Test Questions:
Making the Most of
What You Have Already Got

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An Overview of this Handout and this Session

Too often question-writing sessions forget their audience -- **YOU**!

You, the instructor or school owner, already have a bunch of test questions. So how to write them is old news -- been there, done that. You are way past the blank-paper stage.

Over time, though, it has come to your attention that there are some pretty lame questions in those aging handouts. Not all of them: the law of averages prohibits that. But enough.

So now you are faced with what to do to make the weak ones better.

You are also faced with how to classify each question so you can assemble (1) quizzes that cover an effective range of topics and (2) well-balanced end-of-course exams.

Segment One of this handout includes key points to consider when sizing up your existing collection of test questions; it will give you an eye for strengthening it through more comprehensive and precise categorization.

Segment One also provides an overview of several industry standards used by professional testing companies when assembling exams; it concludes with a look at the very basics of "classical" statistical analyses of item performance.

Segment Two presents a one-page quick-guide and a six-page annotated guide to "crafting" effective, professional questions; these guidelines will show you how to revise some of your more homespun efforts into ones with more focus and less ambiguity.

Segment Three demonstrates some of the principles outlined in Segment Two by taking six "raw" classroom and license-pool questions, offering a "test specialist" review of each one, and then showing how the basic concept of the original question can be "crafted" into a professional-caliber test question.

After a careful look at the many points within each of these three segments, you should recognize they constitute a concise yet robust tutorial. With the enclosed standards and tips at hand, you will review your existing item pools and exams armed and ready for

"making the most of what you have already got!"

Basic Definitions for Terms that Come up in the Following Material

Item = test question
Item type = the format of a question, such as essay, short answer, multiple choice, etc.
Stem = the "top" part of a multiple-choice question
Options = *all* answer choices
Key = the correct answer
Distractors = all of the incorrect answers

Segment One: Overview of Pool/Bank Management & Test Assembly Considerations

A. Rough Management, Assessment, and Item Counts

1. Item-Banking Methods

a. Hard copy only

Some instructors still work from "original" hard copy that they copy and recopy class after class.

If this is you, you owe it to yourself to make a work copy just for making some of the following notations.

b. Word processing files (e.g., Word, WordPerfect)

Most instructors have some sort of collection of word processing files from which they cut and paste sets for quizzes and exams.

These files are a sound base for enhancement through adopting the suggestions in this handout. If you observe the following "save as" technique, you can revise items as you find time, leaving the rest for the time when you want to select them for use.

c. Excel files

Whether you are using hard copy only or hard copy and word processing files to organize and store your files, your ability to assess, improve, and monitor your files will be enhanced considerably by transferring the data you begin collecting into an Excel file.

A sample item with some of the code areas that will be explained next could look like this, and the data row can be cut & pasted into an Excel sheet:

Itm-ID	G/S	CC-psi	CC-asi	CC-State	M/Reg	Itm-lvl	Itm-Stat	Itm-type	Key
PP0001	G	0201			R	2	A		D

1. Which of the following government powers is implemented through the process of condemnation?
(A) Escheat.
(B) Taxation.
(C) Police power.
(D) Eminent domain.

Note(s): 6/2/05-entered raw item; 9/27/05-edited item for seminar use;

Ref(s): MREP-15, p. 352(?);

Mutual exclude with: PP003, PP374

d. Item-banking programs (e.g., LXRTest, Questionmark)

Those instructors and schools that have an item-banking program have already been introduced to that program's options for providing codes, notes, references, and other potentially useful data.

However different they appear from the item presented above, all item-banking programs are based on the application by an individual or committee of the same sets of methodological considerations presented here, but are tailored to their specific areas, such as high school history or cosmetology licensing exams.

2. Cataloguing and Coding

a. Minimal "grouping" methods and identifiers

At a minimum, your items should be clustered into printouts that group the broadest topics, such as agency, finance, types of mortgages, state laws, etc.

If you have the items in electronic files, they are probably at least grouped after an identifying header for the string of items related to, say, appraisal.

Whether or not they are in hard copy or electronic files, almost undoubtedly they are sequentially numbered; these numbers are preliminary Item-IDs.

b. Additional methods and coding considerations

As you become more attentive to the details of your items, you will want to develop a set of codes that makes pool assessment—and additional item preparation—more precise.

