



GUIDE TO ITEM WRITING

CRITERIA FOR EXAM QUALITY

Validity

- Exam content is aligned with professional practice requirements

Reliability

- Exam provides consistent measurement

Fairness

- Exam provides all candidates with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their competence

7 PRINCIPLES OF ITEM WRITING

Validity

1. Alignment with exam blueprint competency profile or knowledge requirements

Reliability

2. Focus and clarity
3. Sufficient information
4. Only one correct answer
5. Consistent and plausible answers

Fairness

6. Assessable language
7. Relevant and clear images



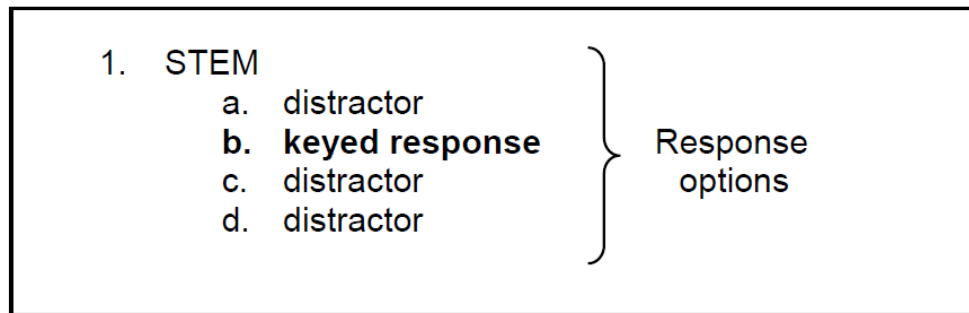
ITEM COGNITIVE LEVELS

Items can be written at various levels of complexity to assess different types of thinking.

- **Knowledge/Recall**
 - Is the basic recall of basic facts or definitions
 - Are **highly discouraged** and are **not effective** at assessing the knowledge, skill, and ability required to function competently in practice.
- **Comprehension/Understanding**
 - Assess the candidate's understanding of clinical principles or processes
- **Application/Analysis**
 - Depict hypothetical physicians/patient scenarios and require the candidate to make diagnoses, prescribe meds, offer suggestions about lifestyle changes, etc.

ANATOMY OF AN ITEM

- An item skeleton:



- Terminology:

Stem: Presents the candidate with the situation or problem they must resolve

Response options: the potential responses to the stem

Keyed Response (Key): the correct option

Distractors: the incorrect options



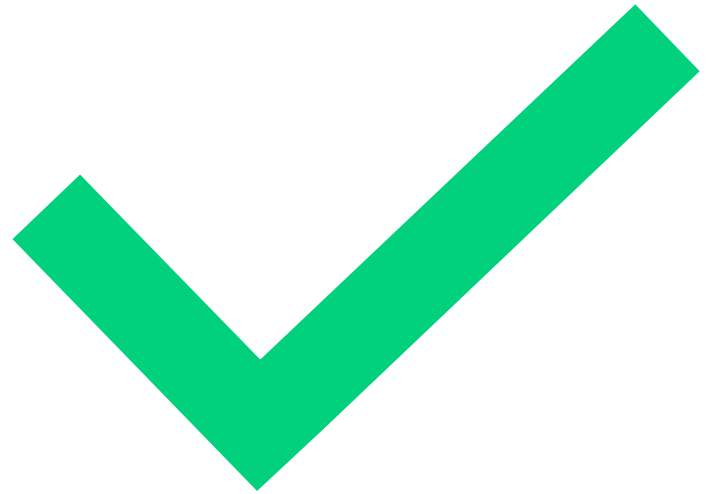
STEP 1: CREATE THE STEM

Presents the situation or problem the candidate must resolve

- Present the stem as a direct question or beginning of a sentence
- Provide all the information required to select an option
- Reflect information or a scenario that is familiar to the well-prepared candidate
- Be stated clearly and concisely
- Avoid textbook phrasing
- Phrase the question in the third person
- Word the stem positively
- Avoid extraneous/irrelevant information
- Use “should” not “would”
- Provide enough stimulus for the candidate to respond

STEP 2: WRITE THE CORRECT (KEYED) RESPONSE

- Provide a response that experts agree is the best answer
- Can be *only one* correct or clearly best response





STEP 3: FORMULATE DISTRACTORS

- Plausible but incorrect (e.g., anticipate the types of errors less proficient candidates are likely to make)

Source of distractors:


- Use common errors and misconceptions
- Carefully worded incorrect statements which may sound plausible to the uninformed
- Statements which are true but do not satisfy the requirements of the question

A decorative graphic in the bottom-left corner of the slide, featuring several overlapping green leaves with a soft, glowing effect. The leaves are in various shades of green, from light to dark, and have a slightly curved, organic shape.

