



Item writing guide for educators

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Social Work Boards Item Writing Guide for Educators provides information to help educators write questions (or *items*) according to ASWB standards. When social work faculty offer experience in answering multiple-choice questions, they help prepare their students to demonstrate competence on the licensing exams.

Licensure is intended to protect the public that uses social work services by ensuring that practitioners are competent. The examinations serve as one part of the process of determining competence; social work regulatory bodies typically require a passing score on the exam along with graduation from an accredited social work program, supervised experience when needed, and a background check.

ASWB trains and works with nearly 100 paid item writers, a diverse group of licensed social workers representing a range of races, ethnicities, locations, and practice settings. The Item Writing Guide for Educators is based on the training those item writers receive and is intended to accompany ASWB's on-demand online question writing training for educators.

Another important resource for educators is the Educator Guide to the ASWB Exams with group review practice questions. The educator guide is a free publication designed to help educators better understand the examination development process and prepare their students for success on the licensing exams. The guide includes access to a set of practice questions retired from ASWB exams.

Learn more about ASWB's [exam resources for educators](#).

SECTION 1

UNDERSTANDING THE BIG PICTURE

Educators new to developing multiple-choice questions that follow ASWB standards may wonder how ASWB develops the exams.

What is ASWB?

ASWB was incorporated in March 1979 by representatives of state social work licensing bodies. The laws, regulations, and experiences in the states varied considerably in 1979 and still do, but many situations are the same from one jurisdiction to another. The need for states to be able to draw on one another's knowledge of and background in consumer protection helped bring them together to form what was first called the American Association of State Social Work Boards. The name was changed in 1999 to be more inclusive after Canadian provinces joined. Current membership consists of all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and all 10 Canadian provinces.

About the practice analysis

ASWB completes an analysis of the practice of social work every five to seven years to ensure that its examinations reflect current social work practice and pertain to important social work functions. A committee of social work content experts specifies tasks that are performed by practitioners across settings. In the past, a large number of practitioners, chosen as a representative sample, rated each task according to the amount of time spent performing it, its importance, and whether it is required at entry to a particular category of practice or learned on the job. The next practice analysis, reenvisioned as the Social Work Census, will attempt to capture feedback from every social worker. After the survey responses are gathered, social work content experts will determine the underlying knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to perform each task. These results will be analyzed and form the basis for the examination blueprint.

Examination blueprint

Just as an architect requires a blueprint to construct a sound building, the designers of a well-constructed objective examination require a content outline that forms the basis of the examination. The exam blueprint is a list of the content areas of skills and knowledge to be tested. The content outline also indicates the relative emphasis that should be given to each content area. Constructing an exam around specified guidelines contributes to the validity of the interpretation of scores derived from it. Not only are all pertinent content areas covered in the examination, the number of items on each reflects the emphasis given to them in training, in practice, and in the literature.

The exam blueprint serves as a basis for items needed. The specifications are also the basis for an item classification system that indicates the content that the item represents. To be considered for use on the exam, each item must be classified appropriately according to ASWB specifications. The item classifications are then used during exam assembly to ensure that exam coverage is complete and appropriately proportional.

Examination format

The ASWB examinations are three- or four-option multiple-choice examinations administered via computer at approved testing sites. Candidates have four hours to complete the 170-question exam, containing 150 scored items and 20 nonscored pretest items that are being evaluated for inclusion in later forms as scored items.

Examination Committee

Submitted items undergo an extensive editing process before appearing on an examination. Each writer is assigned an item development consultant who performs an initial review of every question. Items may be returned to the writer at this stage before they are approved for Examination Committee review. The Examination Committee consists of up to 18 content experts and a liaison from the ASWB Board of Directors, appointed by the association president. The committee members are successful former item writers who reflect the diversity of the profession. They meet up to four times per year to review and edit items as a group. At this stage, items may be approved for pretesting, returned to writers for further edits, or deleted.

The Examination Committee review is exacting and meticulous. Part of the committee's screening process involves ensuring that each item meets the following criteria:

- Contains a focused stem
- Uses simple, clear, unbiased, and up-to-date language
- Has one clear and legally defensible correct answer
- Tests knowledge critical to practice

When an item meets these criteria, the committee approves it for pretesting.

Pretesting items

When a new question has been written and approved by the Examination Committee, it is then added to an exam as a pretest question. The exam contains 150 scored questions and 20 pretest questions that do not count toward a candidate's score.

