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Teaching Toolbox: Writing Multiple-Choice Answers

by Emily O. Gravett

As promised, in this week's Toolbox email, I am continuing the multiple-choice theme by focusing on constructing effective *answer options*. These include both the correct answer as well as the other, incorrect alternatives (sometimes called "distractors"). Here are a few recommendations and key points that emerge out of the literature, such as *A Practical Guide to Creating Quality Exams* (which the CFI houses in its [Resource Collection](#)):

Instruct students to select "the best answer"

- This instruction can help to prevent students from successfully arguing that their incorrect answer actually works (even if it is not the most suitable answer for that question).

Use only plausible distractors

- Common misconceptions, errors, or mistakes, especially from previous tests, can provide realistic incorrect options.

Use only as many answer options as necessary

- The number of options can change from question to question depending on how many high-quality distractors can be generated. As few as three is fine.

Write the options so they are homogeneous in length

- Too often the correct answer is obvious because it is longer or more nuanced than the others.

Vary the placement of the correct answer

- Research shows that instructors usually locate the correct answer in the second or third spots.

Avoid "all of the above" and "none of the above"

- With these options, instructors cannot discern whether students know the correct answer.

In fact, all of the recommendations above can help the instructor avoid situations where test-wise students are simply able to guess correctly, without really knowing the right answer or understanding the material.

Many of the “tips” or “rules” about constructing effective multiple-choice tests also suggest asking a trusted colleague to review and even try out the multiple-choice questions before giving them to students in a high-stakes scenario. This practice ensures both that the questions and answers are clear and that the test can be completed in the time allotted. If you would like to receive feedback on your exams or other course materials, you can always [request a CFI teaching consultation](#).

We look forward to working with you!

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