How to Write an Exam Question

Volunteers who create new questions – "items" – keep PNCB exam content relevant & fresh for future testers. Use these tips before submitting your items.

1. Gather Your Resources
   - Find the content outline and reference list for your specific PNCB exam on our website.
   - Select an approved reference to use as your item's source.

2. Find Your Idea
   - Identify areas on the content outline that grab your interest.
     - Think of patient-related issues you see in practice.
     - Focus on common conditions, not the rare or obscure.
     - Find important practice-related issues in your selected reference.

3. Develop the Stem
   - Pick a stem style for your item:
     - A closed stem question is a complete sentence ending in a question mark.
     - An open stem question offers an incomplete statement that each answer option would join to make a complete sentence.
   - Example of OPEN vs. CLOSED Stem
     - CLOSED: A 2 month old presents with bilious vomiting for 24 hours. Physical exam is unremarkable and there is no weight loss. Which of the following is the anticipated care of this infant?
     - OPEN: A 2 month old presents with bilious vomiting for 24 hours. Physical exam is unremarkable and there is no weight loss. The anticipated care of this infant includes

4. Create Answer Options
   - Write the 1 correct response ("key").
     - Make sure that the stem and key flow together. Remember, with an open stem question, the stem + option = a complete sentence.
   - Write the 3 incorrect options ("distractors").
     - Distractors must be wrong but seem plausible enough to appeal to a test-taker who does not have the knowledge or may be guessing.
   - Critique the 4 options you have written:
     - Does the key blend in with the other 3 options? A key with too much detail will stand out for anyone guessing. The key should not be the only option to repeat an important term from the stem.
     - Are all 4 options similar in structure? Grammar? Complexity? Length?
     - If the same words are repeated at the beginning of each option, rework the stem to add the words there and not in the options.

5. Review and Edit
   - Now it's time to create your 4 options for A, B, C, and D.
   - Write the 1 correct response ("key").
     - Make sure that the stem and key flow together. Remember, with an open stem question, the stem + option = a complete sentence.
   - Write the 3 incorrect options ("distractors").
     - Distractors must be wrong but seem plausible enough to appeal to a test-taker who does not have the knowledge or may be guessing.
   - DO NOT use these:
     - Giveaway distractors so implausible that they are easily eliminated.
     - "All of the above" or "None of the above."
     - Terms such as "always" or "never" to make a question incorrect.
     - Option choices like "both A & B," "both B & C," etc.

6. Validate Item
   - Look for and delete unnecessary words or symptoms that burden the test-taker with distracting, unimportant information. For example, if you identify a care setting in the stem (e.g., "the clinic"), ask if knowing that is critical to understanding and answering the question. The item should contain only what is needed for the knowledge being assessed.
   - Click to see an example >>
   - Read your question aloud to check for flow.

7. Item Ready To Submit!
   - To support item validity and legal defensibility:
     - Indicate which area from the content outline is assessed by your question (e.g., III A 4).
     - Identify the key for your item.
     - Cite the reference that supports the key.
     - List text title, © year, edition, authors, and page number(s).