National testing companies typically develop a set of codes that allows them to perform detailed item inventories. Some of these include

- **Item ID**: These are unique alpha-numeric codes that allow each item to be located and tracked despite changes to any of the other codes.
- **Key**: The key needs to be kept with the item somehow in a method that does not mistakenly appear with the item. Duh!
- **General/State**: A simple G or S code can clarify whether an item is drawn from principles & practices or state law
- **Content Code**: These are linked directly to the content outline and are generally determined by the program available, i.e., an item in Section I Topic C may be coded by an alpha-numeric "1C" or perhaps "0103" where the 01 = Section I and the 03 = Topic C. Since Excel ignores initial zeroes, you may need to start the content code with a meaningful letter, perhaps G or S.
- **Math or not**: Any code that distinguishes math from English helps you count and locate math items to ensure they get the correct emphasis on sample exams.

- **Item-level**: Mostly used to identify sales from broker for the purpose of maintaining separate pools, but can also help prelicensing instructors identify degrees of difficulty or appropriateness for sales, broker, or both. Further, prelicensing instructors can use this kind of code to identify items that are textbook details rather than testable treatments.
- **Item status**: This means whether an item can be used for scoring, or is in "pretest" status where it gathering 'performance data,' or has been deleted for any reason, or is in need of revision before use/reuse. Codes for statuses can be "A" for active, "P" for pretest, "R" for review/revise, "D" for deleted, ""N" for new and may need crafting before use, etc.
- **Item-types**: Though vendors generally do not get this refined with their real estate item banks, you should if you use negative stem, none-of-the-above, all-of-the-above, Roman Numeral, scenario & linked sets, or other quirky item constructions. If you use these item types, you should not overload exams with them and you should also space them rather than clump them when assembling quizzes and exams.
- **Mutually Exclusive Items**: This code is for items that cannot appear on exams with certain other items that are too similar or 'cue' the answer to another question with its information.

B. Closer Assessment and Inventory

1. File Organization

a. Select consistent, logical folder and file naming conventions

I name new folders and files date-first in YY-MMDD format followed by some key label, like "agency items." Whenever I re-open the file and make any changes after that date, I do a "save-as" with the current date before I do the first routine save.

Also, once I have finished a file for future use, like this one, I might postdate the file name to match the use-date. For example, this file is named 05-0930-ConnSeminar.pdf. Postdating could be especially helpful in naming "final-form" quizzes and exams prepared in advance for use on a scheduled date.

As a clear bonus, following this convention allows me to come back months or years later and go straight to the most recently updated version of files that contain progressive changes and pick up where I left off.

It also allows me to archive all earlier drafts, which will come in handy for you if you have been revising items and have any reason, even late-night curiosity, about what a particular one looked like before you made the edits.

b. Additional item data to track source material and updates.

Reference(s): It is a good idea to have some area in which to record the source material that confirms the correct answer. This can be a book and page, a statutory reference, or reference to a website or real estate form.

Note(s): You should dedicate an area for running commentary on changes, solutions/explanations of the item, general comments; it is useful for later reference to include the date of every entry. (See the sample on Page 1.)

c. Get help and opinions on coding, editing, and generating new items wherever you can!

If you are part of a school and share item banks with other instructors, look into periodic "committee meetings" to review subsets of the piles of items you have salted away.

Select a facilitator based on who is the most appropriate person for encouraging interaction and taking notes; this person should guide the input, note editorial suggestions and craft the items, mark up the hard copy, and see that text changes and updated coding data are entered in the respective files.

If you are a solo instructor and want to revise items, you might make some headway on the pool as well as with your class if you break them into groups and have them read and suggest revisions to sets of items covering material they have studied.

This kind of close review will, ideally, draw the students into discussions and investigations of correct definitions of terms; the sequencing, necessity, and relative importance of particular elements within processes such as appraisal, financing, and closing; and the nuances and dilemmas of agency.

You can also get some good raw items out of a class exercise that has student groups reviewing textbook material as if they were actual Subject Matter Experts or test writers.

If, after deciding among themselves which points are most relevant and important, they write and share the questions they feel are most appropriate for testing, they have helped your raw item pool and learned quite a bit.

And if in sharing the questions they explain not only the question's purpose and the correct answer, but the reason for selecting the distractors, they will have also incorporated related material into a broader understanding.

C. Test Assembly Considerations and Techniques

1. Spacing items from the same topic area

At least one national testing company assembles and presents test material according to content areas, moving through all of the questions in Roman Numeral Area I, then II, then III, and so on. The rationale for this is textbook-driven and, I think, flawed: in a normal workday you will not get all of your agency questions in a tidy group before being hit with finance, title, and other areas. Rather, they come at you randomly, generally without warning.

Therefore, most testing companies select the 80 general real estate questions according to content outline specifications and present them in randomized order.

For the vast majority of you who use fixed-sequence paper and pencil exams, you have to manually “randomize” by knowing which questions are drawn from the same areas and then spreading them out so that they don’t clump together.

