



FORM AND STYLE GUIDELINES ABD EXAMINATIONS

The following serves as an editorial guide for item writing. Adherence to these guidelines is required and important for the continuity of items across examinations. Each examination should have the appearance that the items were all written by the same author. Following the established form and style guidelines will assist in this process.

Item Types

Type A Items

Multiple choice item with one correct answer, and four to six distractors.

One Best Answer

Which of the following is the most _____?

Type P Items (Pick N: Multiple Correct Answers)

Multiple choice item with more than one correct answer.

**Clearly identify the item as a pick 1, pick 2, or pick 3 question
and code it correctly using the chart below:**

CODE	FUNCTION	IDEAL NUMBER OF OPTIONS	MAXIMUM NUMBER OF OPTIONS
Pick-1/2	<i>Pick 1 out of 2 correct options</i>	7	10
Pick-1/3	<i>Pick 1 out of 3 correct options</i>	9	11
Pick-2/2	<i>Pick 2 out of 2 correct options</i>	7	10
Pick-2/3	<i>Pick 2 out of 3 correct options</i>	9	11
Pick-3/3	<i>Pick 3 out of 3 correct options</i>	9	11

All correct answers, whether 1, 2, or 3, should be as equally plausible as possible.

Options (Answer Choices)

- Start all options with a capital letter.
- Omit periods after options.
- Answer should be clearly correct.
- Distractors (incorrect options) should be plausible but clearly wrong.

Note: You may provide alternate incorrect options in your Item Writing Assignment. Please indicate which options are the "alternates" in your assignment.

Image/Picture Labeling

All images must conform to the following specifications:

File Format: .jpg only / **File Size:** 4 MB MAX / **Pixel Dimensions:** 512 x 512 (minimum)

- Do not submit Power Point slides, or images embedded in Word documents.
- Obtain a signed patient consent for images with identifiable patient features.
- If using image labels, use language consistent with the reference in the stem. For example, if the text says "Image A" or "Image 1" the image should be labelled accordingly.

Basic Item Writing Guidelines

Important Characteristics of an Applied Knowledge item:

- Clinically relevant
- Tests judgement
- Tests knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs)
- Focuses on clinicopathologic correlation
- All correct answers, whether 1, 2, or 3, should be as equally plausible as possible.

Rules for writing the vignette or scenario:

- Focus on a single, clearly defined topic.
- Exclude irrelevant information (avoid “window dressing” and “red herrings”).
 - EXCEPTION: In some cases, the purpose of the question is to evaluate the ability to sort through information to identify what is relevant and what is not. If that is the purpose of the question, then “irrelevant” information to “emulate” real-world decision making may be included.
- Do not use abbreviations, jargon, or unnecessary complexity.

Rules for writing the lead-in question:

- Ask a focused question so that the examinee knows exactly what is being asked of them.
- Use positively worded lead-ins. Avoid ‘Which of the following is LEAST likely...’ or ‘Which of the following does NOT....’.
- Do not write true-false lead-ins such as: *Which of the following statements about X is true?*
- If you can answer the lead-in question without looking at the options, then you’ve written a focused lead-in question.
- Close the question. In other words, write a full sentence and use a question mark at the end: *Which of the following is the most likely diagnosis?*

Rules for writing the options:

- Create grammatically parallel options.
- Use options similar in length and complexity.
- Use single phrases, if possible.
- Use mutually exclusive options.
- Multiple correct answer questions should have no more than three correct answers.

Clues to avoid when writing items so that the test-wise examinee cannot figure out the answer:

- **Grammatical cues:** Some options do not follow grammatically from the lead-in; these options can easily be ruled out as incorrect by a test-wise examinee.
- **Word repeats:** A word or similar word from the stem is in the answer.
- **Long correct answer(s).**

- **Absolute terms:** Words such as *none, never, always* are used in the options; these almost always can be ruled out as not correct by a test-wise examinee.
- **Paired options:** Two options are direct opposites of each other, and one of them is the answer; this gives the test-wise examinee a 50/50 chance of getting the item correct.
- **Convergence:** The answer has the most words in common with the other options or distractors. This usually occurs with long options.

