

SELECTED-RESPONSE ITEMS

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

By the end of this module, you should be able to define what a selected-response item is, identify the benefits and challenges selected-response items present, know the four parts of a well-designed multiple-choice item and use the assessment blueprint to help you design assessment items.

KEY CONCEPTS

Selected-Response Items

Selected-response items ask students to select the correct answer from a list of options included in the item.¹ Examples of selected-response items include matching, true/false and multiple choice. We use answer keys and scoring guides to score these items.



Selected-response items offer several benefits.

- They are efficient.
- You can use selected-response items to assess a range of student knowledge and skills.
- You can score them faster than other types of items.

Selected-response items also come with challenges.

- Selected-response items cannot directly measure higher-order thinking in the same way that, for example, an essay prompt can.
- Students can guess the answers to selected-response items, which makes the results less accurate.
- A long assessment that contains only selected-response items can overwhelm and frustrate students.

How to Design Multiple-Choice Items²

A typical multiple-choice item contains four parts: an item number, background information, a prompt and choices. The choices include one correct answer and several incorrect answers, which are also known as distractors.

An *item number* orients students to where the item fits within the assessment. The best practice for this part is self-explanatory:

- Number each item.

Background information includes what students need to know to select the correct answer.

- Include all necessary information that students need in order to select the correct answer.

The *prompt* asks a question or describes a task.

- Frame prompts positively or emphasize negative key words. Just because a student can recognize an incorrect answer does not mean that he or she knows the correct answer. If you decide to use a negative prompt, be sure to emphasize the negative key words so that students are not confused.
- Ensure that prompts do not require that students know information not included in the prompt.
- Do not include words or grammatical cues that might give away the answer.
- Include words in the prompt that would otherwise be repeated in choices.

Choices include answers to the item prompt.

- Use the same number of choices on a single assessment so that students have the same odds of guessing the correct answer. We use four or five choices for most grades, though we can use as few as three choices for kindergarten and first grade. Four or five choices provide only a 20 or 25 percent chance of students guessing the correct answer *and* limits the number of good distractors you need to write.
- Use choices that are consistent in form, content and length.
- Order choices in a logical sequence.
- Include only one clearly correct answer, but make sure that your incorrect answers, “distractors,” are plausible. If distractors are too obvious, students may be able to guess the correct answer, whether or not they have mastered the content. Strong distractors should reflect common student misconceptions and errors so that if students answer items incorrectly, you can gain information about where and how student understanding breaks down.
- Avoid using “all of the above” or “none of the above.” Items with these two choices stand out and may appeal to students who can answer an item with four choices correctly if they know that two of the choices are right, although they may not have known that the third choice is right.