This is especially important for math questions. According to PSI’s current outline, there are five math questions on the licensing exam. Regardless of whether or not you assemble exams to their specification or use more, it is a good practice to separate math items and distribute them evenly throughout the test.

It is also good to wait until somewhere near question ten to present the first math question, and make it one of the easier ones you have chosen. This way those candidates with math anxiety will probably have gotten a few questions correct and may be beginning to feel more confident.

As for easy and hard questions, and long and short questions, it is also good practice to spread those out; it will help students get going if you put the hardest and hardest-looking questions somewhere between 15 and 70.

2. Separating annoying item-types, i.e., negative stem, NOTA, Roman Numeral

If you insist on using unusual item types, such as negative-stem (“all of the following statements . . . . are correct EXCEPT”), None of the Above, or others that are not routine, straight multiple choice, try to both limit their numbers and spread them out evenly within the exam.

Frankly, it is distracting to get three negative stem items in a row, then none for a while, then four within a stretch of seven questions. Be kind, be nice, and be a better test writer by eschewing annoying item-types.

3. Key balance and distribution

On paper and pencil exams, students fill in an answer sheet. If there are five A answers in a row, or no D answers for 20 questions, students get distracted, think they must have gotten at least one question wrong, and begin to review and change some answers, even if they have actually answered them all correctly.

So, when assembling exams, check to see how many A, B, C, and D keys there are and do what you can to make them each represent approximately 25% of the total number of questions.

Then try to sequence the questions so no more than three in a row are the same and each key appears at least once every ten questions.

D. Test Review & Item Analysis Basics ("Classical Statistics")

1. Number of candidates, a.k.a. sample size, 'N'

When performing a statistical analysis of item performance, the first variable that must be addressed is the number of people who answered the question. This is known as the "sample size," or "N."

In some analyses, the number of people who did not answer the question are also counted and reported as "omits." Omits include those who skipped a question and just forgot to come back, those who gave up and did not want to guess, and those who simply got to a point and either ran out of time or just stopped.

Since real estate exams are not "speeded" tests, meaning there is generally ample time to finish every question, omits are rare and not worth much consideration here.

2. Percentage of answering correctly, a.k.a. p-value

The number of test takers who answer a particular question correctly divided by the total N provides the percent-value, or p-value, for an item.

Generally real estate items have p-values between 50 and 90, though some will be higher or lower and still be valid and strong for test use.

However, when questions are too hard or too easy, they need to be looked at closely to make sure the question is fair and appropriate if it is very hard, and compellingly relevant for testing if it is very hard or almost a "gimme."

For your class exams, these numbers are hard to get, so often you cannot know which ones are at the very easy/very hard ends of the spectrum.

You should periodically review answer sheets based on student feedback for particular questions and do your own simple p-value determination to see if a question has a very low p-value.

If it does, you should review the number of students answering the other options and find out which one(s) are the "strongest distractors"; it may be that you have an item with two or more acceptable answers!

Also, you should periodically check the answer sheets for questions that have a low p-value without drawing student comments: low p-values are the first indicator to examination vendors that a question has been miskeyed, meaning that if the intended answer is A, some other option is being given credit by mistake.

For classroom tests that are not reviewed by the students, such miskeys can go overlooked indefinitely.

3. Candidate-strength discrimination index, a.k.a. point biserial, 'p-bis'

Sometimes a question has a good p-value and gets no complaints yet still has problems. For example, if most of the test takers with the highest overall scores answered one question "incorrectly" but went for the same distractor, there is reason to suspect the answer they chose has some merit.

One index that indicates how well a question's various options discriminate between high-and-low scoring test takers is called a point-biserial.

In short, a question that "discriminates well" will reveal that high-scorers answer the keyed answer in appropriately high numbers and a high percentage of the low-scorers will choose one of the wrong answers.

When that pattern is reversed, the point-biserial will fall into a low range that alerts statisticians and professional test developers that at least one of the distractors needs a closer look to determine why the stronger candidates favor it.

Sometimes a low point-biserial results from a change in the law that has not been caught on the test. For example, if the amount of a fine goes from $500 to $1,000 and both answers are presented as options, the more-informed candidates will answer $1,000 even though it has not been "keyed" yet.

This is one reason why I insist that for a reasonable period after such a change, the most-recent correct answer should NOT be among the options: leaving it there makes test takers wonder if the answer has been updated or if they will get credit by choosing the "old" answer. This is tantamount to test trickery and must be avoided.

The following is a broker question with its item analysis data; it is based on an item from an old ASI published practice broker test.