Rules for writing the critique:

- Definition: A critique is a paragraph or two that explains why the answer(s) is (are) correct and why the distractors (or other options) are not.
- When writing the critique, reference the words in the answers (e.g., Dermatitis) instead of the letters (e.g., Option A).

Suggested Lead-in Questions

The pattern is to put the number of required responses in ALL CAPS, as outlined below. (i.e. Which ONE of the following....Which THREE options are....)

Diagnosis

Pick – 1/2 or 1/3:

Which ONE of the following is the most appropriate next step in diagnosis? *There may be more than one option that is an acceptable answer. However, only ONE option should be selected.*

Which ONE of the following is the most likely diagnosis? *There may be more than one option that is an acceptable answer. However, only ONE option should be selected.*

Pick – 2/2 or 2/3 or 3/3:

Which [TWO or THREE] of the following are the most appropriate next steps in diagnosis?

NOTE: For Pick 2/3, add an additional explanatory sentence: *There may be more than two options that are acceptable. However, only TWO options should be selected.*

Treatment

Pick – 1/2 or 1/3:

Which ONE of the following is the most appropriate therapy? *There may be more than one option that is an acceptable answer. However, only ONE option should be selected.*

In addition to XYZ, which ONE of the following is the most appropriate therapy? *There may be more than one option that is an acceptable answer. However, only ONE option should be selected.*

Which ONE of the following is the most appropriate initial step in management? *There may be more than one option that is an acceptable answer. However, only ONE option should be selected.*

Pick – 2/2 or 2/3 or 3/3:

Which [TWO or THREE] of the following are appropriate therapies?

In addition to XYZ, which [TWO or THREE] of the following are appropriate therapies?

Which [TWO or THREE] of the following are appropriate initial steps in management?

NOTE: For Pick 2/3, add an additional explanatory sentence: *There may be more than two options that are acceptable. However, only TWO options should be selected.*

Cost Considerations / Patient Preference

Pick – 1/2 or 1/3:

Which ONE of the following is the most cost-effective approach? *There may be more than one option that is an acceptable answer. However, only ONE option should be selected.*

Which ONE of the following options for approaches to treatment is most appropriate to discuss with the patient or patient's mother/father/guardian? *There may be more than one option that is an acceptable answer. However, only ONE option should be selected.*

[for example, if the mother/father/guardian demands a course of treatment, has done their own web research...]

Pick – 2/2 or 2/3 or 3/3:

Which [TWO or THREE] of the following are cost-effective approaches?

Which [TWO or THREE] of the following options for approaches to treatment are appropriate to discuss with the patient or patient's mother/father/guardian?

NOTE: For Pick 2/3, add an additional explanatory sentence: *There may be more than two options that are acceptable. However, only TWO options should be selected.*

General Style List

Abbreviations - Avoid the use of abbreviations. Examples: write out the term “Basal cell carcinoma” instead of BCC, “pathology” instead of path, “American Joint Committee on Cancer” instead of AJCC. A complete blood count can be referred to as “complete blood count (CBC)”.

Vignette - At the beginning of the stem use the following format if applicable: ...comes to the office. Okay to use ...presents to the office.

Age and gender - Use “man” and “woman” instead of “male” and “female”
Female should be ‘woman’ for patients aged 18 and older and ‘girl’ for patients aged 1 through 17. Male should be ‘man’ for patients aged 18 and older and ‘boy’ for patients aged 1 through 17

Patient Race/Ethnicity - A patient's race is only used if directly relevant to the scenario and necessary to answer the question correctly.

Hyphen - Added to ages (e.g., 10-year-old boy)

Numbers under 10 - Written out, unless they are lab values or ages

Numbers 10 and above - Presented as numerals
Laboratory Values’ list should be included in parenthesis in the item. Units should be identified for each value noted. Always add a space between the value and the units (“28 mEq/L” -- not “28mEq/L”).

Sentence Spacing - Use a single space after the concluding punctuation of a sentence.

Close up lead-in questions - End each item stem with a question. For example, instead of “The most appropriate management is”, to the item should read “Which of the following is the most appropriate management?”

