Module 3C: Writing Answer Choices

by Dr. Tim Brophy

Hello. My name is Tim Brophy, and welcome back to Passport to Great Teaching Creative Assessment. This is module 3c and it's all about writing answer choices. In module 3b we discussed writing item stems and here we're going to talk about the answer choices that we write to go with those items stems.

So let's define this first. The answer choices, of course, are the set of responses that we write from which we expect the examinee to choose a correct answer. So this always should include one absolutely correct response in what we call the group of distractors. So a distractor is a plausible but incorrect choice in the response set. Now, plausible distractors are those that are believable and appear to be true but are not. So we want to keep that in mind as we develop our answer choice sets.

Let's have some criteria here if we're doing this now. We want to make sure that only one of the answer choices is the absolutely correct answer. Plausibility is important for the distractors, but we want to make sure they're also incorrect. All right. Distractors should be ideally equal in implausibility so that students have to really think hard about which is the correct answer. If they don't know, they may pick in one of the more plausible responses.

All right. Then when you're writing your draft answer choices, I would always place the correct answer first. Then, you create your plausible distractors and put an asterisk next to the correct answer choice for tracking purposes for yourself so you'll always remember which one that is. And if somebody who's giving the exam or scoring the exam doesn't know the answer, I should say, then the asterisk will help them find that. And then once you're done with that you can move the answer choices around that way you've associated that asterisk with the correct response.

Continuing on, keep the length of your answer choices about equal to the degree that you can. It's really important to do that because students tend to move to longer/shorter responses depending on what their test taking strategies are like. Also, we want to avoid using the choice like none-of-the-above or all-of-the-above because that in itself introduces a new level of reliability issue, all right? And don't use the choice I don't know. Unless it's really important for you to know, I'll give students that option.

When we're writing answer choices also, phrase your choice as positively as much as possible. Don't use the negative words. Try to keep it positive. You're always going for what you're looking for. And don't give clues. We talked about that in module 3b. Don't give clues to the right answer in the item options, I should say, excuse me, and use a stem that asks for the best answer. If you use that, you got to be very careful how you word the distractors as they all may have some degree of correctness, thus the term best.

So the answer has to be clearly the best choice. So I would avoid those kinds of answers, those kinds of questions if you could. But if you want to use that just be sure that the best answer is clearly the best one of the choices.

Going on, don't make a distractor humorous, OK? It's going to kind of throw it away. If students are laughing at their response, they're going to know it's not correct. So that's going to increase their ability of selecting the right answer randomly rather than choosing it because they know the answer. So choices don't want to be overlapping.

This really relates primarily to ranges in numerical questions. For example, if your answer choice one is 1 to 10 and answer choice two is 10 to 20 then you've got an overlapping response. You have 10 in both one and two. So we want to be sure to avoid those kinds of overlapping issues. And keep the content of your answer choices really as homogeneous and as parallel as possible. This will become clearer when we see some examples.

Here's one from my friends in the dance program. Take a look at this item. All right. Here's the question. An audition that involves on the spot choreography is a, A, dance audition, a callback, prepared monologue or solo, or cold reading. Well, there are lots of issues with this question if you know the dance discipline. First of all, the stems not a question. Again, it's one of those kind of open-ended statements that you expect-- it's like filling in the blank by selecting the right answer. And then the answer choices are not equal in length, all right? They range from one word to four words, all right? And they're all not plausible either. Dancers really don't do cold readings, so that would kind of throw that response away as a potential choice. And it's not a good distractor as a result.

So there are some clues here as well. Did you catch that? The word audition appears in the stem and it appears in option A. So it's very interesting that this would happen. Plus when we're talking about auditions that involve on the spot choreography and you see dance audition, you would be tempted to pick that as the correct choice whether you knew the correct choice or not.

So how might we correct this? Well, let's take a look at it again. Here's the revision. All right. Which of the following is the main purpose of a dance audition? A, demonstration of technique; B, listening to music; C, taking a break; or D, a costume fitting? Why is this better? Well, first of all, the stems a question and it's clear in the question exactly what it is you want to ask and what the core idea is of the stem and what you're getting at in the item. So the student who knows the components of this audition are going to read the stem and immediately know the correct answer is A. Also, all the answer choices are equal in length. They're all three words long, which fits our guidelines perfectly. So the distractors are indeed also plausible. So all of them could be a main purpose of a dance audition, although some are more plausible than others.

OK. There are no clues here either. You don't see the word audition anywhere in any of those choices in the answer set. Here's an example from my friends in theater. So the question is, what characteristic would you use on stage to portray a person who is old and

sick? It's A, move slowly and stooped; B, speak loudly; C, walk tall and straight; D, none of the above.

Well, there are a lot of issues here, too. First of all, the stem's not clear. The word characteristic here is used to mean an action or a movement, which could be confusing, all right? And therefore there are also three answer choices, have four words and one has two words. So again, we have the inconsistent number of words used for each of the answer choices, which could lead the student to go to the shorter one. All right. So answer choice D, none of the above, really violates our only one correct response guideline. So what can I say? All right. We probably want to avoid that one as well.

So how would we revise it? Well, let's look at that. Here's the revised question. Which of the following stage actions best portrays a person who's old and sick? A, stoop and move slowly; B, speak loudly and harshly; C, walk tall and straight; D, crawl on the ground. Why is this better? Well, the stem focuses on a type of action, not a characteristic. There's one clear correct answer, and that's A. All distractors are plausible but only one is the best, and the distractors are all equal in length. They are all four words long.

So let's think about your item and your answer choices. Review the answer choice sets for items that you reviewed for module, 3b. OK? Just get out the same exam. Do they meet the guidelines presented here, and if not, how might you change them? Thank you, and I'll see you in module 3d.