Pretesting gives us evidence that the question will accurately measure what it intends to measure. Pretesting also allows us to make sure that questions are performing acceptably before they are included as actual scored items and affect someone's ability to become licensed. They are mixed in with the scored questions so that we can get accurate data on their performance. If a question performs poorly, we will not use it on a future exam.

One aspect of this statistical review concerns differential item functioning, or DIF. DIF is a psychometric measure of the relative difficulty of questions for various groups; it serves as a measure of potential bias. Questions which demonstrate DIF are deleted and will never become scored questions. While there is sometimes no readily apparent cause of DIF, any question that shows DIF is deleted out of an abundance of caution.

Only if a question performs well statistically will it become a scored question on a future exam. If a question does not have acceptable performance statistics, it is reviewed again by the Examination Committee and discarded or changed and pretested again. Even after questions have been approved for use as scored items, they are continuously monitored.

SECTION 2

ITEM WRITING

Writing a good multiple-choice question is a creative process that requires more than expertise in the content area to be tested. You know this from your work as an educator: Following high standards for question development can help you build questions that effectively tell you whether students have and can apply social work knowledge and skills.

Individual items on the exam are made up of a **stem** and three or four **options**. The stem is the part of the item that presents what is being asked and is phrased as a question rather than an open-ended statement. The options are the three or four answer choices presented. The correct answer is called the **key**, and the incorrect options are called the **distractors**.

Step 1: Frame the item topic

Most likely, you will base questions on coursework and reading assignments. While textbooks and journals are important sources of questions, multiple-choice questions should not be based simply on a quotation from a textbook or use the exact wording from a reference. Real, practice-based situations are the best foundations for items, but they need to be supported by a reference.

Step 2: Construct the stem

Once the item topic has been determined, the next step in developing the item is the construction of the stem. The stem poses a question to which the test-taker must respond, and a good stem presents all the information needed to answer the question. Test-takers should not have to review the options to determine the intent of the item, nor should they have to sift through extraneous information. To improve the readability of the item, the item stem should end with a complete question.

Step 3: Develop the options

Once the stem has been written, the next step is to provide the one correct or best answer, the **key**, along with two or three other plausible but incorrect options, or **distractors**. The options are designed to differentiate less knowledgeable test-takers from those who are more knowledgeable. Therefore, distractors should be believable and attractive to test-takers who may be trying to guess the correct answer.



Grammatical consistency

Make certain that all questions include options that are grammatically and logically consistent with each other and the stem.

Step 4: Vary the cognitive skills tested

When writing an item, consider the nature of the task that the student is being asked to perform. In other words, does the test-taker need to arrive at a definition, describe a situation, identify a disorder, or recall information? If so, then the item should be classified as **recall**. If the student must apply a principle or form an inference, then the item requires higher-level cognitive skills such as **application** or **reasoning**. Most questions on ASWB exams are application or reasoning questions.

SECTION 3

GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE STEM

The stem should be written in the present tense using simple, clear, and concise language. The examination should test competence in social work practice, not in the English language. Long series of descriptive terms should be avoided when possible.

Take care to frame the stem in as broad and impersonal terms as possible. Do not use the pronoun “you” to refer to the social worker and remember that because this is a social work exam, the terms “counselor” and “therapist” must be avoided. Use the word “client” instead of referring to the client by name or initials. In medical settings, “patient” may be used.

1. Focus the stem clearly.

The item stem should be complete and focused. It should ask a single question that centers on one idea only, and it should provide all the information necessary to select the correct or best response.

Test-takers should **not** have to search through all the options to determine what the item is asking. A question to consider when writing the stem is: “After reading the stem, can a knowledgeable candidate envision what the possible answer might be without reading the options?”

A good stem directs the test-taker’s thinking, while a poor stem provides no direction and often leads to unparallel options or options that simply do not fit together.

2. Write stems requiring one clear answer.

Items should not ask the test-taker to choose the best of several answers if more than one option may be defensible in some situations.

Poor stem

What should older adults do to **MOST** effectively promote health and social legislation?

- A. Picket the homes of opposition legislators
- B. Write letters to their district legislators
- C. Form coalitions of interested organizations
- D. Send delegations to lobby for the legislation

The problem with this stem is that there may be disagreement about the **MOST** effective approach to influencing legislation for a particular situation and in particular settings. Items should be based on fact, not opinion. The stem below lends itself to a clear, fact-based key.

