



## TEACHING TIDBITS

# Crafting Multiple Choice Questions

It's the time of year again when the Imagineers at the IELT Wizarding World of Assessment™ leave partially-drafted sample exam questions on their desks overnight, hoping that magical elves will complete them before morning.

<http://www.authorama.com/grimms-fairy-tales-39.html> That plan hasn't actually worked out for us yet, so we thought we should investigate ways to build successful questions on our own. This week's topic: multiple choice.

## Why Use Multiple Choice Questions?

One most obvious answer—the Bar Exam—matters a great deal, but may not even be the best reason to consider using multiple choice questions in law school courses. It is certainly true that our students will have to face a daunting set of multiple choice questions to pass the test. But experts advise prospective bar takers to practice with hundreds or even thousands of *actual* MBE (Multistate Bar exam) questions that have been extensively vetted to ensure their validity and reliability. <http://ncbex.org/about-ncbe-exams/mbe/preparing-for-the-mbe/> The limited range of questions we might draft for our courses are not a substitute for this kind of intensive preparation, though they may help give students some insight into what the project will entail.

But multiple choice questions are also useful independent of bar preparation. Testing specialists emphasize that well-designed multiple choice questions can help students develop skills at many cognitive levels, <http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching-resources/effective-practice/revised-blooms-taxonomy/> from seeking straightforward knowledge of concrete material to higher-order critical thinking. [http://thelearningcoach.com/elearning\\_design/multiple-choice-questions/](http://thelearningcoach.com/elearning_design/multiple-choice-questions/).

Moreover, multiple choice questions can actually be *more* useful than other forms of assessment because they require greater precision when mastering and applying legal rules. On essay or short answer questions, students might be able to get away with “sort of” knowing the rules of law without noticing any weakness in their basic knowledge of the law.

But on a well-crafted multiple choice question, those same students will likely choose one of the wrong responses intended as a distractor, which sends a powerful signal that they have more work to do in order to achieve basic mastery of the material.

In the modern law school classroom, multiple choice questions are especially helpful for formative assessment. They can be used for individual tests or as classroom assessment questions answered by clicker or show of hands. This gives both you and your students a sense of how well they are engaging with complex material, and where there might yet be more work to do.

## But I Don't Know How to Write Them!

In *Teaching Law: A Framework for Instructional Mastery*, [http://www.amazon.com/Teaching-Law-Framework-Instructional-Mastery/dp/1935220330/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1414092025&sr=1-3&keywords=teaching+law+nelson+miller](http://www.amazon.com/Teaching-Law-Framework-Instructional-Mastery/dp/1935220330/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1414092025&sr=1-3&keywords=teaching+law+nelson+miller) Nelson Miller provides step-by-step directions for law professors drafting multiple choice test questions. Dean Miller's recommendations reflect common advice for teachers who want to write good multiple choice questions. <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/writing-good-multiple-choice-test-questions/>

A good multiple choice question has three parts: a Stem, a Lead-in, and Options:

1. The **Stem** is the short fact pattern on which the question is based. A well-written stem is written in plain language, and contains all of the facts necessary to answer the question. It should avoid extraneous information and unnecessary characters, and should aim to be as straightforward and succinct as possible, without adjectives or involved descriptions. (Nelson says "Think Hemingway, not Faulkner.")
2. The **Lead-in** or "call of the question" comes next, and tells the test taker what task to perform. Since we want assessments to replicate the thinking processes that lawyers actually use, lead-ins should be answerable even if there were no response options following the question. For example, "What tort has the driver committed?" is preferable to "Which of the following is best?"
3. **Options** are divided into the best response (often called the **key**) and the remaining **distractors**.
  - Options should be short.
  - Options should be parallel in structure and language.
  - Options should not contain new facts.
  - Avoid conditional language such as "Yes, but..." or "No if..."
  - Aggregate responses such as "All/None of the above" and "A & C but not B" are discouraged.

In a law school context, multiple choice questions should include a short fact pattern in the Stem. The fact pattern should pose a problem that could be resolved even if no lead-in or options were given. The Lead-in should then pose a clear and direct inquiry that, again, could be answered even if no options were given. The Options should all be plausible and mutually exclusive. There is no requirement that all questions on a test have the same number of options to choose from, though giving somewhere between 3 and 5 possibilities is most common. Possible ways to create plausible distractors include: pairing a fact with an inapplicable rule; giving incomplete statements of rules; giving incorrect explanations of rule-fact analysis; or using wrong or outdated law.

<http://lawteaching.org/lawteacher/1999fall/testbuilder.php>

Once you've drafted a set of possible questions, look them over to make sure that you are addressing all or most of your teaching/assessment objectives, and that each question covers an independent topic. (You do not want so much overlap that the response options to one question clue the savvy test-taker into the correct answer to another.) Next, plot out the correct answers to make sure that there is no pattern to the desired responses. For some reason it is especially common in first drafts of questions for most of the right answers to be "B" or "C." Make sure your right answers are spread around evenly and unpredictably.

The IELT Imagineers are happy to help in any way we can—if you want us to look over questions you've drafted, need suggestions for additional material, or want to let us know about something you have done in your class that works well, please drop us a note.

Please join us for the remaining Pedagogy Discussion Group speakers this fall:

**Monday, November 10:** Professor Corie Rosen Felder, *Mindset Theory*

**Monday, November 24:** Professors John, Damian & Troy Pieper, *The Pedagogy of Bar Preparation*.

In the meantime, happy drafting!

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