Examples of how to improve multiple-choice questions

## Tip: Present a single, definite statement to be completed or answered by one of the several given choices

**Original**: Genetically modified plants

1. Have been grown since 1985
2. Are free of organophosphates
3. Can cross with non-genetically modified plants
4. Require heavier rainfall

**Improved**: Genetically modified plants require which of the following chemical enhancers?

1. Fertilizer
2. Pesticide
3. Soil improver

### Why is this improved?

In the first example, there is no sense from the stem what the question is asking. The second example more clearly identifies the question and offers the student a set of homogenous choices.

## Tip: Avoid unnecessary and irrelevant material

**Original**: Paul Muldoon, an Irish post-modern poet who uses experimental and playful language, uses which poetic genre in "Why Brownlee Left"?

1. Sonnet
2. Elegy
3. Narrative poem
4. Dramatic monologue
5. Haiku

**Improved**: Paul Muldoon uses which poetic genre in "Why Brownlee Left"?

1. Sonnet
2. Elegy
3. Narrative poem
4. Dramatic monologue
5. Haiku

### Why is this improved?

In the first example, there is information which is not needed to answer the question

## Tip: Use clear, straightforward language in the stem of the item

**Original**: As the level of fertility approaches its nadir, what is the most likely ramification for the citizenry of a developing nation?

1. A decrease in the labour force participation rate of women
2. A dispersing effect on population concentration
3. A downward trend in the youth dependency ratio
4. A broader base in the population pyramid
5. An increased infant mortality rate

**Improved**: A major decline in fertility in a developing nation is likely to produce which of the following?

1. A decrease in the labour forces participation rate of women
2. A dispersing effect on population concentration
3. A downward trend in the youth dependency ratio
4. A broader base in the population pyramid
5. An increased infant mortality rate

### Why is this improved?

The second example has the same information but written more clearly, using more simple language. It isn’t testing the students’ understanding of the language, but of the subject matter.

## Tip: Use negatives sparingly. If negatives must be used, capitalize, underscore embolden or otherwise highlight.

**Original**: Which of the following is not a symptom of osteoporosis?

1. Decreased bone density
2. Frequent bone fractures
3. Raised body temperature
4. Lower back pain

**Improved**: Which of the following is a symptom of osteoporosis?

1. Decreased bone density
2. Raised body temperature
3. Hair loss
4. Painful joints

### Why is this improved?

In the original example, it would be easy for a student to miss the word ‘not’ and get the answer wrong even though they knew the correct answer.

## Tip: Put as much of the question in the stem as possible, rather than duplicating material in each of the options.

**Original**: Theorists of pluralism have asserted which of the following?

1. The maintenance of democracy requires a large middle class.
2. The maintenance of democracy requires the existence of a multiplicity of religious groups.
3. The maintenance of democracy requires a predominantly urban population.
4. The maintenance of democracy requires the separation of governmental powers.

**Improved**: Theorists of pluralism have asserted that the maintenance of democracy requires which of the following?

1. A large middle class
2. The existence of a multiplicity of religious groups
3. A predominantly urban population
4. The separation of governmental powers

### Why is this improved?

There is a lot of repetition in the original example, which is removed in the improved version by adding the repeated phrase to the question stem. This makes the options easier to read and more clear.

## Tip: For single response MCQs, ensure that there is only one correct response.

**Original**: Which of the following texts is considered to represent the pinnacle of modernist achievement?

1. The Waste Land
2. Middlemarch
3. "Ode to a Nightingale"
4. Ulysses
5. Ethan Frome

**Improved**: Which of the following texts represents one of the high points of modernist achievement?

1. The Waste Land
2. Middlemarch
3. "Ode to a Nightingale"
4. Ethan Frome
5. "My Last Duchess"

### Why is this improved?

In the original, the question is asking for a subjective opinion of what is ‘considered to represent’, so arguably any of the answers could be correct.

## Tip: Use only plausible and attractive alternatives as distracters

**Original**: Dichotic presentation of stimuli and shadowing are often used in the study of

1. Brightness constancy
2. Sensory scaling
3. Shadow dancing
4. Cartoons
5. Selection attention

**Improved**: Dichotic presentation of stimuli and shadowing are often used in the study of what?

1. Brightness constancy
2. Sensory scaling
3. Illusions
4. Depth perception
5. Selection attention

### Why is this improved?

‘Cartoons’ and ‘shadow dancing’ don’t fit here as plausible options, so it’s easy for a student to discount them, narrowing down the options.

## Tip: Avoid giving clues to the correct answer

**Original**: A fertile area in the desert in which the water table reaches the ground surface is called an

1. Mirage
2. Oasis
3. Polder

**Improved**: A fertile area in the desert in which the water table reaches the ground surface is called what?

1. Mirage
2. Oasis
3. Polder

### Why is this improved?

The original answer ends with ‘an, and grammatically only ‘oasis’ could come after that, so it’s easy to guess which is the correct answer. 