Improved stem

A community group asks a social worker to help form a coalition of local organizations to promote health and social legislation. What should the social worker do to determine which organizations to contact?

3. Avoid including extraneous information (window dressing).

The stem should contain enough information to allow the test-taker to respond correctly, but it should not be cluttered with irrelevant information. Extraneous information is called “window dressing” because it can mask the primary focus or intent of an item.

Poor stem

During a session with a social worker, a client who had received her first cycle of chemotherapy consisting of doxorubicin, bleomycin, and vincristine, describes feeling very sad and helpless after her oncologist informed her that her cancer has not responded favorably to the treatment. The client indicates uncertainty as to whether the source of her depression stems from the adverse effects of the treatment or the news itself. The social worker says, “You seem to be feeling depressed and hopeless.” What is the **BEST** description of the social worker’s intervention?

The stem is supposed to be testing understanding of the type of intervention the social worker is using, but it is obscured by mentioning the type of chemotherapy the client is receiving and the client’s uncertainty about the source of the depression. The improved stem eliminates unnecessary information.

Improved stem

During a meeting with a social worker, a client describes feeling sad and helpless after being informed that chemotherapy treatments are not helping stop the client's cancer from progressing. The social worker verbally acknowledges the client’s feelings of depression and hopelessness. What intervention is the social worker using?

4. Base items on widely accepted principles of practice.

Frame stems to test widely accepted principles of practice. If the item is based on practical experience, the experience should reflect accepted practice standards. For example, the NASW Code of Ethics or the CASW Code of Ethics can support a key when writing an item about ethical conduct.

5. Avoid negative wording such as NOT and EXCEPT.

Negative words, such as **NOT** and **EXCEPT**, should be avoided in stems because they make items unnecessarily confusing for candidates.

6. Avoid complex constructions, such as dependent clauses or long series of descriptive phrases or terms.

A series of symptoms, ideas, or actions is best broken into two shorter sentences to improve readability.

Poor stem

A social worker meets with a client who recently experienced a severe flood and who now reports sleep disturbance, violent nightmares, jumpiness, and difficulty in concentrating. What disorder is the **MOST** likely in this case?

Improved stem

A social worker meets with a client who recently survived a tragic accident. The client reports sleep disturbances that include violent nightmares. The client also describes being agitated and having difficulty concentrating. What disorder is the client **MOST** likely experiencing?

7. Avoid minilectures. Do not include a sentence or two of introductory information that is not needed to answer the question.

Items should not include information that essentially educates the test-taker by providing a minilecture consisting of facts. In the example below, the first sentence educates the test-taker by explaining a long-standing social work tradition. This minilecture does not provide information necessary to answer the item correctly.

Poor stem

Social workers have a long tradition of providing services to members of society who are most in need of help. To assist an unemployed single parent, what is the **BEST** information the social worker can provide?

Improved stem

A social worker meets with a single parent who has been unable to obtain employment because of lack of work history. What information can the social worker provide that will **MOST** likely help the client?

8. Write stems using active voice and present tense.

Items should be written in the present tense, using active voice where possible.

Poor stem

A social worker is preparing to meet a client for a termination session. What is the **MOST** important action to be done by the social worker?

In the example below, the improved stem is written in the present tense, using active voice.

Improved stem

A social worker prepares to meet a client for a termination session. What is **MOST** important for the social worker to do?

9. Use **FIRST**, **NEXT**, **MOST**, and **BEST** correctly.

ASWB questions often use **FIRST**, **NEXT**, **MOST**, or **BEST** at the end of a stem. These words help to distinguish the key from the incorrect distractors. Qualifiers help the question test critical thinking rather than recall of facts.

FIRST and **NEXT**

FIRST and **NEXT** require the test-taker to identify a sequence of actions. While all the options may be possible actions, the key is the action that should be done **FIRST** or **NEXT**.

It is helpful to compare three similar questions that may be used at the end of a stem:

Example

What should the social worker do?

Use this question when the key is the one correct action, and the distractors are actions that the social worker should not take.

Example

What should the social worker do **FIRST**?

Use this question to focus on the **FIRST** action the social worker should take in response to the scenario. The key is the **FIRST** action, while the distractors are actions that may occur later but not **FIRST**.

Example

After acknowledging the client's concerns, what should the social worker do **NEXT**?

