

0246-1

## ITEM WRITING SUGGESTIONS

### Test Items, General

#### 1. Form:

Each item should consist of a stem and four or five choices labeled A to D or E.

All items submitted should be in printed form (ie: computer printout or typed) and legible. Please indicate the right answer on the back or on a separate list. Keys should NEVER be visible to reviewers.

#### 2. Content:

Item content should be within the life or study experience of students and of interest to them. It should be appropriate to students' intellectual maturity and should be factually correct. Traditional school situations and vocabulary should be avoided or used sparingly.

Avoid: stressful content, childish content, and stereotypes.

Example: Diese Prüfung ist . . . (sehr) schwer. *This test is . . . very hard.*

Mention of school work or tests add to the stress of the testing situation.

The same point could be tested as follows:

Dieser Schrank ist . . . (sehr) schwer. *This closet is . . .*

#### 3. Wording:

Items should be clear and easy to understand, naturally and idiomatically worded; they should be concise, containing enough context for comprehension

without being repetitive or wordy. To be avoided:

tricky, misleading, or ambiguous wording, or wording that can become topically obsolete or outdated.

Example: Diese Geschichte passierte vor . . . *This story occurred*

A) 8 Jahren

B) 10 Jahren

C) 15 Jahren

D) 18 Jahren

*--- years ago.*

Since this item might be used in years to come, this question may change during the life of the item. Instead the answer could be phrased:

B) im Jahre 1985

in 1985

(All other distracters should be worded similarly)

4. Accuracy:

All items should be checked carefully to make sure that they are accurate in every respect and have ONE AND ONLY ONE correct answer.

The Stem

1. Form:

Item stems can consist of a statement containing a blank space to be filled in (for testing structure and vocabulary), or of a question or incomplete statement (for testing reading comprehension). As far as syntactically possible, the stem should contain all words or phrases that would be common to all choices. It should be positive if possible and state the question precisely and explicitly.

2. Content:

The stem should contain all information needed to appraise all choices so as to arrive at the right answer, and it should clearly convey the purpose of the question (see also under item types).

The Item Key

1. Accuracy:

The key should be clearly correct and the best answer in all respects, not just partially or approximately.

2. Form:

The right answer should NOT be longer or more detailed than the wrong choices, if possible. It should not contain any marked similarity to or marked difference from the stem or other stimulus material that is not also included in at least one

of the other choices.

The Distracters

1. Importance:

The distracters are a major factor in the quality and difficulty of the item. The closer the distracters, the finer the discrimination needed to arrive at the right answer, and vice versa. Distracters should be given careful thought and drafted very conscientiously.

2. Form:

Distracters should follow grammatically and logically from a question or incomplete statement in the stem. They should be grammatically parallel to each other and to the key. No wrong option should be nonexistent, nonsensical or contain nonsensical elements, nor any invented words or phrases. No distracter should be true in part, or be made incorrect by tricky or misleading wording.

3. Content:

Distracters should be plausible in the context of the question and should be based on misconceptions known to be held by students. No distracter should be the opposite of the key or, on the other hand, so closely related to it that it is obvious one of the two must be the right answer. Distracters should not differ notably in structure, difficulty, or length from each other or from the key.

Example of a poorly written item:

Das Kind ist traurig und . . .

- A) lacht
- B) lächelt
- C) grinst
- \*D) weint

*The child is sad and*  
*laughs*  
*smiles*  
*grins*  
*cries*

The key (D) is the opposite of all distracters. All distracters are based on

the same misconception, and C is a low frequency word probably unfamiliar to most students and much harder than the other options.

Item Types

1. Discrete Items:

Discrete (individually independent) items are used to measure knowledge of structure and vocabulary. In many tests, this is usually done by means of a stem containing a blank space followed by four or five choices, one of which fits structurally and logically into the stem sentence. (Other item types are possible.) Both structure and vocabulary are tested by means of discrete items.

a) Structure Items:

Structural points tested should be as diversified as possible within the specified difficulty range. The sentence containing the blank should be structurally and lexically at a level that will present no extraneous difficulties to a student likely to understand the tested structure. Words and phrases on which the tested point depends should be familiar to students at the respective level. Structures that are in flux or a matter of choice or regional usage should be avoided. Distracters should represent different options students at the appropriate level are likely to choose: there should never be an incorrect use of the language. Avoid basing more than one distracter on the same misconception.

b) Vocabulary Items:

In testing lexical items, the same principles apply as in testing structural points. However, distracters should fit the sentence grammatically. To be avoided: literary style or unlikely contexts.

Example: Um des Rachegeföhls eines Mannes willen waren drei Personen überfallen worden.

*For the sake of the vengeful feeling of one man,  
3 persons had been assaulted.*

In this item not only is the style too literary, but it is also a very unlikely context. Should be avoided.

## 2. Reading Comprehension

### a) Stimulus Material:

Reading comprehension is tested by questions or incomplete statements based on passages of varied length difficulty, and content.

Passages should be similar to the reading material to which students are accustomed in their learning situation.

