

higher and should not be used in the assessment of listening comprehension. In reading comprehension, students have unlimited opportunities to go back to the text to determine if content is not given, but in listening comprehension, students hear the source text only once or twice. Including an NG option would tax students' memory.

- **Have students circle T, F, or N on the test paper or answer sheet.**

By doing so, you will avoid getting those Ts that suspiciously look like Fs. This will substantially facilitate your marking.

Matching Format

Another common objective format is matching. Matching is an extended form of MCQ that draws on the student's ability to make connections among ideas, vocabulary, and structure. Matching questions present the students with two columns of information. Students must find the matches between the two columns. Items in the left-hand column are called *premises* or stems, and the items in the right-hand column are called *options*. The advantage of matching questions over MCQs is that the student has more distractors per item. Additionally, writing items in the matching format is somewhat easier for teachers than either MCQs or True/False/Not Given.

Consider this example assessing proverbs.

Poor Matching Question Set:

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. better late | A. wear it |
| 2. if the shoe fits, | B. keeps the doctor away |
| 3. an apple a day | C. is not gold |
| 4. the early bird | D. catches the worm |
| 5. all that glitters | E. than never |

Both the options and the premises have an equal number of choices. Therefore if students miss one, they miss at least two automatically. Similarly, if they get four correct, they get the last one correct by default. When formatting matching questions, it is better to draw a line before the numbers so that students can write "the letter of the correct answer in the space provided." With no blanks, in order to answer students will have to draw lines from option to premise, making grading very difficult.

Consider this better example that asks students to match useful expressions with context of their use.

- | | |
|--|----------------------|
| _____ 1. when you are introduced to someone new | A. I'm sorry. |
| _____ 2. to apologize to someone | B. Stop it. |
| _____ 3. you don't know the answer to a question | C. Nice to meet you. |
| _____ 4. when you are joking with someone | D. I've got it. |
| | E. I'm just kidding. |
| | F. I give up. |

In this example, there are two more options than premises which function as distractors. To answer the questions, students have space to write the answer in the space provided thus facilitating the grading process for teachers.

Tips for Writing Matching Items

These are some important points to bear in mind when writing matching questions:

- **Give more options than premises.**

Never write items that rely on direct 1-on-1 matching. The consequence of 1-on-1 matching is that if a student gets one item wrong, at least two (but potentially many more) are wrong by default. By contrast, if the student gets all previous items right, the last item is a process of elimination "freebie."

- **Number the premises and letter the options.**

To facilitate marking, number the premise column and letter the option column. Then have students write the *letter of the correct answer in the space provided.*

- **Make options shorter than premises.**

When developing matching questions, write options that are relatively short. This will reduce the reading load on the part of students.

- **Options and premises should be related to one central theme.**

Relating the information in both columns to one central theme will make for a more coherent test section.

- **Avoid widows.**
"Widows" occur when half of a test section or question overlaps onto another page. Make sure the matching section (and all other sections) on your test is all on the same page. Students might fail to see any answer items that continue on another page.
- **Make it clear to students if they can use options more than once.**
Be sure to explicitly state in the rubric whether options can be used more than once. If this is not permitted, you might advise students to cross out options they have already used.
- **Ask students to write the letter of the correct answer in a blank provided.**
Failure to include this in the rubric will force students to draw lines between options and premises making them next to impossible to grade.

Cloze/Gap-Fill Items

This section discusses common subjective items used on language tests: cloze and gap fill, short answer and completion items, and essay questions. Many teachers don't distinguish between gap fill and cloze tests. However, there are some important differences between the two. In gap-fill questions, we normally choose the words that we delete, whereas in cloze, we delete the words systematically.

Cloze testing originated in the 1950s as a test of reading comprehension. Conventional cloze tests involve the removal of words at regular intervals, usually every six to eight words and normally not less than every five. The student's task is to complete the gaps with appropriate fillers. To do this, students have to read around the gap. More specifically, they must refer to the text on either side of the gap, taking into account meaning and structure to process the answer. Although they remain primarily a test of reading, cloze formats can test a wide variety of language areas.