Which of the following statements represents a tax advantage of the installment sale of a personal residence?
(A) The sale qualifies as a tax-deferred exchange.
(B) The property qualifies for the Accelerated Cost Recovery System (ACRS).
(C) The effect of recapture is spread out over time.
(D) The taxable gain is spread out over time.

P-val	P-bis	Sample	Omits
.85	.26	190	0

Distractor/Response Category Analysis

Ability/sample	A	B	C	D*
High = 61	3 = 5%	= %	= 1%	57 = 93%
Low = 60	11 = 18%	2 = 3%	4 = 8%	41 = 69%

Definitions & Comments:

High (61) = how the highest 61 candidates of the 190 candidates responded
Low (60) = how the lowest 60 candidates of the 190 candidates responded

Segment Two: Item-Crafting Guidelines and Considerations
Key Points for Item-Crafting

A. Aspects of Item Conception and Construction

1. Keep the purpose of the item clearly in mind while considering how to make it relevant and appropriate for the:
   –Population -- e.g., are they prelicensing students? CE attendees?
   –Circumstances -- e.g., are the items for class discussion? Simulated exam material?
   –Outcome Objectives -- e.g., are the items for diagnostics, discussion, or drill?
2. "Craft" the stem until it is focused and directed
3. Make difficult items that way due to required knowledge or reasoning
4. Use direct questions or incomplete statements for the stem
5. Put as much of the item's shared or necessary information in the stem as possible

B. Option Construction and Considerations

1. Craft the "key" called for by the stem
2. Make all options logically consistent with the thought in the stem
3. Make all options grammatically consistent with the stem
4. Make distractors plausible, reasonable, and attractive, but incorrect. For example, use
   –Common mistakes
   –Common misperceptions
   –Insufficient or excessive information
5. Make options approximately the same length
6. Vary the length and position of the key
7. Arrange options in logical order
   –Increasing length, increasing degree, etc.
8. Work commonly repeated words or information back up into the stem
9. Revise unnecessary information out of options as well as out of the stem
   –May "cue" other items
   –May overlap with other items
   –May provide key component for a separate question
10. Minimize the use of "negative stem" format ("All of the following . . . except:")
    –Easy to write, so they tend to be low quality
    –Reverses normal thought pattern, so mistakes are often based on misreading, not weak grasp of material
    --*Can* be used to advantage for multi-element topics
11. Make sparing use of absolute terms
    –"Always," "never," "every," "only," etc.
12. Avoid using "All of the above" and "None of the above"
    –Principle: A responsibly written item should include correct information that completes the thought presented in the stem.
13. Avoid using opposites within the options
    –Principle: A true/false contrast in the options directs attention *from* the "wrong" one *to* the other one.
14. Make sure that "set" items are independent of each other

C. General Style and Item-Crafting Considerations

1. Make sure the item as a whole is appropriate, relevant, and accurate
2. Use language that is simple, direct, clear, and free of ambiguity
3. Use language that is appropriate for the reading level of the population tested
4. Reject language that may be offensive to subgroups of the population, e.g., gender, names, license types, 'clever alliterations,' etc.

A. Aspects of Item Conception and Construction

Basic Item Conception: Which item type to choose?

1. Keep the purpose of the item clearly in mind while considering how to make it relevant and appropriate for the:

–**Population:** What are the characteristics of the target audience? Experienced, inexperienced, a mix? Do they have to be there, or do they want to be there? Do they have any incentive for paying attention to you or learning the material being presented? What are the potential consequences of inattention?

–**Circumstances:** Are you preparing material to go with a brief overview or a long course? Who is sponsoring the course or seminar? Is the audience paying or being subsidized?

The briefer the course, the more likely that recall and definition questions alone would be appropriate; a full-blown course would use those in conjunction with increasingly demanding questions that require more sophisticated reasoning or detailed knowledge.

–**Outcome Objectives:** Are there specific outcomes with performance or knowledge expectations?

The answer to this helps guide your determination of how these outcomes will best be assessed. Discussion? Demonstration? Portfolio? Essay or short answer responses? Multiple choice or matching? A “Practice Test” simulating one that someone else will be administering?

Overall Item Construction Considerations for Multiple-Choice Items

(From this point on the observations will bear exclusively on the construction of multiple-choice items.)

2. “Craft” the stem until it is focused and directed

One very widely used test question has this stem: *“It is true that:”*

This question has correct answers on subjects ranging from aardvarks to zoning.

“Focus” means you can tell the question is about zoning -- or aardvarks -- from reading the stem; “directed” means you can tell <u>*what it is*</u> about the subject that is being tested.

For example, imagine “focusing” on zoning, and directing your stem toward “nonconforming use.”

