



Association of Social Work Boards

Item Writer Screening Document

Introduction

There are four parts of this assessment for potential item writers. Part I contains item writing instructions. In Part II, you are made aware of the commitment that an item writer must agree to in order to be considered for the program. In Part III, you are asked to write three sample items. Your items will be evaluated to see how well you understood the item writing directions in Part I, and how well you followed the item writing guidelines provided at the beginning of Part III. In Part IV, you are asked to evaluate flawed items, correctly identify the flaws, and provide suggestions for revising the items.

Part I. How to write a multiple-choice item for the ASWB examinations

If selected to be an ASWB item writer, you will attend a workshop that will instruct you in detail about how to write test questions. In the meantime, in order to give potential writers enough information to put together some draft items, here are the basic guidelines for writing a multiple-choice item:

1. Choose an area of social work to write the item about (in the testing industry, questions are called “items”). A list to select from is provided in this assessment document.
2. Write a brief “stem,” the main part of the item that presents what is being asked. The stem should be framed in the form of a question. The most effective items are phrased as situations or scenarios that might occur in social work practice. No extra, unneeded information should be given.
3. Provide four options, A through D, of which only one is correct. The other three incorrect options are distractors. They should be clearly wrong to someone who knows the material, but plausible enough to seem correct to a test-taker who does not know the material.
4. Punctuate your items following these directions: If an item is written as a question, end it with a question mark, and capitalize the first word in each option. Options following a stem ending in a question mark should end in punctuation only if they are complete sentences.

Here are a couple of samples you can use as models for your items.

The two items below are examples ASWB’s preferred item format. Notice the use of the question mark at the end of the stem, and the capital letters at the beginning of each option.

What documentation approach is intended to provide a detailed evaluation of social work interactions?

- (A) **Computerized progress recording**
- (B) **Problem oriented recording**
- (C) **Diagnostic summary**
- (D) **Process recording**

Key: D

A social worker who is conducting personal safety seminars for senior citizens is engaging in what kind of activity?

- (A) Social planning
- (B) Community development
- (C) Primary prevention
- (D) Secondary prevention

Key: C

Some “do not’s.” Do not write options such as “All of the above,” “both B and C,” or “none of the above.” Do not write negative questions, such as “Which of the following is **NOT** a probable diagnosis?” Do not refer to specific theories by name unless they are very well known. Do not refer to the social worker as a “therapist” or “counselor.” Do not identify people as “Mr. A” or “Ms. B” or by any other name. And finally, do not use gender unless it is significant in relation to the knowledge being tested.

Part II: Being Aware of the Time Commitment/Qualifications

Writing examination questions is not easy, and ASWB wants to select writers for training who have a clear understanding of the requirements and who will complete their contracts. The selection process is very competitive, and the association wants to choose the best, most committed writers.

Before you take the time to complete this screening, it is important to realize that it takes most people anywhere from one to three hours to write an item and identify appropriate references. Each item does require a reference from readily available literature appropriate to social work. This means that writers must be able to spend time consulting their own libraries or the local social work library, if there is one, or finding other ways to get the references they need.

It costs ASWB about \$3,000 to train a writer, considering transportation, food and lodging, consultants for the training, and the expense of staff and materials. The training is intense, although most people tell us that they enjoy the training and find it stimulating and professionally challenging.

In return for the training, writers are expected to do their best to fulfill their contracts. If selected, you must be prepared to learn a new way of writing questions, which may be unrelated to previous writing, and you must be ready to take constructive criticism and to work with the item development consultants. As potential writers we ask you to consider carefully whether you have the time for working on a new skill, and are willing to follow up on comments made by item development consultants. Anyone who anticipates a change in employment or in location during the next year should keep in mind that this may affect the time available to you for writing, and you may want to consider waiting a year to increase the likelihood of being able to keep this commitment to the association.

The payment of \$1,500 is made after an item development consultant approves 30 submitted items. After items are approved, they are sent to the ASWB Examination Committee for review.

Part III: Writing three sample items

Writing a good multiple-choice test item is a creative process that requires ingenuity, attention to detail, and expertise in the content area to be tested. Some basic guidelines for writing technically sound multiple-choice test items are listed below. Review all directions and guidelines before you begin writing your sample items.

It is important to understand that the purpose of licensing health professionals is to protect the health and welfare of the public. The ASWB examinations must assess social workers' competence to practice, not just their theoretical knowledge. Purely theoretical questions are generally not useful; it is the application of theory that best reflects a social worker's ability to practice safely. Test items must be specific to social work and usually include a social worker doing something.

Directions for Writing Multiple-Choice Test Items

After you have reviewed all instructions and guidelines, you are ready to try your hand at writing items.

1. Select one of the topics from the list on the next page.
2. Ask a single question, or pose a problem, on the topic you choose that has **one** clearly defensible **best answer**. Write your item in the **present tense**. It is most effective to formulate your question as a **situation or scenario**. Either clearly mark or list the correct answer, or key. You may do this by writing Key: A.
3. Include all information necessary to answer the question, but **no extra** information.
4. Develop three incorrect but plausible options. The incorrect options must be mutually exclusive.
5. Phrase your questions in the most clear, concise way possible to direct examinee thinking.
6. To assess social work knowledge rather than reading ability, the question should be written in short sentences with the simplest possible vocabulary.

Consider the sample test item below.

Sample Item

An elderly woman meets with a social worker because she is not sleeping well and has lost weight. She says that she cries easily since her husband died three months ago. What should the social worker assess for **FIRST**?