Passages should be interesting and appropriate to the intellectual and social maturity level of students. They should be contemporary in style and content. Factual narratives and reports in various fields, news items, or human interest stories are suitable. To be avoided: Fables, fairy tales, moralistic or historical anecdotes; provocative, controversial or emotionally charged issues, since this test is administered nationwide; also purely American topics, and topics familiar from outside knowledge only.

Passages should contain several ideas distinct from each other so that a number of questions proportionate to the length of the passage can be asked; but short paragraphs followed by two or three questions are quite acceptable. Passages should be written clearly and idiomatically and should be free from any ambiguities in language or content. All passages may be simplified, shortened, or clarified as necessary to reduce them to a suitable length and difficulty level.

### b) Reading Comprehension Items:

Items based on a passage should ask for the main idea as well as any subsidiary topics or relevant details. Questions may also ask for relationships such as cause and effect, time sequence, comparisons or contrasts, or for moods or attitudes. Inferences to be drawn from the passage

can be asked for if they clearly follow from what is contained in the passage.

All items should be answerable from what is contained in the passage. While the general intellectual level of the students has to be taken into account, NO question should be answerable without reading the passage, either from outside knowledge, or because the distracters could not possibly be valid answers to the question -- all choices must make sense in the context of the question.

Each item should stand on its own and should be answerable without knowing the answer to any other item, e.g. by a pronoun replacing a noun; and no item should contain a clue that will help to answer another item.

Items should paraphrase the wording of the passage, NOT repeat it. In difficulty, they should be neither markedly easier nor harder than the level of the passage.

The stem should state clearly the nature of the question. Vague, undirected stems that do not contain a finite verb are NOT acceptable.

Choices should be comparable in length and should be unified in content rather than constitute a collection of unconnected statements. No choice should contradict or deviate from the information contained in the stem.

ETS Basic Terminology for Item Types

The following terms and concepts are commonly used by the College Board and by ETS:

Stem - Initial part of a test item. The stem may be a question or an incomplete statement.

Item - A single multiple-choice question, including the choices.

Item Set - two or more items based on a common passage, problem, chart, or other stimulus materials.

Choices or options - the alternatives following the stem from which examinees have to select the correct answer.

Key - the choice that is the correct answer.

Distracters - the choices that are incorrect.

Illustration:

Stem: Hier wird ein neues Haus gebaut; das alte wird . . .

	(A) abgemacht	
<u>Distracters</u>	(B) niedergelegt	
	(C) niedergeschlagen	
<u>Key</u>	*(D) abgerissen	

Illustration:

Gerda ist meine _____ Freundin. Sie kommt	Stem
A) gut	
B) lieben	Distracters
Key *C) beste	
D) besser	

jeden Tag _____ mir, und wir machen	Stem
Key *A) zu	
B) bei	Distracters
C) nach	
D) an	

unsere Schularbeiten _____.	Stem
A) einander	
B) mit	Distracters
C) auf	
Key *D) zusammen	

### *Learner-Centered Instruction: Teaching Grammar*

**Length: One or two days**

Participants will...

- develop a wide variety of creative strategies for learner-based grammar instruction in order to improve students' proficiency in the early phases of language study
- focus on the presentation of grammar in textbooks and its role in basal-level language instruction
- examine the typology of exercises and their role in real-world communication
- develop grammar in a sequence for performance, deleting elements not perceived as important to communicative functions at beginning levels and emphasizing or introducing those elements perceived as more vital
- discuss appropriate criteria for a grammar core, with an emphasis on grammar in the context of real-world language use

### *Textbook Adaptation*

**Length: Two days**

Participants will...

- develop a plan for the pedagogical decision-making involved in the selection of a textbook and an approach for implementing those decisions
- examine textbooks in light of a four skills, proficiency-oriented approach
- analyze a particular chapter of the textbook to serve as a model for assessing implementation and adaptation decisions
- focus on real-world functions of vocabulary, grammar and other textbook activities
- decide how material from the textbook will be deleted, adapted or supplemented

### *Learner-Centered Instruction: Teaching Vocabulary*

**Length: One or two days**

Participants will...

- develop a teaching plan designed to help learners access and store and organize vocabulary in a meaningful way to enhance retrieval
- learn to enable students to move from learning vocabulary to using language communicatively and with increased precision
- examine the nature of words and their associations
- create activities for implementation in their own programs to provide students with meaningful practice
- develop strategies for recycling words through the receptive and productive skills for the facilitation of storage, recall and use

### *Using Authentic Texts to Develop Cultural Understanding*

**Length: One or two days**

Participants will...

- learn to integrate culture effectively into language instruction through the use of authentic texts
- understand the conceptual issues underlying the teaching of culture, including aspects of cultural universals and the dual roles of background knowledge and a cultural framework in the comprehension of a text
- identify the skills that students need to develop cultural understanding
- develop teaching strategies to enhance learner skills appropriate to language proficiency, and with particular emphasis on reading
- design reading activities using authentic texts, including pre- and post-reading activities
- develop an instructional plan that integrates the teaching of cultural concepts while developing students' reading proficiency in the target language