think at a higher level to make a decision. Be sure that there are clear priorities present!
- 4. Write items where two or more concepts have been integrated into a test item.**  
Writing items where two or more concepts have been integrated requires additional analysis and synthesis of information to come up with the solution.
- 5. The most common item writing challenge is writing plausible distractors.**  
Usually, the question in the item has been posed in such a manner that it restricts too much content and gives the write limited choices for distractors.

### ***How many plausible options should a writer have?***

When distractors are very difficult to create, reexamine the question being posed. "Open up" the stem and let a little more content into the stem to allow for a selection from a wider range of distractors.

### **Strategies to Alter Item Difficulty**

1. If a question could be answered correctly by most lay persons, it is probably not appropriate for your purposes.
2. Items testing basic skills that are practiced and then used daily tend to be easier. The examinee has received more exposure to that knowledge or skill.
3. Items reflecting straight textbook procedures that examinees memorize and recall tend to be easier than items that ask for some analysis related to the procedure.
  - a. For example, items that ask what to do when something goes wrong during a procedure or how to adapt the procedure to special client tend to be harder.
4. Having more variables in the stem that need to be considered in order to answer the question correctly may increase item difficulty. Items where several reasoning steps must be carried out will be more difficult because several principles or pieces of knowledge will be necessary to answer the item.
5. The plausibility of distractors plays a key role in item difficulty. The more plausible, the more similar the answer options are to each other and to the content in the stem, the more difficult the item will be.