Tips for Writing Good Multiple-Choice Questions

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

I remember with horror and embarrassment the first multiple-choice exam I wrote. I didn’t think the students were taking my course all that seriously, so I decided to use the first exam to show just how substantive the content really was. I wrote long, complicated stems and followed them with multiple answer options and various combinations of them. And it worked. Students did poorly on the exam. I was pleased until I returned the test on what turned out to be the longest class periods of my teaching career. I desperately needed the advice that follows here.

- Don’t plan to write the entire test at once. If you do, chances are most of the questions will be of the “When did Columbus first visit the new world?” variety.
- The instructions should specify whether the student is selecting the correct answer or the best answer.
- Start by writing the stem first. Aim for a stem that presents a single problem and make it a problem related to significant content in the course. Using a verb in the stem helps ensure it presents a problem clearly.
- Write the stem either as a question or an incomplete statement. Generally questions are preferable to statements because they make it obvious what the student is expected to answer.
- State the question or statement positively, avoiding negatives. A negatively worded question adversely challenges even intelligent readers and students stressed about an exam are easily confused by them.
- After you’ve created the stem, write the correct or best answer. Make it brief and clear. It shouldn’t be longer than the incorrect options.
- Now write the incorrect answers, known as distracters. Common student errors make good, plausible distracters. It’s generally best to avoid humorous options. Some research shows that they don’t relax students and ridiculous choices are obviously not the right answer so students who don’t know the material are now guessing between fewer options.
- Include all the words needed to answer the question in the stem. Don’t repeat words or phrases in the distracters that could be put in the stem.
- Terms like “all,” “never,” or “always” are more often in the incorrect options than the correct ones. Test-wise students understand this and use it to their advantage.
- Check for grammatical consistency between the stem and the options. If an answer option isn’t grammatically correct, it doesn’t sound right, and most students won’t select it.
- Generally avoid using “none of the above” and “all of the above” or use them very cautiously. If students are selecting the best answer, “all of the above” is obviously a wrong answer and “none of the above” is very likely a wrong answer. If the instructions are to pick the right answer, the research has documented that 25% of the time “all of the above” is the right answer.

After my first multiple-choice test disaster, a colleague helped me with pointers like these. He also told me something else that has stuck with me. Think of a test question as a window that you look through to see what the student knows and understands. If the window is dirty, streaked, cracked, or broken, that makes it harder to see if the student has learned what you wanted him to learn. Good test questions are clean windows. They don’t obscure the view of what the student does and doesn’t know.

Despite good advice and a commitment to writing good multiple-choice questions, it is still possible to write the occasional bad one. It’s a bad question when a sizeable percentage of students miss the question and when a sizable percentage of those with the highest scores of the exam (or in the class) are missing the question. At this point, it’s best to be honest. You don’t lose credibility with students if you toss out a question now and then. You lose a lot of credibility if you stand by questions that, although perfectly clear to you, confused and misled the masses.
IMPORTANT DATES

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<thead>
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<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRB Meeting</td>
<td>Thursday, April 3rd</td>
<td>1:00 PM – 2:00 PM</td>
<td>Social Work Lab</td>
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<tr>
<td>QEP Critical Thinking Think-Tank VIII</td>
<td>Thursday, March 13th</td>
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<tr>
<td>QEP Critical Thinking Professional</td>
<td>Tuesday, April 15th</td>
<td>10:00 AM – 11:00 AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development Instructors Workshop</td>
<td>Tuesday, April 22nd</td>
<td>8:30 AM – 4:00 PM</td>
<td>Committee of 100 Auditorium</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014 Faculty Research Symposium</td>
<td>Tuesday, April 22nd</td>
<td>4:00 PM - 5:30 PM</td>
<td>Committee of 100 Auditorium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Meeting</td>
<td>Tuesday, April 22nd</td>
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Quality Enhancement Plan Outcomes: An Eternal Perspective

Our first semester of the implementation of the QEP has already stimulated conversations of now and eternity. Let me explain, in early September, several base-line measures related to critical thinking were administered to first-time freshman as part of the QEP assessment design. Measures were administered that included a standardized test, reading and writing essays as well as a test of reading performance. This information will assist us in enhancing students’ learning experiences at the University.

In brief, one of the measures, the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) provided information that sparked a question of eternal import related to church affiliation. The CCTST is a standardized test to which we were able to add ten customized questions that provide information for demographic variables of interest. Specifically, student responses to one of the questions indicated that 93% (N=378) of our first-time freshman report affiliation with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. How many of these students will report the same affiliation 30 years from now? We believe that thinking critically helps clarify and inform values and choices that integrated within “true education” empowers students “to be thinkers and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought…it secures his passport from the preparatory school of earth to the higher grade, the school above” (E.G.White, Education, pp.17, 19).

- Jeannette Dulan, Ph.D.

OU Presents: Biblical Foundations Research Conference 2014 Call for Papers

The 2nd Biblical Foundation Conference will be on May 14 at the McKee B&T Building. Research papers are invited from all academic divisions and should then be submitted to department chairs. Papers should be single-spaced, at least ten pages, and examine any factor(s) that contribute to how the University operationalizes faith-based learning on its campus. Of special interest are scholarly papers that (1) draw on qualitative and quantitative research on faith-based academic assessment methods, (2) explore how other universities implement campus-wide faith-based learning (3) deliberate on the “nuts-and-bolts” of structuring faith-based syllabi and co-curriculum with goals and student learning outcomes, (4) consider the format of syllabi from other faith-based universities and (5) explore data on incorporating faith-based outcomes online.

For more information, please contact the Office of Spiritual Life.

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For online/distance learners, check out new orientation guide at http://libguides.oakwood.edu/GOLD

DATABASE OF THE MONTH

Social Work Abstracts: Researchers seeking scholarly and professional perspectives on subjects such as therapy, education, human services, addictions, child and family welfare, mental health, civil and legal rights, and more will find Social Work Abstracts to be an indispensable resource. For additional full-sources use SOC Index w/FT also. See pictorial Library Catalog for new arrivals @ www.oakwood.edu

THOUGHTS

“It was one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold: when it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade.”

– Charles Dickens

FOR FUN

Q: Why is everyone so tired on April 1?
A: Because they’ve just finished a long, 31 day March!