Weak stem: *“A type of zoning is:”*

Focused, directed stem: “*When a municipality permits the continued use of a property for a purpose that zoning regulations have been established to restrict, this is referred to as:”*

3. Make difficult items that way due to required knowledge or reasoning

Any question that is a maze or a catch-all of irrelevant information needs to be revised for clarity *unless* it is specifically testing a student's ability to navigate a maze or sort through a mess.

4. Use direct questions or incomplete statements for the stem

These are known as "closed" and "open" stems:

Q: "Is this an example of a closed-stem question?"
A: "Yes"
Q: "A question with an open stem ends:"
A: "with options that complete it"

5. Put as much of the item's shared or necessary information in the stem as possible

For directness through reduction of repetition or belated introduction of important subject material, try to revise items that wind up with long options.

B. Option Construction and Considerations

1. Craft the "key" called for by the stem

A well-focused and directed stem often has enough information in it that a knowledgeable person can "picture" the answer before reading any of the options. That is the answer you should strive to craft. (*Example: See A2 above*.)

2. Make all options logically consistent with the thought in the stem

Read the stem every time you work on an option. That way, the option will be more likely to "flow" from the stem than from a neighboring option.

3. Make all options grammatically consistent with the stem

Same as above: read the stem before reading an option to make sure they are grammatically consistent.

4. Make distractors plausible, reasonable, and attractive, but incorrect

This is where weak test takers get their mistaken beliefs that "there was more than one right answer," and "the questions were tricky."

It's also where the *better* test takers catch you for having more than one right answer or writing tricky questions.

–**Common mistakes:** Think about what the less-informed test taker would find attractive, or the points that need to be clarified during class.

–**Common misperceptions:** Think about reasonable misunderstandings. For example, VA loans and who pays for various standard loan points.

–**Insufficient or excessive information:** Think about the elements essential to a particular answer, then craft distractors that are less than complete, or that include extraneous, but plausible, additional information.

5. Make options approximately the same length

An item will attract undue attention to itself by having one option the size of an elephant while the rest are the size of Chihuahuas.

6. Vary the length and position of the key

High-school test-taking logic has it that when in doubt, go for the longest answer. If there isn't one that is notably longer, or more complete, then go for (C).

For that reason, a skilled item-writer will make sure that the longest, most complete answer is correct occasionally and wrong a fair number of times, and that the position of the key is as evenly distributed as possible.

In other words, if you wait until the last few options to write the key, which is a natural tendency, revise it into the (A) or (B) position and craft the remaining options for length and consistency.

7. Arrange options in logical order

–**Increasing length, increasing degree, etc.:** If the options are single-word, terms, or short phrases, consider arranging them from shortest to longest. If they are numeric, arrange them in increasing order. If they have various degrees of detail, arrange them from least to most detailed.

8. Work commonly repeated words or information back up into the stem

The first draft of an item often has common and/or vital information in the options. For example, a stem that begins as, *"Which of the following statements about item-writing is correct?"* may have options that all begin with *"Writing an item . . ."*

The stem above is not yet directed, and the direction is probably given only in the key.

For example, imagine the key is: *"Writing an item takes an average of 30 minutes per item for well-crafted real estate items."* The key directs us to (1) time spent, (2) the kind of test question being considered, and (3) item quality.

The stem should provide this direction through the following revision:

Well-crafted real estate items take an average of how many minutes to produce?
(A) Five
(B) Ten
(C) Thirty
(D) Sixty

9. Revise unnecessary information out of options as well as out of the stem

–**May "cue" other items;**
–May overlap with other items;
–May provide key component for a separate question.

Stem: *"In addition to meeting the continuing education requirement of twelve hours per even-year renewal period, a salesperson must pay which of the following amounts for annual license renewal?"*

The stem provides information that answers questions about continuing education requirements and frequency of license renewal. Why give all that away?

Revise the stem to read: *"A salesperson must pay which of the following amounts for license renewal?" (But why even ask that? It comes with the renewal.)*

This revision opens up the following additional questions:

(1) *"A salesperson must complete a MINIMUM of how many hours of continuing education within the required time period?"*
(2) *"How often must an active real estate licensee renew the license?"*

Of course, stems regarding mandatory CE are tricky to write in Connecticut, since licensees are not required to take CE if they test out by passing the CE exam.

So, every item referring to required CE hours as written above is both technically flawed and factually misleading in Connecticut. The stems above would be more accurate and defensible if they included a qualifying phrase such as, "In general," or "Licensees who elect to satisfy continuing education requirements through coursework MUST take . . ."

10. Minimize the use of "negative stem" format ("All of the following . . . except:")

–Easy to write, so they tend to be low quality;
–Reverses normal thought pattern, so mistakes are often based on misreading, not weak grasp of material;
--*Can* be used to advantage for multi-element topics.