Use this question to focus on the **NEXT** action the social worker should take. Using **NEXT** means that the social worker has already done something, and the key is the **NEXT** action. The distractors are also possible actions, but they should not be done **NEXT**.

MOST and BEST

MOST or **BEST** should be used when more than one distractor is possibly correct, but the key stands out as the **BEST** or **MOST** likely choice.

Example

A social worker meets with a client who reports frequent anxiety and hypervigilance following a car accident two weeks earlier. What is the **MOST** likely diagnosis?

- A. Adjustment disorder
- B. Posttraumatic stress disorder
- C. Acute stress disorder <
- D. Generalized anxiety disorder

In this example, the **MOST** likely diagnosis is C. Further assessment may indicate other diagnoses, but with the information available, this is the **MOST** likely answer. If the question were simply "What is the diagnosis?" the distractors would need to be less plausible.

Example

A social worker meets with a client who is court ordered to participate in services. The client reports no intention of making changes. What is the **BEST** way for the social worker to engage the client?

- A. Focus on establishing a therapeutic relationship <
- B. Review the consequences of failure to comply
- C. Encourage the client to share concerns with the court

In this example, the **BEST** answer is A. The social worker may do the actions in other distractors throughout sessions, but A is the **BEST** way to engage the client.

Checklist for the stem

A well-constructed stem:

- Refers to the social worker as such, rather than as a "therapist," "counselor," or "you"
- Refrains from using names or initials to designate a person; rather, it refers to the person receiving services as a "client" or "patient."
- Clearly describes the problem so that the question being asked is evident and defines the task for the test-taker
- Is worded so that the test-taker can formulate an answer without having to read the options
- Has one clear answer
- Avoids negative wording such as NOT and EXCEPT
- Avoids use of a string of several descriptive words or phrases
- Avoids teaching through minilectures
- Is free of window dressing
- Uses active voice and present tense
- Uses the words FIRST, MOST, BEST, and NEXT correctly

SECTION 4

GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING GOOD OPTIONS

Items should include three or four options conceptually similar in content, parallel in structure, grammatically correct, and similar in length. Options should be mutually exclusive; that is, one option should not be synonymous with or a subset of any other option. Only one option can be keyed correct or best; two or three others, referred to as distractors, must be incorrect. A stem asking for a **BEST** answer is appropriate when the key is not too obviously correct, and therefore too easy, but at the same time represents the answer that experts would agree is best among the choices given. Incorrect options should be plausible to test-takers who do not possess the knowledge, skill, or ability tested by the item and should appeal to those who are guessing at the answer. Items on the ASWB examinations do not use options such as “All of the above,” “None of the above,” or “A and C.”

1. Make options parallel.

All options should be parallel in content, phrasing, and format. If the correct response is a diagnosis, for example, all the distractors should also be diagnoses. Likewise, if the stem asks for an action, then all options should be actions.

Poor distractors

A social worker meets with a client who did not receive an anticipated job promotion. The client describes periods of mood swings, at times feeling elated and at other times feeling very sad. The client sleeps and eats well and reports occasional suicidal thoughts but no specific plan. What should the social worker assess for **FIRST**?

- A. Low self-esteem
- B. Generalized anxiety disorder
- C. A bipolar disorder <
- D. Having a nervous breakdown

Options A and D are not parallel in terms of content since they are not DSM diagnoses. Option D is also not grammatically parallel.

Improved distractors

- A. Major depressive disorder
- B. Generalized anxiety disorder
- C. A bipolar disorder <
- D. Adjustment disorder

2. Ensure that all distractors are plausible.

Incorrect options should be plausible without being correct. Implausible options will be automatically eliminated by less knowledgeable test-takers. All four options should be structurally similar. Item writers must ensure that options are similar in length and grammatical structure. Avoid writing one option that has more carefully crafted qualifications, additional actions, or more built-in explanation than the others.

Poor distractors

A five-year-old child is referred to a social worker because a teacher saw the child using dolls to simulate oral sex. What does this behavior **MOST** likely indicate?

- A. The child is engaging in age appropriate behavior.
- B. The child has been exposed to this behavior. <
- C. The child is play-acting appropriately for his age.
- D. Doll play by young males reflects gender role confusion.

Distractors A, C, and D are obviously wrong. Options A and C overlap, and option D demonstrates stereotypical thinking.

