

Advice for writing good multiple choice questions. ¹

The usual format for multiple choice questions is to pose a question in a *stem*, and offer several (4-5) brief possible answers. One is the *key*, or correct answer and the others—called the *distracters*—are plausible but incorrect.

Example

In 2003, the specialized area of psychiatry concerned with its application in the general medical setting was approved as a formal subspecialty by the American Board of Medical Specialties. Which of the following became the official name of this subspecialty?

stem

- A. Consultation-liaison psychiatry
- B. Psychiatry in the medical setting
- C. Liaison psychiatry
- D. Medical psychiatry
- E. Psychosomatic medicine

Distracters

Key

Overall, the question should

- Test important material
- Be appropriate to the level of training
- Be supported by data or references

The stems should

- Be focused and clear
- Contain the majority of information
- Lead to only one possible answer
- Be positively phrased

The distracters should

- Be incorrect
- Be short and to the point
- Be independent (i.e., one cannot deduce answer through process of elimination or by noticing the similarity between possible answers)
- Be free of vague quantifiers such as “usually,” “mostly,” “rarely”
- Avoid “all of the above” or “none of the above”
- Be similar in content, length, and grammar

¹ Adapted from Academic Psychiatry, 34:4, July-August 2010, 310-316.