With March quickly approaching, many of you may soon be developing midterm exams, perhaps replete with multiple-choice questions. While we offered a workshop on the topic last spring, there are also many helpful resources available online through other teaching and learning centers, such as here and here. A few key recommendations emerge about constructing clear multiple-choice questions, which I have represented below, along with the problems they seek to address and examples:

Use open-ended questions, not fill-in-the-blank, incomplete sentences

- The problem: Students have difficulty focusing on the question if they simultaneously have to hold the partial sentence in their memory and complete it with each answer choice.

  Original: Trinity was first located in ____________ when it opened in 1869.

  Improvement: Where was Trinity first located when it opened in 1869?

Keep questions as specific and succinct as possible

- The problem: Students may incorrectly interpret the question if the information provided is superfluous or unnecessarily long.

  Original: On average, attendance at Marco’s study sessions has been 25 students. Recently, however, the numbers have dropped much lower. Sometimes only 3 come. Not only are Marco’s feelings hurt, but he also has started to wonder if the hours he spends planning the session, sometimes more than 10, are worth it. Marco has started requiring RSVPs 2 weeks in advance to ensure high attendance. Which of the following is an assumption in Marco’s reasoning?

  Improvement: Recently, the number of students attending Marco’s study sessions has been much lower than usual. Marco has started requiring RSVPs to ensure high attendance. Which of the following is an assumption in Marco’s reasoning?

Avoid negatives in questions

- The problem: Students often miss key terms like “not” or “never” (even when bold, underlined, etc.) and there is evidence that ESL students are particularly disadvantaged by such extremes.

  Original: Which of the following is NOT one of Trinity’s official values listed on the website?

  Improvement: All of the following are official values listed on Trinity’s website, except...

Include questions that test higher-level thinking

- The problem: Many instructors intend for their students to learn skills in application, analysis, or evaluation, but these skills are not tested by questions that only require recall of information.

  Original: How many of Trinity’s students are originally from Texas?

  Improvement: Given that nearly two-thirds of Trinity’s students hail from Texas, which curricular
recommendation makes the most sense?

We will continue with this theme in the next short-form email, focusing on how to write clear answers and alternatives to multiple-choice questions.

-Emily

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