Negative stem items require careful consideration and crafting to overcome the likelihood that they will simply be weak or confusing.

However, they are useful when the intent is to identify the "odd-man-out," or to reinforce a list of multiple requirements.

For example:

In order to be considered valid, a listing agreement must include all of the following elements EXCEPT the:
(A) date of the agreement
(B) time of the agreement
(C) signature of the seller
(D) signature of the listing agent

11. Make sparing use of absolute terms

–**"Always," "never," "every," "only," etc.** Qualifiers are essential in test questions, but absolute terms are commonly abused through overuse. Typically they appear in distractors, where their strength essentially drives the candidate to a more reasonable-looking answer. Use them sparingly; use them skillfully.

12. Avoid using "All of the above" and "None of the above"

–**Principle: A responsibly written item should include correct information that completes the thought presented in the stem**.

These items are among the fastest and easiest to write. Novice item writers can list three correct or three incorrect options in no time at all.

While these items can serve as a springboard for fruitful class discussion, they are considered suspect for more serious examinations: ASI standards prohibits using them on the general portion of the real estate exam and strongly recommends against them in the state-specific portion.

13. Avoid using opposites within the options

–**Principle: A true/false contrast in the options directs attention *from* the "wrong" one *to* the other one.**

Consider the following item:

Which of the following statements about maintaining a real estate license is CORRECT?
(A) It must be renewed to remain in effect
(B) It need not be renewed to remain in effect
(C) It must be kept in the licensee's real estate files
(D) It needs to be notarized at least every three years

Why even read (C) and (D) when (A) and (B) are working as a pair, one of which has to be correct?

14. Make sure that "set" items are independent of each other

When you create a group of items that refer back to the same stimulus or scenario, pay extra attention to making sure that information in one does not help answer another one.

C. General Style and Item-Crafting Considerations

1. Make sure the item as a whole is appropriate, relevant, and accurate

This means that a final read-through of the item will show that it integrates the points above and is internally consistent.

Accuracy is of ultimate importance for the key, but also keep in mind that test takers often learn new information while taking the test. So, if a question bears on which government agency is responsible for a particular function, avoid providing fictitious agencies: the test taker might know the correct answer, but go away having "learned" about a new government agency.

2. Use language that is simple, direct, clear, and free of ambiguity

This point merely summarizes many of those above. One further consideration of how to stay on track with these points is to follow any "Which of the following/All of the following" phrases with a noun that characterizes the direction of the item.

The direction provided by the noun in the stem will help you recognize instantly if you are maintaining a parallel structure and consistent logic among the options.

And remember that as your revise genuine ambiguity out of your items, that plausible, but incorrect answers may always provide "ambiguity" for the less informed test takers, whereas the same question will not be ambiguous at all to those with a confident grasp of the material.

3. Use language that is appropriate for the reading level of the population tested

Real estate material requires students to gain familiarity with terms and concepts that are commonly used within the profession. But it does not demand that they be equally responsible for unfamiliar words that are not real-estate related.

So, when writing an item, consider the material you expect them to learn as well as the general reading ability of your students. Then go ahead and use words like "novation" and "hypothecation," while revising out "quotidian" and "fatuous."

4. Reject language that may be offensive to subgroups of the population tested, e.g., gender, names, license types, 'clever alliterations,' etc.

"Subgroups of the population" means any one or more individuals in your class or seminar identified by a particular characteristic, such as male/female or ethnic/regional origin. It also applies to license level; use "licensee" for both sales and broker UNLESS there is a reason to identify the broker of record.

Clearly, references to any identifiable subset of the general population in test material puts the creator in sensitive territory.

This commonly occurs through the use of proper names or illustrative scenarios that might make some test takers feel included and respected and the rest excluded or diminished. It also occurs with "cutesy" bits of 'clever alliteration,' such as "Sally Seller" and "Betty Broker." Stick with simple, straightforward labels for the parties involved: "a seller," "a prospective buyer," and "the seller's agent."

Regardless of intent or degree, if test material provides challenges outside the scope of the knowledge and skills it is designed to test, those extraneous challenges must be revised out of the material. Period.

-- End of Annotated Outline --

Segment Three: Sample Items—Six Raw-to Revised Items

Sample Item #1

#1. The following item is from a classroom handout. It is a simple categorization of trade fixtures as personal property.

Original:

According to law, a trade fixture is:
(A) real estate
(B) personal property
(C) a license
(D) none of the above Key: (B)

Commentary: According to what law? Also, the stem is unfocused, as seen by the fact that the sentence can be completed any number of ways: "located in a retail store," "exemplified by built-in store freezers," or "usually big and heavy."

