Essay and Oral Items

Essay and oral items, like completion items, are supply items. Completion items, however, require learners to supply their own knowledge one piece at a time. Essay or oral items require learners to recall and supply numerous pieces of knowledge. Furthermore, they require learners to organize and present this knowledge in a logical and understandable manner.

Both essay and oral items can be divided into two kinds, depending on the kind of response they call for. The extended-response item allows learners considerable freedom in structuring and presenting their own answers. The following item, for example, could be answered in a number of ways:

Discuss the stand of the tobacco industry on advertising of tobacco products.

A restricted-response item, on the other hand, limits the content and form of the response in some way. Both the item and the response it calls for are much more specific, as in the following example:

Describe the criticisms made by the tobacco industry against government controls on package design and outdoor advertising of tobacco products. Cite one example each of the limitations on packaging and outdoor media.

Uses of Essay and Oral Items

Essay and oral items can be used to test learner performance at any level in the cognitive domain. They are most useful in evaluating performance on high-level instructional objectives requiring the application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of information.

Compared to objective items, there are some "disadvantages" in using essay and oral items. Scoring of learners' answers to essay and oral items is more subjective and, thus, can be more unreliable. Even a restricted-response item allows learners some latitude in responding, and scoring must allow equal credit for different responses of equal merit. Thus, it is critical that you prepare and utilize a structured, yet flexible, answer key in scoring responses, so that your ratings are as objective and fair as possible.

Answering essay and oral items and scoring the answers also demand a good deal of time. Oral tests must be conducted and scored individually, which may require large amounts of teacher and learner time. Teachers can often expect to spend several hours scoring essay items for a whole class-unlike objective items, which can usually be answered and scored in a matter of minutes.

Finally, these items test more than just learners' knowledge of technical content. They also test learners' ability to communicate, orally or in writing. Learners must be able not
only to recall and apply, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate technical knowledge. They must also be able to communicate their knowledge and their treatment of it to you.

However, when the learner performance objectives call for higher levels of cognition and when ability to organize and communicate information is important for occupational success, then essay and oral items should be used. The time involved in scoring will be well worth it. Short-answer tests are useful and have their place in evaluation, but only through essay and oral items can you test, and challenge, learners’ ability to think—to take what they know, analyze it, synthesize it, organize it, and communicate their ideas to others.

**Constructing Essay and Oral Items**

There are several guidelines that you can follow to minimize any limitations of essay and oral items.

*Develop clear, precise items.* Your essay and oral items should always communicate your intent to learners with no room for misinterpretation. In practice, restricted-response items are usually preferable. Each item should tell learners, as clearly as possible, what information is required in the answer and how that information should be presented.

Clear, precise items allow less opportunity for learners to misunderstand an item. They also reduce the opportunities for learners to evade responding to an item by speaking or writing at length in generalities. Scoring also becomes easier when the required content and form of the response are clearly indicated in the item.

*Require learners to answer all items.* Teachers sometimes make some essay or oral items optional. Learners might be directed, for example, to respond to any one of three items. However, when different learners answer different items, it is almost impossible to get comparable scores because learners have not been performing comparable tasks. With optional items, you end up testing different groups of learners on different bodies of information and different ways of treating those different bodies of information.

*Use a larger number of shorter items.* Since learners take more time in responding to essay or oral items, you cannot sample as wide a range of knowledge as with objective items. The best way to make your sample as wide as possible is to use a larger number of items that require shorter answers. Your essay or oral items will then evaluate a wider variety of instructional objectives.

*Develop items for higher-level objectives and content.* Given the nature of essay and oral items, you should use them to measure only appropriate, high-level instructional achievement. Objective items should be used to measure the lower cognitive levels (i.e., knowledge and comprehension)—a task they can accomplish accurately and efficiently. The use of each type of item—subjective and objective—should be restricted to the levels of accomplishment for which each is most suited.

*Provide full and clear directions.* In your directions, you should tell learners exactly what their task is—for example, to answer each of the three items provided on a written essay test. You should tell learners what the point value of each item is and how much time is available for each item or for the whole test. Learners will then know approximately how much time to spend on each item. Learners must also be told if their
scores will be affected by mechanical factors (e.g., spelling and handwriting on essay items, grammar on essay or oral items).

**Give learners advance notice and practice tests.** You should give your learners warning of upcoming essay or oral tests. This provides them with an opportunity to review the material to be covered from the appropriate perspective. You probably know from your own experiences that preparing for an essay test requires the use of different study skills than preparing for objective tests.

Furthermore, learners should be given practice tests. Some learners may never have been required to respond to essay or oral items before. They may have had no experience in organizing and presenting a body of information, as these items require. They may not be aware that they will need to spend some of the time allotted for the test in planning their answers. Learners should have the chance to practice answering oral or essay items before being evaluated on their performance of these skills.

**Don’t use open-book tests.** Allowing learners to use their books doesn't really help them to answer items-unless you are also testing their ability to locate appropriate information in reference books. Remember that an essay or oral item should be used to evaluate learner ability at the higher cognitive levels. At these levels, it matters somewhat less what knowledge learners supply. More important is how They can apply that knowledge in answering the essay or oral item. Studies have shown that learners don't do any better or worse than expected when they are allowed to use their books.

**Prepare a structured key for scoring.** The subjectivity of scoring can be minimized if you write a structured scoring key—a model answer to the essay or oral item, usually in outline form. As you write your own answer to the item, you can assign specific point values to specific aspects of the answer. Learners’ answers can then be compared to the key to assign point values to their answers.

It is a good idea to have your scoring key reviewed by a colleague who is also knowledgeable in your occupational area. He or she may identify other information to include in your model answer. Likewise, you may find information in learners’ answers that is correct but that you did not anticipate. Learners might include facts not mentioned in your key, or they might organize and present their facts in a way you hadn't thought of. Any such information should be added to your key as well.

**Read all learners’ answers to one essay item at one sitting.** The best way to score answers to essay items consistently is to read all learners' answers to one item at one sitting. In other words, don't read one learner’s entire test before reading another’s. You can review your key for the item you are scoring and concentrate on that item. If possible, you should not even know whose answer you are reading. Studies have shown that the “halo effect” is real-teachers tend to score answers higher for learners who are known to be more capable.

**Score mechanical factors separately.** Experts disagree on whether such factors as handwriting, spelling, or grammar should be considered at all in scoring learners’ answers. Some are all for it; some are equally against it. You will need to use your own judgment to determine whether to score learners’ answers for these factors. If these skills are important for success in the occupation, then they should, at some point and in some way, be evaluated.
If you do score for these factors, however, you should assign a score separate from that for technical content. Regardless of how important skill in communicating may be in your occupational area, the technical content of learners' answers should be scored on its own merit.

**Activity**

- Select one or more learner performance objectives from one of your texts that require learners to use the higher cognitive levels (application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation).

- Construct **three essay items** and **two oral items** to measure achievement of the performance objectives you selected. Number each item for easy reference during feedback.

- Include directions and a scoring key.

- Be sure to check your items using the checklist below before submitting them for evaluation.

**Essay and Oral Items Checklist:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The essay and oral items meet the following criteria:</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Items must assess the content in the performance objectives.</td>
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<td>2. The language in each item is precise and unambiguous.</td>
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<td>3. The problems or tasks require learners to use the higher levels of cognition.</td>
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<td>4. Open books are not allowed.</td>
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<td>5. Directions clearly state the task, point value of items, and time allowed for answering.</td>
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<td>6. The items clarify any additional directions needed beyond the general directions.</td>
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<td>7. Learners are required to answer all items.</td>
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<td>8. A structured scoring key is provided.</td>
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