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

Key: B

Note that this sample item follows the basic directions listed on the previous page. First, it covers a topic that is relevant to social work practice. Second, it asks a single question and has a single correct answer, listed as the key. The other options are plausible, but incorrect. The item is written clearly and concisely and directs examinee thinking by including only the information necessary to answer the question. (A test of this principle is to cover up the options and read only the stem. If a knowledgeable examinee can hazard a good guess after reading only the stem, it is well-focused.) As you write your sample items, keep these basic instructions in mind and refer back to this item as a model.

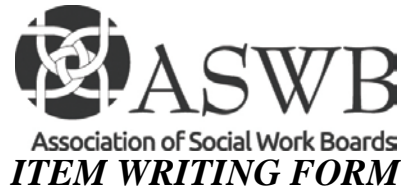
Item Writing Assignment

Develop three (3) multiple-choice test items, based on three different topics from the list below. Select topics from this list only. Review the guidelines before you begin. Please remember to indicate the correct answer and the number of the topic you have selected. Be sure to provide a reference that supports the correct answer.

Topics

1. Biopsychosocial History and Collateral Data
2. Assessment Methods and Techniques
3. Assessment and Diagnosis
4. Intervention Planning
5. Treatment Planning
6. Intervention Processes and Techniques For Use With Larger Systems
7. Documentation
8. Consultation and Interdisciplinary Collaboration
9. Professional Values and Ethics
10. Confidentiality
11. Professional Development and Use of Self

Please use this page and the next two pages to write your three sample items.



Name:

Exam Level: Bachelors, Masters, or Clinical		Topic (pg 4):
		Key:
Reference:		

Type item here:

Do not write below this line. Please make sure the box below remains on the same page with your item.

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ASWB Item Number

Name:

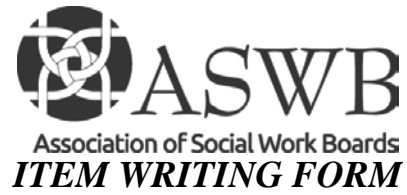
Exam Level: Bachelors, Masters, or Clinical	Topic (see pg 4):	
		Key:
Reference:		

Type item here:

Do not write below this line. Please make sure the box below remains on the same page with your item.

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ASWB Item Number



Name:

Exam Level: Bachelors, Masters, or Clinical		Topic (see pg 4):
		Key:
Reference:		

Type item here:

Do not write below this line. Please make sure the box below remains on the same page with your item.

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ASWB Item Number

Part IV: Reviewing Items

Another important skill for item writers is the ability to detect and correct flaws in test items. Consider the example of a non-social work item reviewed below.

Example: Flawed Item and Reviewer Comments

Washington, DC, the nation's capital, is home to all of the world's important landmarks. Among the most important are the Albert Pike Memorial and the K Street Lobbyists Open-Air Influence Market. It is also the location of the White House. The White House is the official primary abode of:

- (A) the Speaker of the House
- (B) Godzilla
- (C) the President of the United States
- (D) the anxieties of a generation

Key: C

Flaw(s)

- The stem contains “window dressing” (e.g., it contains extraneous information, about the landmarks, that is not necessary for a knowledgeable reader to answer the item correctly).
- The stem contains biased information (e.g., the idea that Washington, DC, is home to “all of the world’s important landmarks,” as well as the not-so-subtle dig at DC lobbyists).
- The options are not homogeneous; B and D are fundamentally, conceptually different from A and C.
- Only A & C are plausible occupants of the White House.
- The topic is trivial, general knowledge, not something that a professional needs to know.

Suggestion(s) for revision

- If the topic is appropriate for the exam, eliminate the first three sentences (window dressing, bias, and trivia). The stem should be rewritten as “The White House is the official residence (easier to understand than ‘primary abode’) of:”
- Make all the options political titles of people who might plausibly live or have lived in the White House, e.g. Vice President, or Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.
- The item must be revised to test knowledge more appropriate for the purpose of the exam (less trivial).

Instructions: Review the three flawed test items on this page and the following two pages. In a few sentences, please identify the flaws and write a complete revision of the item. The flaws may be in content, logic, or construction. Before you begin, review again the instructions for writing multiple-choice test items, as well as the item writing guidelines.

Flawed item 1: Bachelors Level

Mr. And Mrs. B, who are in their 40s and have a 12-year-old son, Jason, have just lost their home in a hurricane. They meet with a social worker at a crisis counseling center. What should the social worker do?

- (A) Recommend the family for psychotherapy
- (B) Explain that time will make them feel better
- (C) Recommend family therapy
- (D) Ask them to recount their experiences in detail

Key: D

Flaw(s):

Revision of item:

Flawed item 2: Masters Level

A family sees a counselor because of concerns about their 14-year-old boy, who torments his little sister, has been skipping school, ignoring curfews, and refusing to help around the house, and yells at his parents. Given the above information, what should the counselor do?

- (A) Recommend family therapy
- (B) Focus on the scapegoating of the child
- (C) Suggest a physical examination for the child
- (D) Explore the triangulation

Key: A

Flaw(s):

Revision of item:

Flawed item 3: Clinical Level

A social worker leads a group of adolescents who had been sexually abused. One tall, very pretty girl is an outgoing seventh grade student who had been continuously abused by her father from ages five to eleven. Some of the other group members express anger about their abuse, but this girl says that her family is very close; she loves her family and pets. She says she feels no anger toward anyone. What should the social worker suspect?

- (A) Because she has a healthy ego the impact of the abuse was minimized
- (B) She may have dissociated from the abusive experience and is actually unaware of her feelings
- (C) Normal adolescent concerns have taken priority over the previous abusive experience
- (D) She presents a highly positive image in order to be recognized by her peers as a group leader

Key: B

Flaw(s):

Revision of item: