

From: Center for Faculty Innovation
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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Writing Multiple-Choice Questions
Date: Friday, September 23, 2016 12:22:00 PM

Teaching Toolbox: Writing Multiple-Choice Questions

By Emily O. Gravett

With October just around the corner, many of us may soon be developing midterm exams, perhaps replete with multiple-choice questions. There are many helpful resources available in text and even online for constructing these questions, such as through [Vanderbilt's Center for Teaching](#). Several specific recommendations emerge about constructing clear multiple-choice questions from the vast literature on the topic; I represent a selection below, along with the problems they seek to address and examples:

Use open-ended questions, not fill-in-the-blank, incomplete sentences

- The problem: Students have difficulty focusing on the question if they simultaneously have to hold the partial sentence in their memory as well as complete it with each of the answer choices.

Original: JMU was first called _____ when it opened in 1908.

Improvement: What was JMU first called when it opened in 1908?

Keep questions as specific and succinct as possible

- The problem: Students may incorrectly interpret the question if the information provided is superfluous or unnecessarily long.

Original: On average, attendance at Marco's study sessions has been 25 students. Recently, however, the numbers have dropped much lower. Sometimes only 3 come. Not only are Marco's feelings hurt, but he also has started to wonder if the hours he spends planning the session, sometimes more than 10, are worth it. Marco has started requiring RSVPs 2 weeks in advance to ensure high attendance. Which of the following is an assumption in Marco's reasoning?

Improvement: Recently, the number of students attending Marco's study sessions has been much lower than usual. Marco has started requiring RSVPs to ensure high attendance. Which of the following is an assumption in Marco's reasoning?

Avoid negatives in questions

- The problem: Students often miss key terms like "not" or "never" (even when bolded,

underlined, etc.) and there is evidence that ESL students are particularly disadvantaged by such extremes.

Original: Which of the following is **NOT** one of JMU's official values listed on the website?

Improvement: All of the following are official values listed on JMU's website, except...

Include questions that test higher-level thinking

- The problem: Many instructors intend for their students to learn skills in application, analysis, or evaluation, but these skills are not tested by questions that only require recall of information.

Original: How many of JMU's students are from Virginia?

Improvement: Given that over two-thirds of JMU's students hail from Virginia, which curricular recommendation makes the most sense?

We will continue with this theme with the next Toolbox email, focusing on how to write clear *answers and alternatives* to multiple-choice questions.

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