Improved distractors

- A. A conduct disorder
- B. Sexual abuse <
- C. An autism spectrum disorder
- D. Reaction formation

3. Write mutually exclusive options.

Options should **not** overlap, and they should be mutually exclusive of each other. No part of an option should be contained within another option.

Poor distractors

A social worker at a community mental health agency attends an emergency meeting of employees from a factory. The employees have learned that the factory will be closed at the end of the week. What should the social worker do **FIRST** to assist the group?

- A. Interview workers about the closing
- B. Identify the group members' needs <
- C. Consult with union representatives

In this example, options A and D could be components of the key (B)—what a social worker might do to identify the group members' needs.

Improved distractors

- A. Collect demographic information
- B. Identify the group members' needs <
- C. Find legal counsel for the group

In this example, options A and C are not subsumed by B. Distractors A and C may be appropriate actions for the social worker to take, depending on the needs that were identified.

4. Each option should have only one thought or action.

Make sure options are focused, with no extraneous information or explanations about the central thought or action. Never say “the social worker should take this action because ...” In the example below, A, B, and C improperly contain material that explains the answer while D has two separate actions. Problem areas are identified in italics.

Poor distractors

- A. Refer the client for a medication evaluation, *as the currently prescribed antidepressant does not seem to be working*
- B. Evaluate the client for suicidal ideation *to ensure safety*
- C. Report the possibility of self harm to the police *because a suicide attempt may be made*
- D. Call the nearest hospital for admission *and ask the client to notify the closest family member*

Improved distractors

- A. Refer the client for a medication evaluation
- B. Evaluate the client for suicidal ideation
- C. Report the possibility of self harm to the police
- D. Call the nearest hospital for admission

Checklist for good options

The options, both key and distractors, will be effective if they are:

- Parallel
- Plausible
- Mutually exclusive (not overlapping)
- Without dual actions or explanations

SECTION 5

WATCH THE LANGUAGE

We have examined writing good stems and options in depth. Before finalizing questions, keep these fine-tuning principles in mind.

1. Use terms that are relevant to all.

ASWB examinations are intended for use in the United States and Canada, so writers are careful to avoid creating stems that refer to programs or terminology specific to either country. Likewise, educators should use terms that are common across states and regions since students may choose to practice elsewhere.

2. Eliminate bias and microaggression.

AWSB's goal is to ensure that no bias or microaggressions appear on the exams.

A *microaggression* is a form of discrimination that negatively targets a group of people, often those who have been marginalized. Microaggressions are usually indirect, subtle, or unintentional, but they can still cause harm especially when they accumulate. Pay particular attention to gender, ability, age, and cultural references in items.

Examples of microaggressions include item content that:

- Describes clients who receive public services as members of certain ethnic groups
- Presumes people of Asian descent are immigrants
- Refers to supervisors as men
- Refers to a “walk-in” clinic

Do not use gender references if you can avoid them. While binary gender references may be appropriate in an item vignette, avoid using gender in a way that suggests that there are only two genders (e.g., “opposite sex” or “his or her”). A client's race or age should be mentioned only when it has direct relevance to the knowledge tested.

Item displaying bias and/or microaggression

A social worker meets with a client who is Asian for an intake session. The client speaks softly using a low tone of voice, making it difficult for the social worker to understand the client's responses. What should the social worker do FIRST?

- A. Ask the client for the country of origin
- B. Ask the client to speak a little louder
- C. Refer the client to a social worker who is Asian

In this item, race has no bearing on the key. The stem and distractors are based on false stereotypes about people of Asian descent. The client could simply be shy or nervous.

The way the item is written also implies that social workers are not Asian, which is also a microaggression.

If the information that a client and social worker have differences in race, ethnicity, or gender is pertinent to the content of an item, use neutral wording. Stems like this do not assume that all social workers are white and English speaking, helping prevent microaggressions.

Improved stem

A social worker meets with a client for an intake session. The social worker has a different cultural background from the client...

Item displaying gender microaggression

A social worker has a client who was recently deemed by a court to need a guardian. How will the court's decision affect the client's self-determination?

- A. A family member will have fiduciary responsibility only for the client.
- B. A proxy will be appointed to make decisions on the client's behalf.<
- C. The client will retain the right to make **his or her** own decisions.
- D. The client will decide the extent of assistance needed.

Do not use gender references, as in option C, if you can avoid them. While binary gender references may be appropriate in an item vignette, do not use gender references that indicate there are only two genders.

