Writing Multiple Choice Questions

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## What makes a good MCQ?

Good MCQs:

* check understanding of a concept
* check understanding and the application of a technique
* check previous understanding
* reinforcement
* reassure the learner
* keep the learner engaged.

## What makes a bad MCQ?

* **Questions can be guessed.** Questions can seem pointless and the answers provide no useful data.
* **Questions test only a vague understanding.** Full knowledge or application isn’t needed.
* **Irrelevant testing.** The questions have been written because they were easy to write. They do not test key learning points.
* **Insufficient challenge.** Questions do not address the complexity and academic level of the material.
* **Misreading issues.** Confusing question phrasing or formats mean that learners can answer incorrectly by mistake; this is demoralising for the learner and creates misleading data.

## Dos and Don’ts when writing MCQs

#### Do vary the position of the correct answer in the options available.

#### Do keep answer options similar in length, make sure they all are phrased in a similar tone, and are grammatically correct.

#### Do, if possible, avoid all of the above or none of the above options, as these are nearly always the answer and do not test the learner’s knowledge.

* Do use clear, straightforward language and sentences, and avoid words which might be misinterpreted or have several meanings.

#### Do avoid ambiguous questions where there could be multiple potentially correct answers depending on the context or point of view.

#### Don’t use question types that ask the learner to finish a sentence. Rephrase the question so it is a full sentence.

#### Don’t use negative questions or options.

# Feedback

Feedback is very important in MCQ writing. For all types of questions, feedback should explain what is correct and incorrect, and how it can be improved.

* If the question is formative, i.e. it is designed to check understanding and be part of the teaching process, then the feedback should affect what the student does next.
* If the question is summative, i.e. it is meant to assess understanding, then it should show the learner’s success.

## Correct answer feedback

Do not merely paraphrase the option they have selected or say: “well done”. If the learner knows the answer then they understand that aspect; now their understanding should be extended further with additional detail or links.

Correct: This new material fundamentally alters the emphasis of the main plot of The Comedy of Errors, by turning attention to the re-unification of the family.

We will return to this theme at the end of the play. You may want to consider what differences to the comic tone Shakespeare’s addition of this romance frame makes to the main Plautine plot.

See Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, in the reading list to learn more.

## Incorrect answer feedback – attempts remaining

This is a key teaching step, the learner has highlighted that they do not understand something. Therefore, the feedback should help them to do so.

1. Explain why the answer is wrong and highlight why they may have misinterpreted the question to select that answer.

2. Support them by providing additional information or background.

3. Refer the learner back to course information that will help them.

Be careful to avoid directly signposting the correct answer in feedback for questions as this will invalidate the assessment results.

Incorrect – try again. Shakespeare does give more prominence to the character of Adriana, the wife (Plautus does not even give his equivalent character a name), but he does not draw on romance elements to achieve this. Rather he develops hints from Roman New Comedy stagecraft. See Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, for more discussion. Have a look back at the discussion in section 1 of the unit, particularly the details about quest elements.

## Incorrect answer feedback – final answer

Identify and explain the correct answer. You should include summary details of why the other answers are wrong. Refer the learner back to relevant information.

# MCQ Checklist

1. Are the learning outcomes being supported or assessed?
2. Is the question challenging enough?
3. Can the answers be easily guessed?

#### Is the question written in clear, straightforward language and sentences?

#### Do they contain any words which might be misinterpreted or have several meanings?

#### Could there be multiple potentially correct answers depending on the context or point of view?

1. Are all the answers plausible/realistic?
2. Are all the answers a similar length?
3. The question isn’t posed negatively
4. Is there suitable feedback provided for every answer?
5. The feedback for incorrect answers doesn’t give the correct answer away
6. Does the feedback for the correct answer advance the learning further or suggest additional areas for the learner to explore?