In gap-fill items, a word or phrase is replaced by a blank in a sentence. The student's task is to fill in the missing word or phrase. Harrison (1983) identifies two types of gap fills: function gaps (such as prepositions, articles, conjunctions)

that have only one correct filler, and semantic gaps (such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs) that can be filled with a number of different alternatives (p. 40). Rational deletion cloze is similar to gap fill in that specific categories of words have been deleted for assessment purposes. See an example in Chapter 3 on page 53.

Tips for Writing Cloze/Gap-Fill Items

- **Ensure that answers are concise.**

The response that goes in the blank should not be overly long. Make sure there is enough room in the blank to comfortably write the response.

- **Provide enough context.**

There needs to be sufficient context present for students to surmise what goes in the blank.

- **Blanks should be of equal length.**

When putting blanks in your paragraph/text, make sure they are the same length. Providing blanks that differ in length implies responses of varying lengths. The main body of the question should precede the blank.

- **Develop and allow for a list of acceptable responses.**

When grading cloze/gap fill items, be sure to allow for the possibility of more than one answer.

- **Don't put a gap in the first sentence of a paragraph or text.**

Normally the initial sentence in a paragraph or text is used to set the context for the reading to follow. Including questions in this part of the text can be problematic for students.

Short Answer/Completion Items

Short answer or sentence completion items ask students to answer in a few words, phrases, or sentences. These items offer a number of advantages. First, they encourage students to learn and know the answer rather than just recognize it. Second, because students must produce the answer, there is less guessing. Third, they are easy to construct. Fourth, they are especially good for

checking gist, intensive understanding of a text, and *who, what, where, and when* content. Finally, these question types can test higher-order thinking skills.

Teachers also point out a number of disadvantages to short answer/sentence completion items. One disadvantage is that responses may take the student longer, which reduces the possible number of items on a test. Second, the student has to produce language to respond, and this may discourage the rote memorization of facts. Issues having to do with scoring are perhaps the most cited disadvantage with this item format. Because there is often a significant amount of language to assess, scoring may take longer. Since the scoring is subjective, it has the potential to be unreliable through *inter-rater* and *intra-rater* reliability issues. *Inter-rater* reliability refers to the consistency between two or more graders. *Intra-rater* reliability refers to one grader's inner consistency between one marking session and another.

Tips for Writing Short Answer/Completion Items

- **There should be only one short, concise answer.**
Responses that are short and concise are easier to grade. Teachers should specify the number of words if there is a limit.
- **Allow for partial credit.**
Teachers should consider the issue of partial credit for answers that have varying degrees of correctness. A major goal of testing/assessment is giving students credit for what they know.

Essay Questions

Essay questions offer students the greatest opportunity to construct their own responses. With this question type, it is the student who decides how to approach the question, which ideas to include, how to organize these points, and which conclusions to make. Essay questions are the most useful format for assessing higher-order cognitive processes such as analyzing, evaluating, summarizing, and synthesizing.

Despite these advantages, essay questions are time consuming for students to answer, thereby allowing for the testing of only a limited amount of student learning. Essay questions not only assess content knowledge, they place a premium on writing ability. Since essay questions are scored subjectively, there is

the potential for reliability problems. For teachers the scoring workload is the biggest disadvantage to using the essay question format.

Tips for Writing Essay Questions

- **Make all questions similar in level of difficulty.**

This is especially important if students are given a selection of essay questions and have to choose the ones they answer. If the questions vary in difficulty, students will go for the easier ones.

- **Write questions that force students to use higher-order thinking skills.**

Use essay questions to their best advantage by requiring students to use higher-order cognitive processes such as analyzing, evaluating, summarizing, and synthesizing by using verbs such as compare and contrast, defend, support, and predict.

- **Allow students enough space to write their answer.**

Leave sufficient space (preferably lined) for students to plan and write their answer. Have extra lined paper on hand during the exam in case students need to continue or double space their answers.

- **Be specific in the amount or type of information you want in the answer.**

If you want students to include specific information in their answers, tell them in the prompt. If a specific number of paraphrases or pages is required, include that information as well. Be clear about the number of examples you require or if students are expected to give their own opinion.

- **Assess content selectively.**

Sometimes content is better suited to another format. Assess only content that is appropriate with this format.