Improved distractor C

- C. The client will retain the right to make decisions.

In this example, "his or her" was removed to avoid a microaggression.

Item displaying bias and/or microaggression

A white social worker has been meeting for several months with a Black adult client. The client is not making any progress toward treatment goals. What should the social worker do **FIRST**?

- A. Assure the client that the social worker does not see color
- B. Remind the client that the social worker has experience with Black clients
- C. Offer to refer the client to a social worker who is Black
- D. Explore all possible barriers to treatment progress with the client<

In this item, race has no bearing on the key. Further, the distractors contain microaggressions: Option A denies the client's experience, option B assumes the social worker is immune to racial bias, and option C sends the message that the client can only be helped by a social worker of similar background. If race were to be omitted from the item, option D would still be the key. Be sure to consider whether the specific culture matters to the skill that a social worker would use.

3. Depict actions, not thoughts.

Items should be constructed so that social workers are depicted as engaging in an action rather than thinking about an action.

Poor stem

A social worker meets with a client for the first time. The client reports symptoms of severe depression. What does the social worker think should be done **FIRST**?

Improved stem

A social worker meets with a client for the first time. The client reports symptoms of severe depression. What should the social worker do **FIRST**?

4. Ensure clarity and readability.

It is important that questions test social work knowledge and not the reading ability of test-takers. Readability studies of the ASWB exams indicate that they are written at a 10th grade reading level, exclusive of social work terms of art. Language needs to be straightforward, direct, and as simple as possible. Avoid jargon, idioms, and colloquialisms. Make sentences relatively short, and use the same verb tense, usually present tense, throughout the stem and options. Choose individual words carefully to minimize possible misinterpretation.

Item with poor readability

A social worker sees a client concluding treatment at a family counseling agency. The client exuberantly expressed deep appreciation of the social worker's services rendered over the course of treatment, and at the end of the interview is accompanying her fee to the agency with an additional substantial monetary gift intended for the social worker. The social worker should:

- A. Accept the gift, acknowledging the client's contribution to treatment
- B. Refuse the gift, basing the action on ethical standards of practice
- C. Accept the money with the understanding that it will be donated to a local charity
- D. Refuse the gift and suggest that the client make a donation to the agency instead

This item has several problems that contribute to its poor readability. Use of the word *sees* in the first sentence of the stem can be confusing; *meets with* is a better choice. Unnecessary modifiers (*exuberantly*, *deep*) clutter the stem, verb tenses are mixed, and the second sentence is too long. Finally, the item ends with an incomplete sentence rather than a question.

Item with improved readability

A social worker meets with a client who is receiving treatment at a family counseling agency. The client is very appreciative of the social worker's services. At the end of the session, the client pays the fee to the agency and offers the social worker a large monetary gift. What should the social worker do?

- A. Accept the gift as an expression of gratitude
- B. Explain to the client that the gift cannot be accepted
- C. Inform the client that the money will be donated to a local charity
- D. Suggest that the client offer the gift to the agency as a whole

This item uses shorter, more direct sentences and eliminates extraneous language. Verb tenses are consistent. It also ends with a direct question—another help to overall readability.

Checklist for watching language

Items will be effective if they:

- Use clear, sensitive language
- Avoid unnecessary references to identifiers such as race, gender, age, socioeconomic or immigration status, and sexuality
- Avoid representing a demographic group in limited or stereotypical roles
- Avoid cultural assumptions or suggestions that Western, Judeo-Christian values are correct or universal
- Are free from bias and microaggression
- Are action-oriented

SECTION 6

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Cognitive level

An item's cognitive skill level is based on the type of thinking the item requires the test-taker to engage in to choose the correct answer. Well-written multiple-choice questions can test higher-order thinking skills.

To illustrate the three cognitive levels, consider the three stems below. Each is designed to test the concept of scapegoating, but each does so differently, requiring different cognitive abilities. The first is basic and asks the test-taker to **recall** a definition. The second provides a scenario and asks the test-taker to **apply** knowledge in that situation. The third requires the test-taker to **reason** through and critically think about several pieces of information to arrive at an inference.

Recall item example

What is the **BEST** definition of scapegoating?

Application item example

During an interview with a couple and their child, a social worker observes conflicts between the parents that are not directly discussed. Throughout the meeting, one parent makes critical and blaming statements about the child. What is the **BEST** description of the parent's behavior?

