# Writing Multiple Choice Questions

A multiple choice question has two main parts, the item stem and the item options.  The item stem poses the question to be answered or problem to be solved.  The item options include the correct answer and the wrong answers (also known as distractors).  Generally, you will have one correct answer and 3-4 distractors.  Fewer distractors make the question easy to guess and more makes it difficult to answer.

**Writing a Good Item Stem**

Item stems can be written as either a question or an incomplete sentence.

| | |
|---|---|
| *Question:* | What is another name for the incorrect item options in a multiple choice question? |
| *Incomplete Sentence:* | In a multiple choice question, the incorrect item options are also known as _____. |

- If you do use an incomplete sentence as the stem, write it so the blank comes at the end of the sentence, not at the beginning or in the middle.
- When you write the stem, whether as a question or as an incomplete sentence, you need to balance between making the stem too wordy and giving enough information to make the question unambiguous.  The sentence structure you use should be simple.  You can include one or two introductory sentences to set up a problem, for example, before the actual item stem, rather than using a complexly worded question alone.
- Avoid using questions that are negatively worded, such as, "Which of the following are not examples of....?"  These types of questions are effective if used occasionally, but they are confusing for students to read and interpret and should not make up the bulk of your test.  If you do use a negative, draw attention to it by using bold or italicized font (or both), like this: "Which of the following are *NOT* examples of....?"
- Who, What, and When questions tend to ask for factual knowledge.  To test higher order cognitive skills, try asking Why and How questions, which tend to test understanding and interpretation.  You can present a chart, graph, map or other data to be interpreted, and then ask a series of several questions that require the student to draw conclusions based on the information presented.
- Nothing about the writing of the responses should cue the student to which one is correct or incorrect.
  - This means each option should be approximately the same length and have the same sentence structure.
  - For an incomplete stem, each item option should complete the sentence grammatically, if incorrectly.
- The distractors should at least be plausible, even thought they are incorrect.
  - Distractors that are "too incorrect" are easily ruled out by anyone, making it easier to guess the correct answer from the remaining options
  - each option in order to know that none is correct, but use it only occasionally.
- When listing the options, put then in a logical order, such as chronologically for dates, increasing size for numbers, or alphabetically for names or places.  If there is no logical order, then put them in random order, with the correct option in a random position.