RULES FOR WRITING OPTIONS

- The options must be:
 - real
 - plausible
 - positively phrased
 - unique - no options should have the same meaning
 - grammatically correct
 - similar in terms of:
 - Length
 - Structure
 - Content

SAMPLE ITEM FORMATS



- Direct Question
 - A patient presents to the office complaining of fatigue, morning stiffness, and multiple joint swelling and tenderness that has lasted for eight weeks. On physical examination, the patient has a reduced range of motion. What is the most likely diagnosis?
 - A. gout
 - B. cellulitis
 - C. rheumatoid arthritis**
 - D. vitamin B deficiency
- Sentence Completion
 - A patient presents to the office complaining of fatigue, morning stiffness, and multiple joint swelling and tenderness that has lasted for eight weeks. On physical examination, the patient has a reduced range of motion. The most likely diagnosis is
 - A. gout.
 - B. cellulitis.
 - C. rheumatoid arthritis.**
 - D. vitamin B deficiency.



ITEM WRITING REQUIREMENTS

- All items **MUST**:
 - be job-relevant
 - reflect day-to-day clinical practice
 - have a valid textbook reference from the approved reference list
 - have one clear correct answer
 - be positively phrased
 - be free of ambiguous or confusing language

THINGS TO AVOID


- Unnecessary demographic descriptors or text that indicate bias
 - Most items should only refer to age and gender of a patient.
- Brand names
- Clues that might help a weak candidate guess the keyed response
 - Verbiage from the stem repeated in the key
 - Obviously incorrect options
 - Directly opposing options (hypothermia/hyperthermia)
- first person – use job titles instead of using “you”
- teaching statements or additional information not needed to provide a response





UNACCEPTABLE ITEMS

- True/False stems (such as TRUE, CORRECT, FALSE, INCORRECT, etc.)
- Options that are a series of True/False statements.
- Negative phrasing (such as NOT, EXCEPT, LEAST, INCORRECT, CONTRAINDICATED, AVOID, OPPOSITE, etc.) in either the stem or options
- Absolutes (such as ALWAYS, NEVER, etc.)
- “all of the above” or “none of the above” options
- a combination of options (A&B, B&C, ...)



EXAMPLE OF A FLAWED ITEM

Following a recent camping trip, a patient presents to the office complaining of fatigue, joint swelling and tenderness. On physical examination, patient has a reduced range of motion and muscle weakness. Given the recent activity of the patient, the physician should assess the patient for

- A. cellulitis.
 - B. rheumatoid arthritis.
 - C. Lyme disease.*
 - D. vitamin B deficiency.
- The correct answer too obvious because the stem makes such a big deal about the patient's camping trip and time spent outdoors, as well as the language in the stem about the patient's recent activity.
 - The average person has heard of Lyme disease and the association with ticks, most physicians should be aware of this linkage as well.
 - The distractors are not plausible since they aren't linked to anything the patient may or may not have done according to the text of the stem.
 - There is also a "testwiseness" issue due to the fact that the keyed response is the only option with an initial cap while the distractors are in lower case.

ITEM WRITING TIPS

Utilize

Utilize real-life clinical examples

Write

Write items that require the same kind of decision-making the physician would encounter in practice situations