Reasoning item example

During an interview with a couple and their child, a social worker observes several conflicts. One parent makes critical and blaming statements about the child while the child insists the family is perfect. Throughout the interview, the social worker notices the child exhibiting symptoms of stress. From a structural family perspective, what should the social worker **MOST** likely infer about the child?

Recall

A recall item involves the most basic type of thought and is the simplest of the three levels. It requires a test-taker to define a term, identify a disorder, or remember basic information. It involves naming a concept or recalling a simple fact. It does not require higher level thinking beyond basic memory recall. Recall items test a concept that the test-taker either knows or does not know. An item is a recall item if the test-taker needs to know a definition, describe a situation, identify a disorder, or remember information.

Example recall item

What symptom is **MOST** common in persons with a major depressive episode?

- A. Inflated self-esteem
- B. Sleep disturbance <
- C. Hallucinations

Example recall item

What term is used to refer to a survey that obtains the same results over time?

- A. Validity
- B. Test discrimination
- C. Reliability
- D. Construct

In the first item, the test-taker demonstrates knowledge of basic information about a diagnosis. In the second, the test-taker is asked to remember a term. In both cases, the test-taker must remember or recall the information being requested.

Application

An application item involves more than knowing a term or a simple concept and requires a higher level of cognitive engagement. It asks the test-taker to know a concept and apply it to a situation or engage in problem solving. An application item often presents a scenario and asks the test-taker to know what to do **FIRST** or **NEXT**. An application item might ask a test-taker to use client information or behavior to decide how **BEST** to proceed. Knowledge, skills, and abilities must be both recalled and applied.

Example application item

A hospital social worker receives a referral to evaluate a patient who is talking to nonexistent objects. What should the social worker do **FIRST**?

- A. Meet with the patient individually
- B. Consult with the nursing staff
- C. Call the social work supervisor

This example requires applying knowledge of what to do first when asked to evaluate a hospitalized patient. It asks the test-taker to think about what to do in a very specific situation and *apply* that knowledge.

Example application item

A social worker in an inpatient adolescent treatment program meets with parents who are concerned about their child. They say their child is getting worse and demand the child's immediate discharge. The social worker knows the treatment team is not recommending discharge for several weeks. What should the social worker do **NEXT**?

- A. Learn more about parents' perspective on the child's lack of improvement
- B. Arrange for a treatment team meeting with the parents
- C. Cite specific ways in which the child has improved during treatment

In this item, the test-taker must apply knowledge about a situation where the family and treatment team disagree. Application items, as in this example, ask the test-taker to consider a scenario and apply appropriate practice concepts to that situation.

Reasoning

Reasoning items are the most cognitively complex, requiring advanced skills to correctly identify an item's key. This type of cognitive thought goes beyond identifying one concept, as with recall, or being able to apply knowledge and skills, as with application. It requires demonstrating basic knowledge of social work principles and practices, having an ability to apply that knowledge, and sorting through knowledge of more than one concept to identify a key among several plausible alternatives. A test-taker may be required to successfully distinguish one element as more important or relevant than another, compare or infer concepts, resolve a complex dilemma, or relate one concept to another. Balancing multiple concepts, such as stages of treatment or service delivery, therapeutic relationships, level of risk, professional duties, ethical guidelines, and appropriate interventions may be required in a reasoning item.

A reasoning item may require a test-taker to:

- **Compare** or **contrast** the features of two or more therapeutic approaches rather than simply asking for recall of one of them
- **Identify** principles shared by different concepts, finding areas of interrelationship between different intervention approaches or client situations
- **Explain** actions or **identify why** events happen
- **Relate ideas** or **identify a relationship** between two or more concepts

Example of a reasoning item

During an interview with a couple and their child, a social worker observes several conflicts. One parent makes critical and blaming statements about the child while the child insists the family is perfect. Throughout the interview, the social worker notices the child exhibiting symptoms of stress. From a structural family perspective, what can the social worker **MOST** likely infer about the child?

- A. The child is experiencing role overload. <
- B. The child is disengaged from the family.
- C. The child has boundaries that are fluid.

The test-taker must first identify the roles of scapegoat and hero that are described and know that these are two common roles identified by structural family theory. The test-taker must also know how these roles are viewed from the theoretical perspective and consider the conflict that multiple roles can create for a family member. The test-taker must reach a conclusion that identifies the **MOST** likely interpretation of this information. This item requires a higher level of complex thought, knowledge of more than one concept, and an ability to relate concepts described in the scenario.

