# How to Write an Occupational Questionnaire

## Introduction

First, identify the content areas (e.g., competencies) you plan to measure, based on your job analysis. The content areas you identify need to be both observable and verifiable. In other words, they should relate to tasks and activities that can be seen and measured. Generally, you will want to select about five (5) competencies as the focus of the occupational questionnaire.

## Writing a Behaviorally-Based Item

The rule of thumb is to ask about 5 to 10 quality items for each content area. Writing a good-quality item includes all of the following:

- ❑ **Clearly distinguish competencies**
  (e.g., be sure an item doesn't measure both technical AND general content)

- ❑ **Consider level of experience required**
  (e.g., should the item cover very job-specific skills or general job-related behavior?)

- ❑ **Items should distinguish among candidates**
  (i.e., break items into different levels of proficiency)

- ❑ **Use observable (verifiable) terms**
  (e.g., "write a report" vs. "develop a report" as a measure for Written Communication)

- ❑ **Write clearly and succinctly**
  (e.g., Audits employee time reports ~~of persons under own supervision by checking for errors in addition and hours claimed~~.)

> **The general formula for writing items is:**
>
> Perform *What?* + to *Whom or What?* + to produce *What? or Why?  How?*
> (ex, Sort + incoming mail + into groups for distribution)

## Item-Writing Pitfalls

Some common pitfalls (and how to avoid them) that can occur when writing items include:

| Pitfall | Fix |
|---|---|
| Unnecessary Words | Strip task to the bare elements; make it as concise and clear as possible |
| Double-barreled Item (includes multiple tasks or components) | Remove extra actions or break the item into two (or more) separate items |
| Overly Specific Items | Replace specific wording (e.g., Use Excel to add, subtract, and divide subordinates' timecards to calculate time and leave) with more general actions (e.g., Use spreadsheets to track pay and leave) |
| Vague or Ambiguous Terms | Replace subjective adjectives and adverbs (e.g., excellent, adequate, best, all, timely, accurately) with more descriptive terms (e.g., verify, provide, create) |
| Abbreviations | Avoid using abbreviations; spell out the term at all possible times to ensure all applicants understand the item |

## Rating Scales

There are various types of rating scales, with some common formats listed below:

- **Yes-No** – Applicants select Yes or No
- **Multiple choice** – Applicants select one answer from the options provided
- **Select all that apply** – Applicants select as many answers as appropriate

You can use either a generic or customized rating scale. The pros and cons of each type are illustrated in the table below:

| | Generic: Quick to create or use, but may not work as well | Customized: More effort and time to create, but more likely to work |
|---|---|---|
| Pros | • Relatively inexpensive to develop<br>• Can be easier to develop (i.e., will take less time to develop a questionnaire)<br>• Significant measurement expertise is not required<br>• Can be used for various questionnaires (not tied to a specific occupation) | • May provide greater differentiation among candidates<br>• Can be specifically tailored to a particular occupation or grade level<br>• Applicants' experience may relate better to the job-specific wording |
| Cons | • Little, to none, Subject Matter Expert (SME[1]) involvement<br>• May not provide as much differentiation among candidates | • More challenging and time-consuming to develop<br>• Require a greater level of measurement expertise<br>• Require significantly more SME involvement<br>• Cannot be used for other (specific) occupations |

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[1] An SME is a person with expert knowledge about what it takes to do a particular job. Many people can serve as SMEs (e.g., first-level supervisors, high-performing incumbents in the same or similar position) as long as they have current and thorough knowledge of the job's requirements.