

Tips for Writing Effective Multiple Choice Questions

Anatomy of a Multiple Choice Item

Test questions consist of a stem and alternatives, one of which is the answer and the remainder of which are distractors.

A 54-year-old woman, G0P0, with a BMI of 20, smokes and works as a convenience store clerk. She is seeing you because she has been having urine leakage. Which of the following in her history is a known risk factor for urinary incontinence?

Distractors { A. BMI
B. occupation type
C. parity } **Alternatives**

Answer { D. smoking status }

Stem

General Best Practices

1. One question addresses one key point or takeaway.
2. The question is clear using appropriate vocabulary and terminology.
3. The Sharp CME Portal allows a maximum of five (5) alternatives (a – e), you can have less, but not more.
4. Avoid complex multiple choice options (e.g.: “Both a and b” or “Both b and c”)
5. Avoid “True or False” questions.
6. The total number of questions will vary depending on length and complexity of education.

Stem (Question) Best Practices

1. Should be meaningful by itself and present a definite problem.
2. Contain only relevant material.
3. Avoid negatively stating questions, unless absolutely required by the content.
4. Should be a question (preferred) or a partial sentence – avoid fill-in-the-blank.

Alternatives (Distractors & Answers) Best Practices

1. All alternatives should be plausible (even incorrect ones).
2. Alternatives should be clear and concise – short answers are better.
3. Avoid “all of the above” or “none of the above”.
4. Present alternatives in a logical order.
5. Be consistent in grammar, form, length and language for all alternatives – helps to avoid providing clues to the correct answer.

Additional Requirements for MOC Part 2 Questions

1. Provide rationale and/or references to support correct answer.
2. Provide rationale and/or references to support all distractors.

Additional Resources

[Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching – Writing Good Multiple Choice Test Questions](#) (Source for handout)

[Kent State University Teaching Tools in a Flash – Writing Effective Multiple Choice Questions](#)

[Virginia Commonwealth University Center for Teaching Excellence – Writing Multiple Choice Questions](#)

[University of Waterloo Centre for Teaching Excellence – Designing Multiple-Choice Questions](#)