

# Checklist for Writing Multiple-Choice (MC) Items

Content Concerns		
Check box		
	1.	Every item should reflect specific content and a single specific mental behavior, as called for in test specifications (two-way grid, test blueprint).
	2.	Base each item on important content to learn; avoid trivial content.
	3.	Use novel material to test higher-level learning. Paraphrase textbook language or language used during instruction to avoid testing for simply recall.
	4.	Keep the content of each item independent from the content of other items on the test.
	5.	Avoid overly specific and overly general content.
	6.	Avoid opinion-based items.
	7.	Avoid trick items.
	8.	Keep the vocabulary simple for the group of students being tested.
Formatting Concerns		
	9.	The conventional MC with a single best answer format is preferred. Other acceptable options are MCs with multiple correct answers (these are on the NABP exam), questions requiring matching, and questions that embed multiple true-false (MTF) items. Regular true-false (TF) questions are strongly discouraged because there is a 50% chance of guessing the correct answer. <b>Avoid</b> the complex MC (Type K) format since the correct answer can often be identified using logic if the students knows 1 or 2 of the possible choices are incorrect.
	10.	Format the item vertically instead of horizontally.
Style Concerns		
	11.	Edit and proofread items.
	12.	Use correct grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.
	13.	Minimize the amount of reading in each item.
Writing the stem		
	14.	Ensure that the directions in the stem are very clear.
	15.	Include the central idea in the stem instead of the choices.
	16.	Avoid window dressing (excessive verbiage).
	17.	Word the stem positively, avoid negatives such as <i>not</i> or <i>except</i> . If you use negative words, use them cautiously and always ensure that they appear capitalized and boldface.
Writing the Choices		
	18.	Develop as many effective choices as you can, but research suggests that three choices are adequate.
	19.	Make sure that only one of the choices is the correct answer.
	20.	Vary the location of the correct answer according to the number of choices.
	21.	Place the choices in logical order or numeric order.
	22.	Keep the choices independent; choices should not overlap.
	23.	Keep the choices homogenous in content and grammatic structure.
	24.	Keep the length of the choices about equal.
	25.	<i>None of the above</i> should be used very carefully.
	26.	Avoid <i>all of the above</i> .
	27.	Phrase choices positively; <i>avoid</i> negatives such as <i>not</i> .
	28.	Avoid giving clues to the right answer, such as the following
		a) Specific determiners, including <i>always, never, completely, and absolutely</i>
		b) Clang association (choices identical to or resembling words of the stem)

		c) Grammatical inconsistencies that cue the test taker to the correct choice
		d) Conspicuous correct choice
		e) Pairs or triples of options that clue the test taker to the correct choice
		f) Blatantly absurd, ridiculous options
	29.	Make all distractors plausible
	30.	Use typical student errors to write your distractors.
	31.	Use humor if it is compatible with the teacher and the learning environment

**Reference:**

*The checklist is from:* Sylvia LM, Barr JT. Pharmacy Education: What Matters in Learning and Teaching. Jones and Bartlett Learning. Sudbury, MA, 2011. (adapted from Haladyna reference below)

**Other Resources:**

1. Haladyna TM, Downing SM, Rodriguez MC. A review of multiple-choice item-writing guidelines for classroom assessment. *Appl Meas Educ.* 2002; 15:309-334.
2. NBME. Constructing Written Test Questions for the Basic & Clinical Sciences, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Available at: [http://www.nbme.org/PDF/ItemWriting\\_2003/2003IWGwhole.pdf](http://www.nbme.org/PDF/ItemWriting_2003/2003IWGwhole.pdf)
3. Brame C. Multiple choice item construction: avoiding constructions that reduce validity and reliability. Available at: <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/writing-good-multiple-choice-test-questions/>