Good practice guide
Writing good assessment items – principles and strategies for success
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Context and key issues

Assessment of students' learning is an indirect process of inference involving the use of professional judgement: it is not possible to *directly* observe or measure a person's learning – but rather those behaviours that lead to learning, and the consequent behaviours that result from it. For this reason, when teaching students we ask them to engage in behaviours that we believe will lead to the desired learning outcomes, and when we assess that learning we ask students to undertake tasks that can, we claim, only be done (and done well) if the students have learned whatever is required. Thus it is critical when writing good assessment items to ensure that the ability to complete the tasks we set for students *actually* depends on achievement of the desired learning outcomes that are the focus of courses and teaching. If that relationship is good, then we only have to concern ourselves with the validity and reliability of our professional judgement. This guide aims to provide some practical strategies that will help you to write good assessment items.

Foundation Principles for Writing Good Assessment Items

1. **Assessment validity**
   Your assessment of the students' learning can only be valid if the tasks you give them actually depend on the learning you are seeking to assess. If the task can be done without that learning, then the 'measure' is invalid. This means you have to be sure that the assessment tasks you set 'measure' what you claim they do.

2. **Assessment reliability**
   When you mark a piece of work you are using your professional judgement. Imagine you take a copy of all your students' work. You mark the originals and return them, keeping a record of the marks. A week later you mark the copies and compare the marks. Do you think that they will compare well? (Intra-marker reliability). What about if a colleague marks the copies? Will their marks compare well with yours? (Inter-marker reliability). Research literature says that both these forms of reliability are frequently very low unless specific practices are employed to ensure that markers agree on the criteria, the performance standards and the forms of evidence that equate to particular marks being awarded. Detailing how this can be achieved is beyond the scope of this guide. What do you do to ensure your assessment reliability? Is it enough?

3. **Assessment for Learning**
   Assessment is the primary instrument you have to support the fact that teaching and learning are deliberate, purposeful, goal directed acts, undertaken by strategic and intelligent people. Assessment should be part of your L&T strategy. Each assessment item should have a clear purpose in relation to their studies. It's essential that both you and your students are clear about this..
   Assessment directly contributes marks which translate to grades. As such, the assessment tasks are the only compulsory activities students have to undertake. Thus, assessment activities do more to determine learning outcomes than anything else.
   Your job is to make sure that what the students have to do to complete your assessment items involves the kinds of cognitions that relate to the kind of learning you want them to achieve. Learning involves thinking. Assessment obliges students to spend "time on task".

4. **Assessment and curriculum design: Alignment / interdependence**
   Assessment should align with, and be inter-dependent with all other curriculum components: together they form a system. Each component contributes to the message students get about what is important for them to learn. Your job is to be sure your assessment gives a clear message about what students need to learn. All curriculum components should signal the same message. Students' perceptions of the assessment requirements have been called "the hidden curriculum". It is certainly the de facto curriculum.

5. **Alignment/ Consistency checking**
   Assessment should relate directly, and transparently, to the desired learning outcomes (and vice versa). If you assess something not specified in the course aims, what message are you sending your students? Conversely, if you specify aims that are not assessed, what message are you sending your students? Your job is to either modify your aims, or your assessment according to whatever you decide is appropriate for your students' learning.

6. **Assessment kind <-> learning kind**
   If there are different kinds of learning (e.g. Knowledge, understanding and skills), then the assessment types you use should be chosen to ensure there is an appropriate match between what is learned and what is assessed.

7. **Assessment sequence - constructivism**
   Constructivism proposes that learning outcomes ought to be built or developed in a progressive sequence. Can you assess a person's skills before they have developed the understanding that is needed to perform them? Your task is to progress from simple to more complex things. Build sequentially on students' knowledge and learning. To do this, match the kinds of assessment items to the kinds of learning outcomes you desire, and match these to the sequence of the learning. The kinds of assessment task, their sequence, the inter-relationships or links between them and their timing are *all* important. In summary: the sequence of your assessment should support the sequence of learning.

8. **Assessment weighting and sequence**
   Be sure that the marks awarded through the assessment match the relative importance of the learning you assess. Don't award lots of marks for unimportant learning outcomes. Don't assess difficult and important learning outcomes and reward them poorly with low marks.
   Recognise that the learning outcomes that are achieved later in the course are *usually* valued more highly than the outcomes that are achieved earlier in the course. When this is the case ensure that the weight of assessment marks that students can be awarded reflect the value of learning outcomes

Specific assessment writing tips

1. **Use student focused language.** This very simply means that you word your assessment information as if you were talking directly to a single student. "Requires the student to …" and "Students are required to …" are not examples of student focused, "You are required to …" <u>is</u>
2. **Explain the purpose of the assignment.** If that's difficult for you, imagine how hard it is for students!
3. **Procedural details matter.** Tell the students what they will have to do in procedural terms. This is not the same as "giving them the answer". For example, you can specify that "You will have to produce an essay of 2500 words. The formatting requirements are stipulated in the course outline. Be sure to avoid the use of unsubstantiated opinion in your work."
4. **Use marking criteria**. Ideally, provide marking criteria together with annotated examples of good and poor answers (comparisons help), or annotated extracts.
5. **Authenticity is good.** Set tasks that resemble the kinds of things students will have to do when they graduate.
6. **Consider using peer and Self-assessment.** Involving peer and self-assessment practices can be good - but can also be hard to pull off. There are guidelines in other GIHE resources that will help you make a success of peer and self-assessment. Perhaps the most important of these guidelines is to start small and simple!
7. **Proof read your assessment items and associated instructions.** Request a colleague to do it. Don't just look at wording, but also check to see that all your marks add up correctly to 100%.
8. **Focus carefully on validity and clarity of purpose.** Do the questions you ask of students actually ask for what you want them to do? For example what does the word "discuss" mean in the following question? "List and discuss the major impacts of the Internet on the Hospitality Industry with relation to the following sectors …" What features would a good "discussion" have? Could the question explicitly ask for those? e.g. "Compare, contrast and evaluate the different major effects of the internet on the following three industry sectors…"
9. **Avoid double negatives**: not wording things positively is sometimes not very clear!
10. **The value of assessment items.** Keep in mind that the less time it takes for students to provide an answer to a question, the less likely it is to be an indication of learning that has much significance. The proportion of marks awarded should reflect this.
11. **Precision and clarity are paramount.** For example, what does the word "Identify" mean in the following question? "Identify two (2) of Belbin's thought oriented roles within a group?" Does it mean: List; state, provide, choose, remember …?

Good practice guide prepared by Dr Duncan D Nulty.