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.

Define an objective for your item by considering:
- What aspects are important to know for certification?
- How is that knowledge applied in practice?
- Where would my question fit on the content outline?

Frame your idea by writing a short statement about the knowledge you expect your item to assess.

Note the reference used to support your question, including page numbers or link.

3 Develop the Stem

Your item will be a multiple-choice question with 4 possible answers. Test-takers will try to pick a single correct response. The **stem** is the question or lead-in statement that sets up a clear task for the reader. A well-developed stem allows test-takers possessing the knowledge to understand what is being asked without reading the options.

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

Please don't use:
- X Negative stems like, "Which of the following does not…" or "All of the following except…" However, items asking about contraindications are allowed because they test important safety information.
- X Patient names. Simply refer to patients generically like "the child."
- X "You" or "the nurse/the PNP." Instead, absorb into the stem: "When selecting the appropriate gauge needle, it is important to…"
- X True/false questions.

Write your stem in a concise, direct way.
- Use no more than 3-4 sentences. Avoid run-on sentences, parentheses, and phrases offset by commas.
- Include age and gender ONLY when it is important to what is being asked. If a specific age is not required, use age groups: newborn, infant, toddler, preschooler, school-age child, or adolescent.

4 Create Answer Options

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:
- X Giveaway distractors so implausible that they are easily eliminated.
- X "All of the above" or "None of the above."
- X Terms such as "always" or "never" to make a question incorrect.
- X Option choices like "both A & B," "both B & C," etc.

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

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.

6 Validate Item

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).

7 Item Ready To Submit!

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