Completion Items

Completion items are supply items—that is, learners must supply their own answers instead of choosing from given possible answers. Completion items can appear in two forms. One form is simply a sentence with a blank in place of one or more missing words, as in the following example:

The unit used to measure electrical resistance is called the __________________.

Another form consists of a complete question requiring a short answer (hence the name short-answer test sometimes used for a test using these items). Learners write their answer in a blank provided at the end of the question, as in the following example:

What are the parallel beams that support the roof of a structure called?

__________

Uses of Completion Items

Completion items test learners' recall of knowledge. Hence, they are different from selection items (e.g., multiple-choice and matching) in which learners need only to be able to recognize the correct answer. In this respect, completion items are similar to essay or oral items because all of these forms require learners to supply answers from their own memory. The possibility of guessing thus is minimized.

Completion items can be used to test learner recall of many different kinds of factual information. They can be used to evaluate learners' knowledge of specifics, terminology, classifications, methodology, universals, principles, and so on. Furthermore, they can be used in any content area. However, completion items are most appropriate for use at the first-lowest-level of the cognitive domain.

Constructing Completion Items

Care should be taken in constructing completion items. If an item is not clearly stated, learners may misinterpret it and answer incorrectly, even though they might know the correct answer. On the other hand, a poorly written item may contain clues that a test-wise learner can use in determining the correct answer. Both situations should be avoided.

The following are suggestions for constructing completion items.

Use your own words. Many authorities feel that the main weakness of the completion item is that it only measures recall of rote learning, thus encouraging lower-level cognitive activity at the expense of higher-level activity. Lifting textbook quotes verbatim to use as completion items encourages rote learning even more.

Test only for significant bits of knowledge. You will need to use your own judgment to determine what knowledge is significant in your own area. Using that judgment, you can ensure
that your completion items focus on significant knowledge in the area. Learners might truly need

to know that a particular technological development occurred in your field in 1962. It is unlikely,

however, that learners need to know that this development took place on a Wednesday morning.

**Have each item clearly call for one-and only one-answer.** Perhaps the most common mistake

teachers make in writing completion items is in not being clear enough. Consider the following

example:

The cathode ray tube with florescent screen was first introduced by K. F. Braun in

__________.

How many possible answers are there to this item? The tube in question was first introduced by

Braun: In 1897? In the laboratory? In Germany? Learners could legitimately give any one of these

three answers. And what if a cagey learner wrote the answer "in modern times"-is that right or

wrong?

The item could be saved by rephrasing it. Learners could be asked specifically in what year or in

what country, for example, the cathode ray tube was introduced by Braun, as in the following

examples:

In what year was the cathode ray tube with fluorescent screen first introduced?

__________

In what country was the cathode ray tube with fluorescent screen first introduced?

__________

**Don't go overboard with your blanks.** This guideline is closely related to the previous one. If

you put too many blanks in one item, there won't be enough significant information left in the item

for learners to know how to answer it. The following is an example of too many blanks spoiling the

broth:

There really is no way for learners to know how to complete this item. However, you could delete

the first blank, replacing it with the word it stands for, and improve the item as follows:

In the ____________, ________________ enters the ________________.

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the first blank, replacing it with the word it stands for, and improve the item as follows:

In the lungs, _______________ enters the _____________.

The item is now clear enough that learners should be able to supply the correct answers (i.e.,
oxygen enters the bloodstream). If you have any question concerning how many blanks you can

put in a given item, remember that fewer is usually better. If necessary, you should write several

items, each with one blank, to replace a single item with several blanks that is impossible to

understand.

**Put the blanks toward the end of the statement.** Let the learner know ahead of the blank what

information you want him or her to address in the answer before coming to the blank.

Remember, your goal is to find out what the learner knows, not have him or her miss an item

because of confusion about what information is called for.
Do not turn completion items into essay items. As stated previously, another name for the completion item is the short-answer item. Completion items differ from essay items mainly in the length of the answer required. You should ensure that your completion items are not really essay items (even miniessay items) in disguise. This point applies particularly to completion items in the form of questions.

Keep blanks in all items the same length. In practice, this means that all blanks should be long enough for the longest answer to be used in the test. You should never leave a short blank for a short answer, medium blank for a medium answer, and so on. Learners will quickly understand that there is a clue to the answer in the length of the blank if you do.

Don't give grammatical clues to the answer. Consider the following example:

The __________________ remove waste substances from the blood.

Many learners will be able to use their knowledge of the English language to help answer this item. The verb remove in the item is plural (he, she, or it removes; they remove). Any learner who realizes this will also realize that a plural answer is required to be the subject of the verb. Otherwise, the sentence would be grammatically incorrect. This example could be rewritten as follows:

Waste substances are removed from the blood by the _____________.

There are no grammatical clues in this version, since we use “the” with both singular and plural nouns in English. You should also avoid having either “a” or “an” immediately before the blank. The indefinite article “a” tells learners that the next word starts with a consonant, and “an” indicates that the next word starts with a vowel.

Place the blanks for easy scoring. It is helpful to put all the blanks in one column, in either the left or right margin. Learners actually write their answers in this column of blanks. A short blank in the middle of items can indicate which word or phrase learners are to supply. The following is an example:

Explosive gas is used as 3. _______________

an energy source in the (3) engine.

Prepare a scoring key. This can make scoring a lot easier, especially if you put all the blanks in a column. List the correct answers to the items as you write them. Then, as you score the test, you may find other answers that are acceptable in learners’ papers. You should add these to your key as well.

Assign the same number of points to each blank. Each blank should test learner recall of a significant bit of knowledge. Each answer should thus have the same weight, since each item should be of comparable importance and difficulty. This also makes computation of learners’ scores on the test easier.

Keep all completion items together. This guideline always applies, no matter what type of item is involved. Learners should not have to switch from one type of item to another—from one mode of reasoning and answering to another—any more than necessary.
Activity

Select one or more cognitive learner performance objectives from one of your texts require learners to recall information.

- Construct five completion items to measure achievement of the learner performance objectives you selected. Number each item for easy reference during feedback.
- Include directions and a scoring key.
- Use the Matching Checklist below to evaluate your work before you send it in for evaluation.

Completion Checklist

The completion items meet the following criteria:

1. Only significant words are omitted in incomplete sentence items.
2. Enough clues are left in the incomplete sentence items so that the required responses make sense to the students.
3. There are no grammatical clues to reveal the correct responses.
4. All the blanks are the same length.
5. All omitted phrases or words are of comparable importance.
6. Blanks are put toward the end of the statement.
7. Any question asked is specific enough to evoke the correct type of response.
8. Direct quotes from a textbook are avoided.
9. All answers are a word, numeral, symbol, or short phrase.
10. All answers have equal point value.
11. An appropriate scoring key is provided.