

Joint Committee on Intercollegiate Examinations

Question writing checklist

Featherstone, C.¹, and Hurst, Y.² (2014) ¹RCSEd/JCIE, ²RCSEd

Checks across all question formats	
Alignment	Is the task required by the question congruent with the learning objectives at this stage of career progression (e.g. interpretation of information, decision making...)?
Blueprinting	Are the topic and task listed in the exam syllabus and is the blueprint code provided?
Level of competence	Is the question pitched to discriminate around the level of minimal competence required for a pass?
Spelling and grammar	Is the question free from spelling mistakes and grammatical errors?
Jargon	Is the question jargon free (as much possible within the topic area)? Is it free from idioms which might unfairly disadvantage non-native English speakers?
Timing	Can the question be read and answered within approximately 1 minute (for SBAs and EMIs) or within the allocated time (structured orals)?
Clarity	Is it clear from the question what candidates are expected to do?
Additional checks: common pitfalls in writing questions with a selected response format (SBAs, EMIs)	
Grammatical cue	The sentence structure can sometimes allow candidates to exclude a subset of the options. To avoid this, make the lead in a whole question rather than a sentence continuation.
Logical cue	If several but not all of the options are very similar, this can suggest that the answer is in this subset. Try to make the options as homogeneous as possible.
Absolute or vague terms	Never and always are almost never true; vague terms make it difficult to know what the question writer meant (e.g. how often is "often"?).
Longest answer is "single best answer"	The answer with the most information / the highest level of precision is often the correct answer. Try to give all options a similar length and similar level of precision.
Repeated words	Repeated words (or related words) between the stem and the options can point to the answer.
Convergence strategy	By looking at how many times each term is repeated across the set of options, candidates select the option which contains all the most frequently repeated terms.
Overly complicated questions	Questions which are too long, or present information in overly complex forms are in danger of testing skills which are not in line with the purpose of the exam (e.g. reading speed, working memory).
Negatively phrased items	Items which ask a question in the negative (e.g. "which is the least appropriate...") are confusing to candidates who have to switch between best and worst answer, and are contrary to the mode of reasoning in most clinical situations.
"True/false"	If the options are all either completely correct or completely incorrect, the question does not follow the "single best answer" approach and is most likely pitched at the recall level. Options should be on a continuum from least to most appropriate.
Option-dependent question	Candidates should be able to answer the question without referring to the options. This encourages them to think of the answer for themselves based on the information provided in the stem and lead-in.
Window dressing	Questions which can be answered without referring to the stem are typically pitched at the recall level. They also use up precious time in the examination by giving candidates irrelevant information to read.

Resources used in the compilation of this checklist

Case, S. and Swanson, D. (2002) *Item writing manual (3rd Edition)*, NBME (available online).

Naeem, N., van der Vleuten, C. and Alfaris, E. A. (2012) Faculty development on item writing substantially improves item quality, *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 17, 369-376.