Vital signs - Vital signs should be in this order (temperature, pulse, respirations, and blood pressure) (e.g., Temperature is 36.7°C (98.0°F), pulse rate is 205/min, respirations are 12/min, and blood pressure is 95/60 mmHg). The temperature should be in the correct format (Celsius first and Fahrenheit in parentheses) and the conversion should be correct. Indicate if the pulse is regular or irregular and if the respirations are labored or unlabored. Also, if pulse oximetry is mentioned, add as a new sentence right after the vital signs sentence (e.g., Pulse oximetry is 94%.) Editor will change to oxygen saturation during editing.

Medications - Use generic for medications unless there is a compelling reason to use a brand name.

Disease Names - No use of apostrophe “s” in disease names: i.e. Parkinson disease, not Parkinson's; Crohn disease, not Crohn's disease.

Smoking History - Hyphen as follows for smoking history (35-pack-year).

Miscellaneous Style Guide Recommendations -

- Use "denies" upon patient presentation – "The patient denies chest pain."
- Ob/Gyn patients – use "gestation" rather than "pregnant" – "A 35-year-old woman 35 weeks' gestation..."
- Use "significant/specific for" – "Medical history is significant for..."
- Use of "clinic" and "office" are okay, e.g., "A patient comes to the clinic..." or "A patient comes to the office..."
- Use of "evaluated for" is okay; e.g., "A patient is evaluated for..."
- Use of "routine" to describe an office visit is okay.
- Avoid use of "should be" in the items (e.g., *Which of the following should be avoided?*), because this means the answer is really up for debate.
- Avoid use of normal – instead change to "shows no abnormalities" for physical exams or "is within normal limits" for lab values
- Use the serial comma. For example: one, two, and three; not one, two and three
- Order vignettes as follows: patient age, gender, site of care, presenting symptom, duration of symptom, personal medical history, family medical history, current history of smoking, drinking, or drug use, height/weight/BMI, vital signs, PE findings, Lab findings, Urinalysis findings, imaging study results
- Avoid use of "complains" or "complaints" when describing a patient's symptoms.
- Options do not need to be in alphabetical order
- Use kilos (pounds) for weight, e.g., 11.5 kg (25 lb).
- Greek letters should be used (i.e., "β" not "beta")
- Use italics with genes (e.g., *BRAF*).
- Use "skin-colored" versus "flesh-colored."
- In dermatology, "perform" is a better verb than "order". A biopsy is not ordered, it is performed.
- Laser description - Do not use a comma in the numeric portion of the laser description.
- Greater than (>) less than (<) – If numbers, use the symbol (i.e., <25 mL/h), but if it's in a sentence, use words (e.g., there were less than six people sitting by the pool).
- Capitalize contraindicated, least, not. (e.g., Initiation of which of the following , would be CONTRAINDICATED for this patient?)
- The use of the word "levels" in a stem - "Which of the following laboratory tests is most appropriate?" is preferable to a construction that uses the word "levels".
- When in doubt, follow the AMA style guidelines.

Requested Scope of Editorial Review

- Review stems and options for proper spelling, grammar and formatting.
- Ensure instructions at end of stem are consistent with the Item Structure (i.e. Pick 2 of 2 / One best answer / Pick 1 of 3).
- Ensure instructions at end of stem follow the same format for all items (* approved wording inserted far below) ♣ NOTE: When inserting text into the stem or answer options, use the STRIP FORMATTING command to ensure the text that is inserted (by copy + paste) is not distorted
- Review answer options to remove blank distractors or “Xs” inserted as placeholders, and adjust the answer key accordingly.
- Flag multiple true/false items for re-write/chair review.
- Flag only items with outstanding issues back to the chair for review. Otherwise, we will defer to your judgement for edits that do not change the intent of the question.

General Notes for Editing List File

- Make any professional level edits directly in the stem deleting original text instead of showing a strikethrough.
- Flag on the spreadsheet those items that need review by the committee chair. This will be help in performing targeted follow-up.
- Add any comments directly on the spreadsheet.
- Changes should be made strictly for form, and for the better. The sense of the question should not be changed.