
Item Writing 101: How to design a high-functioning multiple choice question

A good item asks just one question AND has only one correct or 'best' answer

POOR: Which of the following are common Canadian garden birds?

- a) Sparrows
- b) Chickadees
- c) Magpies
- d) Cats

BETTER: Which blood pressure is most widely quoted as 'normal' for healthy adults?

- a) 130/90
- b) 130/80
- c) 120/80
- d) 120/90

A good item has a positive 'stem' or lead-in

POOR: Which of these is NOT one of the top 5 reasons for induction of labour at XYZ hospital?

- a) LGA
- b) Term PROM
- c) Twins
- d) Post-term pregnancy

Phrasing the stem positively and including only one correct reason amongst the answer choices is preferred.

A good item features plausible distractors (incorrect answer choices)

Respondents should not be able to select the correct answer by a process of elimination, or clever guessing. People can be tipped off by answers of mismatched length or complexity, patently obvious falsehoods, one answer is in a different category from the rest (units of measurement, families of drugs, etc.)

A good item has at least two plausible distractors

MCQs function best with between 2 and 4 plausible distractors and 1 correct (or best) answer. Longer questions take extra time to develop, and longer to read. Fewer than 3 options makes guessing or test-taking strategies more successful without reflecting better knowledge.