The options are weak. (A) is arguably keyable, since circumstances and/or contract language in a lease may, indeed, make a trade fixture an attached part of the property and therefore real estate.

Option (C), the term "license," is too farfetched to be a plausible distractor; and (D)'s "none of the above" is a throwaway.

The basic concept of the item wants to link trade fixtures with personal property. So, it is best to focus on "types of property" and let the options be property types.

There is no reason to keep the reference to "law" in the stem, since it serves only as a clumsy attempt to give greater authority to the answer. Plus, it sends one to a "law" book to verify the answer: trade fixtures are defined adequately in prelicensing textbooks.

The following revision uses a gradation approach to keep open the issue about trade fixtures becoming real property while making it a wrong answer.

Revision:

Trade fixtures are MOST likely to be categorized as which of the following types of property?
(A) Real
(B) Rented
(C) Personal
(D) Disposable Key: (C)

Sample Item #2

#**2. The following item is from a classroom handout. It is a simple identification of encroachment.**

Original:

A part of Edgar Tracy's barn is on his neighbor's land. This is called an:
(A) an easement
(B) an encumbrance
(C) an encroachment
(D) an estoppel Key: (C)

Commentary: Yes, the handout repeated the article "an" as shown above. This points to a style call of having the article remain in the stem or with the terms in the options.

The guiding principle for most style standards and conventions is readability. So, which is the *least* noticeable way to present words like "a," "an," and "the"? These decisions can vary from item to item, and where you might want to leave the "an" in the stem above, for another item it may "look funny" to separate the article from its noun.

Regardless, once you select your preference, strive for consistency within your own item pools.

The stem above raises several sensitivity issues: names, gender, and property type. It is best to craft items that are as generic and neutral as possible. Otherwise, you may have to work too hard to provide a balanced representation in the pool of ethnic diversity in given names, male/female references, and property types (rural vs. urban; commercial/industrial/retail vs. residential).

Options (A) and (B) are plausible, and arguably keyable (an encroachment is a type of encumbrance; Phil's neighbor may have knowingly allowed this situation, or it may have existed long enough to warrant a prescriptive easement).

Option (D) is an outlandish choice here; it has nothing to do with property interests or ownership and does not belong in this group.

The following revision focuses on a straightforward textbook definition of encroachment. Using the qualifier "best" makes (B) wrong, since "encroachment" is the more applicable term.

Revision:

Which of the following terms BEST identifies the situation created when a building extends across a property line onto a neighboring property?
(A) Easement
(B) Encumbrance
(C) Encroachment
(D) Eminent domain Key: (C)

Sample Item #3

#3. The following item is from a classroom handout. It is a tortured attempt to get at an example of a lis pendens.

Original:

When a lien against a parcel of real estate may result from a pending lawsuit, a person examining the public records would look for:
(A) forcible entry
(B) constructive notice
(C) caveat emptor notice
(D) lis pendis Key: (D)

Commentary: Yes, the handout misspells the key!! This means that students who see "lis pendens" on a licensing exam may well think that it is misspelled there rather than here . . . Basic bad form.

The stem is way too busy and hypothetical in its attempt to paint a picture. Also, the stem's jumble of information points out a prime reason to make sure you have a grasp of the *one* point the item is trying to test, since this item contains two different testable topics: (1) what is a lis pendens; and (2) how is it discovered?

The options are all problematic: (A) is nonsensical; (B) is arguably correct since a lis pendens provides constructive notice; (C) is unusual (even fictitious?); and (D), as already noted, is misspelled.

Definition items are commonly constructed either of two ways. One, put an acceptable definition in the stem and offer a list of terms. Or, two, identify the term in the stem and offer a list of definitions.

Both ways create recognition exercises that are not particularly challenging. The first way, though, is generally easier to both write and answer; it sets up a simpler recognition task with fewer words and nuances to wade through in the options. The second way is much more demanding for the author, since writing three plausible alternate definitions on top of the correct one is a tricky business.

In the revision below, "constructive notice" works as a good distractor without being keyable.

Revision:

Which of the following terms BEST identifies a pending legal action that might have an impact on the marketability of a property's title?
(A) Escheat
(B) Lis pendens
(C) Abstract of title
(D) Constructive notice Key: (B)

Sample Item #4

#4. The following item is from a classroom handout. It is a common short-stem wonder.

Original:

An option:
(A) requires the buyer to complete the purchase
(B) keeps an offer open for a specified time
(C) gives buyer an easement of the property
(D) makes seller liable for commission if buyer defaults Key: (B)

Commentary: The stem identifies the key word, but not the question. This is a classic example of an unfocused (or 'undirected') stem. It is only slightly more informative than the ultimate classic of weak stems, "Which of the following is true?"