- **Share the scoring rubric with students prior to the exam.**

Develop a specified scoring rubric and then share and discuss this rubric with your students before (or even during) the exam. Transparency will help decrease student anxiety.

Ten Things to Remember about Testing Techniques

1. Design tests and assessment tasks based on blueprints or test specifications.

It is easier to create parallel items/tasks if test developers follow a blueprint or test specification. If you don't have a test specification but do have an assessment task that works, analyze what the task entails and write a specification to fit it.

2. Ensure the format remains the same within one section of the exam.

It is confusing to mix formats within the same section of a test.

3. Make sure the item format is correctly matched to the test purpose and course content.

Test items should relate to curricular objectives. Teachers should think about what they are trying to test and match their purpose with the item format that most closely resembles it.

4. Include items of varying levels of difficulty.

Present items of different levels of difficulty throughout the test from easy to difficult. We recommend the 30/40/30 principle. When constructing a test, try to direct 30 percent of the questions to the below average students in the class, 40 percent of the questions to those who have mid-range abilities, and the remaining 30 percent of the questions should be directed toward those students who are above average in their language ability. In this way, everyone in the class, no matter what their ability level, will have access to some of the questions.

5. Start with an easy question first.

If you follow the 30/40/30 principle mentioned, start the exam with one of the questions from the easy group. This will relax students, which will lower their anxiety levels.

6. Avoid ambiguous items, negatives, and especially double negatives.

Unless your purpose as a tester is to test ambiguity, avoid ambiguous items. Sometimes ambiguous language causes students to answer incorrectly even when they know the answer. Negatives and double negatives are extremely confusing and should be avoided; if the intention is to test negatives, only relevant information should be presented.

7. Avoid race, gender, and ethnic background bias.

Sometimes test content unfairly biases certain groups. To avoid this, examine your items carefully. Make sure that at least one other colleague has looked over your items to check for bias.

8. Prepare answer keys in advance of test administration.

Develop keys and model answers at the same time you develop the test or assessment task.

9. Employ items that test all levels of thinking.

Avoid lifting items verbatim from test stimulus. This does not require a great deal of processing from our students. Try to include items/tasks of varying degrees of sophistication and levels of thinking. Remember the six levels in Bloom's Taxonomy (1984): Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation.

10. Give clear instructions.

When we assess our students, we want to know if they comprehend the questions we are asking them. Directions that are too elaborate, for example, could impede student comprehension, thereby skewing test results.

Extension Activity

Mr. Knott has just developed his midterm English exam for his integrated skills ESL class. Look at the grammar and vocabulary section and decide which aspects of his test are good. What could be done to improve the test? Compare your comments to what some colleagues had to say about Mr. Knott's test (pages 40–42).

English Midterm Grammar Exam

Directions: Questions 1–10 are in complete sentences. Choose the best word or phrase to complete each sentence. Indicate the correct letter (10 points total; 1 point each).

1. Obet lives in Detroit. _____ works in the auto industry.
 - a. her
 - b. he
 - c. him
 - d. she

2. My sister _____ as an air hostess.
 - a. working
 - b. works
 - c. she works
 - d. job

3. Tuesday and Wednesday come before Thursday but after _____
 - a. Sunday
 - b. Saturday
 - c. Monday
 - d. Friday
 - e. None of the above

4. I'm hungry. I think I'll eat an _____
 - a. orange juice
 - b. fork
 - c. éclair
 - d. automobile

5. The answer to question three is the _____ day of the week.
 - a. first
 - b. forth
 - c. three
 - d. fifth

6. I usually participate in the regatta _____ June.
 - a. from
 - b. on
 - c. at
 - d. to

7. Juan is a lazy person. He usually takes a siesta _____ the weekend.
 - a. on
 - b. during
 - c. at
 - d. throughout

8. Although the proposal has some disadvantages, they are outweighed by the _____.
 - a. advantages
 - b. negatives
 - c. drawbacks
 - d. problem

9. While my mother prepared the _____ for dinner, I watched television.
 - a. kitchen
 - b. children
 - c. chicken
 - d. cartoon

10. An architect is a person who does not _____.
 - a. design automobiles
 - b. design buildings
 - c. design houses
 - d. design offices

11. Can you type _____ on a computer?
 - a. typing
 - b. to type
 - c. typed
 - d. type