Use

Use common errors and misconceptions to create distractors

Cover

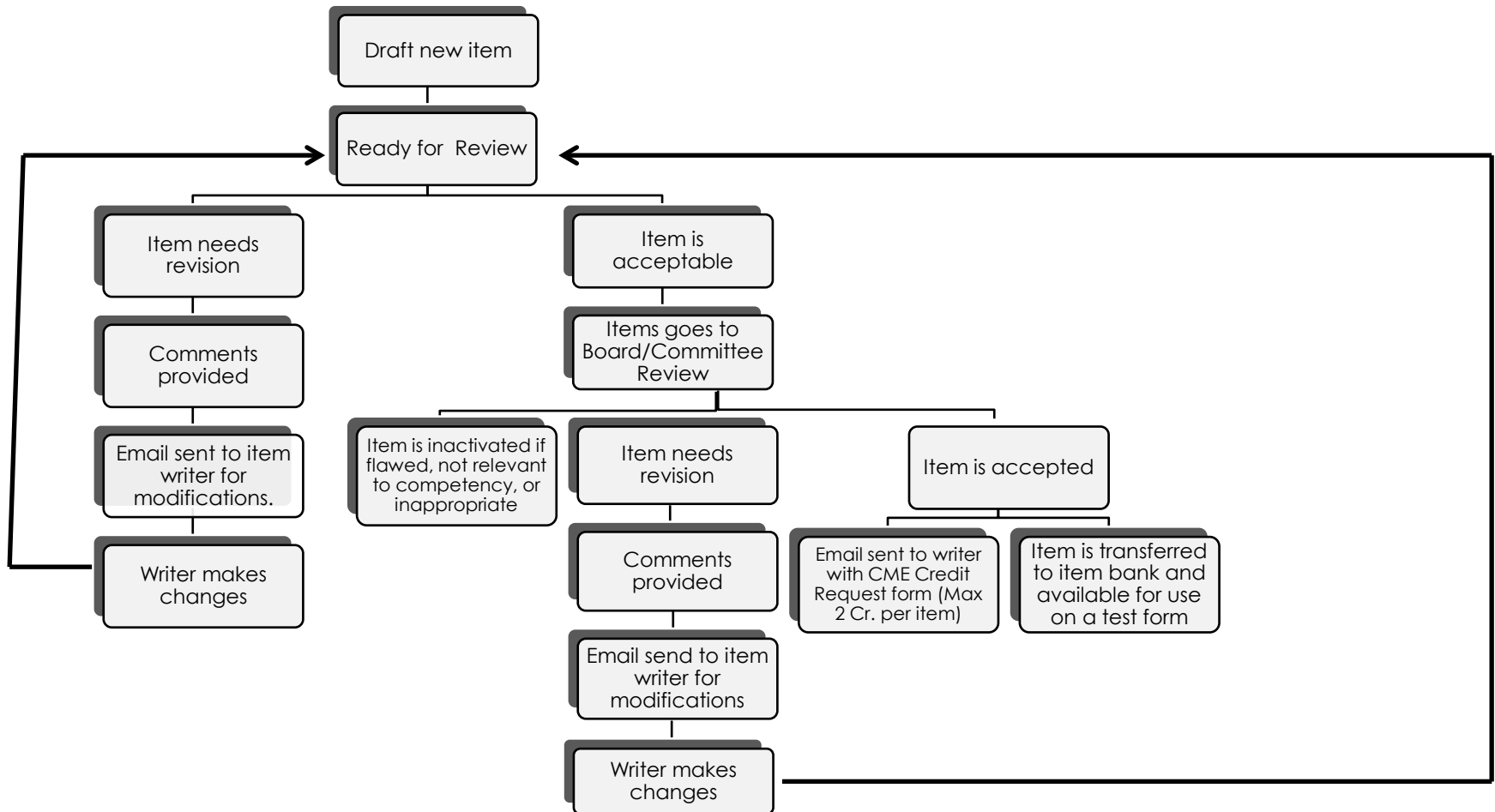
Once an item is complete, cover the options and reread the stem



REFERENCES

- Each specialty has a list of approved references for item writing.
 - All items must be linked to a reference from the approved list and a page number or chapter is required.
 - Items referenced to sources other than those on the approved list will not be submitted for board/committee review.
 - While references are used to support the content of the items, items should be practice-based rather than definitional or verbatim from the text.

ONLINE ITEM WRITING PROCESS



CONCLUSION



WE HOPE THIS PRESENTATION HAS PROVIDED INSIGHT ABOUT THE PRACTICE OF ITEM WRITING.



PLEASE REMEMBER THAT ITEM WRITING, LIKE ANY SKILL, IS IMPROVED WITH TIME AND PRACTICE.



ABPS STAFF IS ALWAYS AVAILABLE FOR QUESTIONS.



WE LOOK FORWARD TO HELPING YOU TRANSFORM YOUR EXPERTISE INTO HIGH-QUALITY ITEMS WHICH WILL STRENGTHEN THE VALIDITY OF THE ABPS EXAMINATIONS.



**Contact Certification Staff @ 813-433-2277 or certification@abpsus.org
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