Looking at the key suggests the stem needs to focus on one aspect or characteristic of options *to purchase* versus options to renew, lease options, or even option listings.

In the style department, while it is not uncommon for test questions to attempt being "business efficient" by omitting articles, as in options (C) and (D), one has to ask if there are any benefits for adopting this style in test questions. My vote is "no," because it simply makes for choppy reading; use "*the* buyer" and "*the* seller" instead of just "buyer" and "seller."

Note below that I have arranged the options in order of increasing length. This, too, streamlines the item from a readability standpoint.

Also note that whereas all of the options begin with a verb for grammatical consistency, the final two options are even more similar in their construction. When options exhibit this sort of parallelism in style and/or logic, they are best kept together for reading ease.

In practice, option contracts involve a host of possible components, most of which are too transaction-specific to attempt to test in a simple definition question. The way to home in on the essential specifics of an option to purchase in a definition question is to select the best qualifier and place it prominently in the stem.

Revision:

A PRIMARY characteristic of an option to purchase real estate is that an option
(A) keeps an offer open for a specified time.
(B) requires the buyer to complete the purchase.
(C) gives the buyer the right to use the property prior to closing.
(D) gives the seller the right to all earnest monies if the buyer fails to close

Key: (A)

Sample Item #5

#5. The following item is from a classroom handout. Only the key lets us know it is attempting to get at the topic of the transfer of real property by the laws of devise, descent, and distribution.

Original:

The law that requires transfer of real property ownership
(A) law of evidence
(B) statute of limitations
(C) status of frauds
(D) laws of descent Key: (D)

Commentary: There's a law that *requires* transfer of real property ownership? How interesting!

The better term is undoubtedly "governs," but the stem still does not clarify how and when the correct answer applies. Ultimately, the stem is misguided: it omits the key concept of intestate distribution while setting up a vague notion of required transfer of property.

The item as a whole also raises the all-important issue of relevance. There is nothing wrong with teaching the concept of descent, especially since it is useful general information about the process by which a decedent's property is transferred in the absence of a will. But is it more of a legal detail issue than a term of art used in the real estate profession? If so, then it lacks relevance for real estate testing.

Or, do brokers need to know this and it is just a bit too advanced for sales? It may be that the topics that are more appropriate for testing relate to definitions of testate, intestate, and escheat.

Those issues aside for now, "law of evidence" is a trumped-up option, and there is no such thing as a "status of frauds," except as a typo. These options are reminders that fictitious distractors are inappropriate for testing: they present a student with terms they should be able to trust as valid terms, though perhaps incorrect choices. In fact, they should even 'learn' from distractors.

As I first learned while writing SATs in Princeton, as the stakes on an exam get higher and move farther away from your own classroom discussion-prompters, it is an increasingly indefensible disservice to test takers to expose them to "made up" terminology, legal terms or regulations, and government or professional agencies. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

The following revision focuses on a straightforward textbook definition of the laws of descent. The qualifier "most" makes (B) wrong, since "escheat" is the recourse if there are no family heirs.

Revision:

The transfer of property to the heirs of a person who dies intestate is MOST likely to be determined by the
(A) laws of descent
(B) process of escheat
(C) statute of frauds
(D) statute of limitations Key: (A)

Sample Item #6

#6. The following item is from a state-owned license exam item bank that was retired long ago. It was written, no doubt, as stress-relief after generating hundreds of other items (item-writing can become mind-numbing). Needless to say, it was never used.

Original:

Holding a gun to someone's head to force a signature on a contract is
(A) attempted murder.
(B) permissible only in exceptional circumstances.
(C) duress.
(D) rude and inconsiderate, but not illegal so long as the gun doesn't go off.

Key: (C)

Commentary: Truly an outstanding item!

I've shared this one with a number of people in various formal and informal settings, and there have only been two suggestions for improvement:

- arrange the options in order of increasing length
- correct the key to (D)

So, here it is! A six-gun question that is so good it can be left in a classroom set for the surprise value, and to open up a lively general discussion about circumstances that constitute duress, which might thereby invalidate a contract.

This is a discussion question, NOT an assessment question, so make sure these types do not creep into the end-of-course tests: humor is highly subjective and failing candidates are not in a laughing mood.

Revision:

Holding a gun to someone's head to force a signature on a contract is
(A) duress.
(B) attempted murder.
(C) permissible only in exceptional circumstances.
(D) rude and inconsiderate, but not illegal so long as the gun doesn't go off.

Key: (D)

That all, folks! Good luck "grooming" your own pools.