Best Practice:
Writing Multiple Choice Questions

Anatomy of a Multiple Choice Question

What compound is known as the universal solvent?


Stem
- Base each question on the student learning objective.
- Minimize the time necessary to read each question.
- Present diagrams, charts, tables and illustrations when appropriate.
- Highlight important words.
- Use the active voice.
- Have your questions peer reviewed.

Options
- Stem should either be in a question format or completion format.
- Include the central idea and most of the phrasing in the stem.
- The blank in a completion stem should always be at the end.
- Always include a verb in the stem.
- Create stems designed to comprehend, apply, analyze, and evaluate.

Options
- Provide a minimum of three options.
- Make all options homogenous in content, form and grammatical structure.
- List options in a logical sequence if possible.

Key
- Randomly distribute the correct answer among the positions.
- Confirm that there is only one correct or best response.

Mistakes To Avoid

Design
- Trying to assess more than one idea per question.
- Questions based on opinions.
- Using “all of the above.”
- Overly specific knowledge questions.
- Textbook verbatim phrasing when developing questions.
- Trick questions.
- Clues from one question to another.
- Formatting the question horizontally.
- Cultural or gender bias.

Stem
- The use of negatives in the stem such as “not” or “except.”
- Giving clues in the stem.
- Unnecessary verbiage in the stem.

Options
- More than five options.
- The use of humor when developing options.
- Numbering options. Lettering options reduces confusion if the stems are numbered.

Key
- Verbal association between the stem and the correct answer.
- Making the correct answer overly longer than the distracters.