

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in the ASWB item writer program. To help us select item writers, we have prepared the writing assignment below. It has two parts, an item writing exercise and a flawed item evaluation exercise.

Helpful information about the application process and expectations for selected item writers:

- The selection process is competitive and is based on performance on this assignment, the applicant's qualifications, and ASWB's need for a balanced, diverse, and inclusive group of writers.
- It typically takes one to three hours to write an item and identify appropriate references.
- Item writing is a skill that takes time to develop. ASWB provides a robust training workshop and the continuing support of item development consultants who provide constructive feedback.
- ASWB contracts with item writers to complete three 10-item contracts for a total of 30 items produced over eight to twelve months.
- Writers receive payment of \$500 after their item development consultant approves 10 items to go on to the next step.

Item writing exercise

Applied knowledge statements

It is important to understand that the purpose of licensing social workers is to protect the health and welfare of the public. The ASWB examinations assess social workers' competence to practice, not just their theoretical knowledge. The exams test the *application* of theory to assess the social worker's readiness to enter practice safely and ethically.

The content outlines, developed through an extensive and inclusive analysis of the practice of social work, contain the applied knowledge statements tested on the exams. Every question on an exam tests the knowledge expressed in one of these statements. We have selected three applied knowledge statements for your assignment.

How to write each item

1. Write a brief *stem*, the part of the item that presents a situation or scenario and includes a question.
2. Write three options, A through C.
 - One option should be clearly correct. Identify that option as the *key*.
 - The two incorrect options, the *distractors*, should be clearly incorrect but plausible enough to seem correct to a test-taker who does not have the knowledge being tested.
3. Punctuate your items as follows:
 - End the stem with a question and question mark
 - Capitalize the first word of each option
 - Use end punctuation for options only when the option is a complete sentence

Item writing tips

Stems:

- Include a social worker in the stem. Do not identify individuals using names. Use terms like *social worker* and *client*.
- Include only information needed to answer the question.
- To assess social work knowledge rather than reading ability, use short sentences and clear, simple vocabulary.
- Avoid microaggressions based on race, gender, ethnicity, or ability.

Options:

- Avoid options like *All of the above*, *Both B and C*, or *None of the above*.
- Avoid *not* or *except*, such as “Which of the following is **not** a probable diagnosis?”

Model item

A client meets with a social worker and describes not sleeping well and recent weight loss. The client reports crying easily since an intimate partner died three months ago. What should the social worker assess for **FIRST**?

- (A) An eating disorder
- (B) Depression
- (C) Anxiety

Key: B

This model item follows the basic format of an exam item. It tests knowledge that is relevant to social work practice. It asks a single question and has a single correct answer, listed as the key. The distractors are plausible but incorrect. The item is written clearly and concisely and directs examinees' thinking by including only the information necessary to answer the question.

The [ASWB Examination Guidebook](#) includes many sample questions, most found in Part III. We recommend using the sample questions as examples as you complete your writing assignment.

Note: The guidebook follows the current content outlines. The content outlines for the 2026 social work licensing exams are located in the [Analysis of the Practice of Social Work](#). Additionally, all new exam items have only three options.

Exam item writing exercise instructions

- Write three items using the applied knowledge statements indicated.
- Include the key, references, and item.

Name: _____

Date: _____

I.B. Diversity and social justice

Applied knowledge statement: Social justice, truth and reconciliation, and restorative practices related to clients/client systems from historically oppressed and marginalized communities

Key:

Reference: (Include author, year, title, edition, publisher, page number)

Type item here:

Flawed item evaluation exercise

Another important skill for item writers is the ability to detect and correct flaws in exam items.

Instructions:

- Review the flawed item.
- Identify the flaws, using the item writing instructions and tips.
- Write a complete revision of the item.

Flawed item evaluation sample

In response to a borderline personality disorder client's verbalized self-destructive thoughts, the social worker should **FIRST**:

1. explore possible depression
2. complete a suicide risk assessment
3. refer for medication evaluation

Key: B

Flaws:

- The scenario does not introduce the social worker and setting.
- Contains a microaggression because it identifies the client by the disorder.
- "Verbalize" is not clear, simple language.
- Does not ask a question at the end of the stem.
- Uses numbers instead of letters for the options.
- Options start with lowercase letters

Revised item:

A social worker meets with a client diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. What should the social worker do **FIRST**?

- A. Explore possible depression
- B. Complete a suicide risk assessment
- C. Refer for medication evaluation

Flawed item

A public agency is in the process of downsizing. The number of staff has been reduced by half, caseloads have doubled, and social workers are expected to adhere to the same schedule for submitting case records as in the past. In addition, funds for staff development have been cut so that only one staff member per year is budgeted to take developmental training. Some social workers threaten to leave. To enhance staff morale, the agency director should:

1. Provide close supervision of the staff.
2. Include the staff in agency planning.
3. Leave decision-making to management.

Key: B

Flaws:

Revised item: