General Guidelines for Writing/Review of Multiple-Choice Test Questions

Joel P. Wiesen, Ph.D., Director
Applied Personnel Research
27 Judith Road
Newton, Massachusetts 02459-1715
wiesen@personnelselection.com

The following may be considered while writing or reviewing multiple-choice test questions.

1. Clear central problem in the stem; focused on one subject or content area.
2. All choices are grammatical completions of stem or answers to the question.
3. One and only one correct answer.

4. Distracters are plausible (but wrong).
5. Length of choices are equal, or the length is not a consistent cue for the correct answer.
6. Equal number of A, B, C, D choices as the key.

7. Avoid "All of the above", especially in lower level exams (it is confusing and makes item easier).
8. If you use "None of the above" make it the key sometimes and use only w clearly wrong distracters.
9. Use short, clear phrasing of the question.

10. No typos in the questions, instructions, or any exam-related briefing materials.
11. No errors of item content, even tangential content.
12. No errors in test instructions, or in sample items.

13. Avoid unnecessary, unusual, or non-standard jargon and abbreviations, or define them when used.
14. Avoid slang.
15. Use words which are widely and easily understood.

16. Avoid double negatives.
17. If using negatives, underline or capitalize (not bold, since that can wash out in printing).
18. If you use a pronoun, it should be absolutely clear to what the pronoun refers.

19. Avoid specific determiners (e.g., repetition of important word in both the stem and key).
20. Present numbers in numerical order, unless that gives away the answer.
21. Avoid combination items (e.g., A only; B only; C only; A and C)

22. For knowledge questions, have a solid reference, preferably page and paragraph in an authoritative text.

23. If the correct answer is not universally or very widely accepted, cite the authority or source.
24. If using a textbook as a reference, be careful about using textbook wording in the key. Often it is difficult to write distracters which are similar to the textbook wording.

25. Provide enough context to enable candidate to answer the question. This is especially important when a test writer who is unfamiliar with the subject matter is using a textbook as the source of the question. Read the pages before and after the page used as a reference.
26. Avoid contamination of an item for one ability with another ability (e.g., a math question with difficult syntax and grammar).
27. Put repetitive words in the stem rather than in each choice.

28. Avoid overlapping choices unless very germane (e.g., ages 9-14, teenage)
29. Avoid two distracters which mean the same thing.
30. Do not overload a test with definitional items.

31. Do not emphasize knowledge to the exclusion of understanding and application.
32. Avoid outraging candidates (as by asking outrageously hard questions, or trivia, especially trivia which need not be memorized because it is readily available in various sources on the job, or by asking questions on only the first half of a textbook).
33. Avoid humor.

34. Do not try to write tricky questions, unless the examination requires it (as for a detective).
35. Review the test when it is complete to be sure one item does not give away the answer to any other, and that no item is a duplicate of another.
36. Type the test so that the items are easily read.

37. Use an intuitively clear answer sheet layout, such as in blocks of five, numbered down not across.
38. Distracters should be similar to key in knowledge, to avoid confusion or giving cue to key.
39. Wording of distracters should be as precise as key, to avoid giving cue to key.

40. Avoid unnecessary mathematical computation when measuring mathematical comprehension.
41. Arrange distracters in a logical order, so test takers do not have to hunt for the correct answer.
42. Items should be reviewed by another person, no matter how skilled the item writer.

43. It is highly desirable to try out items before using them in a live examination.

Partial Bibliography

Adkins, D.C. (1974) *Test Construction: Development and interpretation of achievement tests* (2nd ed.) Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill.

Haladyna, T.M. (`1999) *Developing and Validating Multiple-Choice Test Items* (2nd ed.) Mahway, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Wesman, A.G. (1971) Writing the test item. In R.L. Thorndike *Educational Measurement* (2nd ed.) Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

Handouts available at: Personnelselection.com\siop2002.htm