

Module 3b:
Writing the Item Stem for
Selected Response Items

Passport to Great Teaching
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Definition

Item stem – the statement of the question or problem that the examinee is going to answer or solve

Item Stem Guidelines

Write the stem as a question.

Make the question (*stem*) as clear as possible so the student knows exactly what is being asked.

Place any directions that you use to accompany text, graphic, or media above the text or graphic. Typically, the text, graphic, or media comes *before* the question.

Item Stem Guidelines

Put the main or central idea of what you want to ask in the *stem*, not in the answer choices.

Word the question positively. Avoid negatives such as NOT or EXCEPT.

Make sure that something in the stem doesn't give a clue (cue) that will help the student choose the correct answer.

Item Stem Guidelines

Don't make the item opinion-based. For example, don't ask, "In your opinion ..., " as this would make *any* answer choice a possibly correct answer. This renders the item invalid and unusable.

Don't write trick questions. The purpose of a test item is not to trick the student. Also we are measuring the benchmark content and skills, NOT how a student deals with trick questions.

Example 1

Let's examine this item:

1. Multiple-choice items
 - A. consist of a stem and some options.
 - B. may have several correct answers.
 - C. always measure factual details.

The stem is not a question

The problem is determined here

Issues:

- ♦ This does not have a problem or question posed in the stem.
- ♦ The examinee cannot determine the problem on which the item is focused without reading each of the options.
- ♦ The item should be revised.

Example 1 - Revised

Let's examine this revision:

1. What are the components of a multiple-choice item?

- A. A stem and several distractors.
- B. A correct answer and distractors.
- C. A stem, correct answer, and distractors.
- D. A stem and a correct answer.

This asks a question

Which is correct?

Why this is better:

- The stem asks a question.
- A student who knows the components of a multiple-choice item will read the stem, and immediately know the correct answer.
- The only remaining task is to locate the option which contains the complete list of components.

Clueing and an Example

Occasionally, a word or two is inadvertently included in the stem of an item which furnishes the examinee with a verbal association with a word or words in the correct option. This is called *clueing*.

1. What is the major purpose of chord analysis?

- A. To analyze melodic relationships.
- B. To analyze chord progressions.
- C. To determine rhythmic relationships.
- D. To determine sectional relationships.

Clues!

- **The Clue:** The words "analyze" and "chord" in option B are associated with "chord analysis", leading examinees to the correct option through extraneous information.
- **Possible solution:** The problem could be solved, in this case, by changing the wording in option B to "To determine harmonic relationships", and option A to "To determine melodic relationships."

"Trick" questions

Trick questions are designed to confuse or (in some instances) entertain people.

Sometimes these types of questions are difficult, but usually the answer is just not as simple as it may initially seem

They focus on a "strategy of deception" to fool or trick the respondent into an incorrect answer

The correct answer is a fact once it is revealed.

Trick Question Example

Question: Some months have 30 days, some have 31 days. How many months of the year have 28 days?

Answer: ALL months have 28 days. ONE month – February - has ONLY 28 days except for Leap Years (like 2016)

Resource: Item stem templates

- With this module, you have access to the list of item stem templates from *Connecting the Dots*, an excellent book by Ronald S. Carriveau (2010)(University of North Texas).This resource presents sample item stems by category
- Those stems with an asterisk (*) are more adaptable to higher-level thinking

Pause to Think

- Review some item stems from examinations you give and check their alignment with the guidelines presented in this module. Describe how your stems meet the guidelines.