Example of a reasoning item

A social worker completes an evaluation of a new client who is concerned about constant worrying. The client reports repeatedly checking all doors and windows every night to be sure they are locked. What should the social worker do **FIRST**?

- A. Ask the client to verbalize the feelings that accompany the behaviors <
- B. Suggest the client keep a log of the checking behavior for six weeks
- C. Tell the client that the behavior is not a serious problem
- D. Establish goals for the client to achieve before the next session

In this item, the test-taker must distinguish that the client is reporting behaviors and not feelings. Since the client is new to the social worker, a relationship has yet to be established. Knowledge of relationship building

and assessment skills are necessary as well. The test-taker must sort through several concepts and use critical thinking skills.

Example of a reasoning item

A social worker facilitates a group for inmates who have experienced abuse by an intimate partner. Control and punishment are daily experiences that group members report. What should the social worker do to **BEST** empower group members in this setting?

- A. Promote a grassroots approach to prisoner rights
- B. Discuss connections between past abuse and current behavior
- C. Insist on a group contract for confidentiality
- D. Consciously build choices into group activities <

In this example, a test-taker must have knowledge about ways in which empowerment occurs, the impact of intimate partner abuse, prison experiences, and group facilitation practices. The test-taker must simultaneously analyze and evaluate more than one concept and critically think about how these concepts combine to point to the best way to empower group members.

Example of a reasoning item

A social worker meets with a 31-year-old client who reports anxiety related to a pending court case. The client reveals being involved in a coercive sexual encounter with the presiding judge several years ago. The client is ambivalent about filing a complaint which may anger the judge and impact the client's outcome. What should the social worker do **FIRST**?

- A. Alert the judge to the content and scope of the client's accusation
- B. Discuss with the client the benefits and risks of filing a report <
- C. Report the incident to the appropriate regulatory authority

Similarly, in this example, the test-taker is asked to consider several concepts, including knowledge of anxiety, the court system, reactions to past abuse, and the ethical role of the social worker. The level of critical thinking required elevates the cognitive level of this item from application to reasoning.

How to write a reasoning item

Recall and application items are generally easier to write than reasoning items. Differentiating between application and reasoning is more involved. Because of the complex nature of reasoning items, there is no one recipe to follow. To distinguish between application and reasoning items, assess the mental tasks required to answer the question. Before assigning a cognitive level, the following questions should be asked: What does this item require the test-taker to know about? What must the test-taker do with that knowledge? How much critical thinking is necessary? The answer to these questions will help point to the correct cognitive level.

Cognitive tasks

When writing a reasoning item, a good place to start is to review the cognitive tasks in the lists below. Reviewing these lists can help with understanding tasks test-takers must perform to answer reasoning items. Begin with a scenario and add multiple elements that must be compared with or inferred from one another, keeping in mind cognitive tasks from the list.

The lists below contain descriptions of the thinking processes associated with the cognitive levels used by ASWB. The actual words may or may not appear in the item.

Recall items may require a test-taker to:	Application items may require a test-taker to:	Reasoning items may require a test-taker to:
<i>define</i> <i>describe</i> <i>identify</i> <i>list</i> <i>remember</i> <i>recognize</i>	<i>analyze</i> <i>anticipate</i> <i>apply</i> <i>assess</i> <i>calculate</i> <i>decide</i> <i>deduce</i> <i>demonstrate</i> <i>evaluate</i> <i>plan</i> <i>predict</i> <i>prioritize</i> <i>solve</i> <i>use</i>	<i>categorize</i> <i>compare</i> <i>conclude</i> <i>create</i> <i>differentiate</i> <i>discriminate</i> <i>distinguish</i> <i>infer</i> <i>interpret</i> <i>organize</i> <i>rearrange</i> <i>relate</i>

CONCLUSION

ASWB's goal in providing the Item Writing Guide for Educators is to help social work faculty better understand how exam questions are created so that, when appropriate, they can employ those techniques in their own course materials. When students are familiar with the question format and have abundant experience with demonstrating their knowledge using this format, a potential barrier is lifted. Social work educators can use the information in this guide to take actions that contribute to their students' success.

We would appreciate hearing from you about your experience with using the Item Writing Guide for Educators. Write to exam@aswb.org.