Designing Effective Test Questions

There are a number of resources available in the library of the Center for Teaching lending library on formal assessment of student learning. Many websites also have useful information. Below is a summary of some key points gleaned from these resources.

General Test-Writing Guidelines

- **Prepare students for the test format and content through explanation and practice** – Peter Airasian suggests that, “The primary aim in assessing pupil achievement is to provide pupils a fair opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned from the instruction provided.”

- **Decide what level of thinking a question asks of the student** – According to Bloom’s Taxonomy, there are at least six levels of thinking, beginning with simple recall of information to analysis and devaluation of the material.

  **Bloom’s Taxonomy:**
  Knowledge – Comprehension – Application – Analysis – Synthesis – Evaluation

- **Write the Questions**
  - Avoid wording and sentence structure that are ambiguous and confusing.
  - Use appropriate vocabulary.
  - Keep questions short and to the point.
  - Write items that have only one correct answer.
  - Give information about the nature of the desired answer; be explicit about what kinds of items are required for a correct answer.
  - Do not provide clues to the correct answer.

Multiple-Choice Test-Writing Guidelines

Adapted from “Writing Multiple-Choice Questions That Demand Critical Thinking”

These general guidelines apply to writing multiple choice questions. However, you also have to write the answer!

Answer Options:

- Avoid lifting phrases directly from text or lecture. This becomes a simple recall activity for the student. Use new language as frequently as possible.

---

- Write the correct answer before writing the distracters. This makes sure you formulate one [clearly] correct answer.
- Answer options should be similar in length and parallel in grammatical structure.
- Limit the number of answer options. Research shows that three-choice items are about as effective as four-choice items.
- Distracter choices must be incorrect, but plausible.
- To make distracters more plausible, use words that should be familiar to students.
- Help students see crucial words in the question. For example: “Which of the following is NOT an explicit norm?”
- Use hyperbole or extreme words rarely. Eg: all, none, never, always, etc.

Resources:


“Multiple-choice Questions and Bloom’s Taxonomy.” http://web.nct.ac.za/projects/cbe/mcqman/mcqappc.html


“Writing Multiple-Choice Questions That Demand Critical Thinking.” http://cit.necc.mass.edu/atft/TestCritThink.htm