



ITEM WRITING WORKBOOK

INTRODUCTION

This workbook has been designed to introduce you to the principles of question writing and editing for the Securities & Investment Institute and to provide you with suitable guidance to enable you to produce questions that are likely to be used in live exams.

The workbook will take you through the item writing process, and best practices of producing good quality questions.

Examples and practical exercises are included in the workbook to aid you with your item writing.

Once you have studied the workbook you will be required to complete an item writing and editing task for the Securities & Investment Institute, which – if successfully completed – will complete your induction to item writing and editing for SII.

ITEM WRITING FOR SII

When new items are needed by SII, an item writer will be contacted and requested to write a specified number of items for the item bank. The item writer will be provided with the relevant subject syllabus and workbook, and will be given instructions as to which learning objective(s) the items should be written against.

All items submitted by writers must be:

- i) *directly linked to the learning objective of the syllabus.*
- ii) *answerable from relevant learning material provided.*

Most SII learning objectives begin with one of the following verbs: **know**, **understand**, **be able to calculate** or **be able to apply**. It is also possible that **distinguish between** and **identify** may be used. These verbs indicate the different levels of skill that will be tested.

A typical **knowledge** question requires candidates to be able to recall information: facts e.g. principles, types of products, product characteristics, sequences or give a brief, general explanation. An example might be: “What does the Companies Act 1985/89 say about the disclosure of interests in shares?”

Understand - requires candidates to be able to demonstrate comprehension of an issue or product. An example might be “Why is the Criminal Justice Act 1993 concerned with Money Laundering?”

Be able to calculate - requires candidates to use formulae or tax rates to perform calculations.

Be able to apply - requires candidates to use their knowledge in a given set of circumstances in order to recognise a clear and detailed explanation of a situation, product or rule. An example might be: “The Price Earnings Ratio achieved by Company Z during the financial year 2009/2010 was X: Y. How would this influence potential investors in Company Z?”

Be able to distinguish between – requires candidates to be able to compare and contrast two or more issues, situations, rules or principles.

Identify – requires the candidate to be able to apply their knowledge of rules or principles in order to categorise one or more issues from a situation



ACTION

All SII subject syllabuses are on our website: www.sii.org.uk

Take time to review the syllabuses that you are likely to be writing questions for.

In particular, you will need to familiarise yourself with the following sections of each syllabus:

- *The aim and standard of the exam*
- *Unit structure*
- *Examination specification*

THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

The type of multiple-choice question that we prefer to use comprises a piece of text which sets the scene and four different possible answers, only one of which is correct. We score our papers by giving a mark to a candidate for each question where the candidate chooses (only) the correct answer.

Like in most technical fields, there is a special terminology in educational measurement. We use the terms that apply to multiple-choice testing.

- Item:** The whole question
Stem: The initial part of the item, that states the problem
Options: The 4 possible answers offered
Key: The correct answer, or option
Distractors: The incorrect answers, or options

Example:

A customer wishes to sell stock that she owns. However, she does NOT wish to receive a forthcoming cash dividend. If the dividend date is Friday 21 June, what is the last day during which She can sell the regular way?

- | | | | | |
|---|------------------|--------|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| A | Thursday 20 June | } STEM | } O
P
T
I
O
N
S | |
| B | Friday 21 June | | | } KEY |
| C | Monday 24 June | | | } DISTRACTORS |
| D | Tuesday 25 June | | | } DISTRACTORS |



ACTION

All IAQ examinations have a set of SAMPLE questions which are available to candidates via our website.

These SAMPLE questions are tried and tested questions that have been through our full quality controls and have been accepted by SII as suitable for testing.

Take time to look at the questions before continuing to the next section.

FEATURES THAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR IN A STEM

However elegant an item, if it does not test content from the learning objective specified, then unfortunately we are unable to use it.

Questions must be “worth asking”. Our exams are designed to test whether candidates have sufficient knowledge to function in the world of work. So the questions should ideally be ones that they might meet during their work. Although sometimes questions might relate to background knowledge that would be assumed at work, they should never be designed to trick candidates into choosing the incorrect option.

Rules for the stem:

The stem should clearly describe the problem or what is being asked of the candidate.

Poor stem:

Liquidity is the degree of ease with which assets can be:

- A purchased on credit
- B converted into cash
- C used as collateral
- D transferred to other ownership



Better stem:

What is the function of the postage stamp on a letter?

- A To show the delivery charge paid
- B To show the weight of the letter
- C To show how far the letter is to travel
- D To show where the letter was posted

Avoid excessive, unnecessary wording:

Poor stem:

At the SII, continuing professional development is strongly encouraged. What is the minimum number of hours advocated in a one year period?

- a. 25
- b. 35.
- c. 45
- d. 55

FEATURES THAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR IN THE KEY

You will have to make sure that the key to each of your items is defensible as being correct. This is a greater requirement than might be the case in general discussion at work. Candidates do not have the opportunity to ask what you might mean so the keys to your items must be sufficient in themselves to answer the question in the stem.

But the keys to your items should not all be longer than the distractors (which can happen if you add wording to make sure that they are defensible). This would provide a clue to the candidates. The keys should look similar in style and length to the distractors.

FEATURES THAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR IN DISTRACTORS

You will have to make sure that all of the distractors are wrong. Otherwise the whole point of multiple-choice testing is lost. But you will also have to make sure that all of the distractors would be plausible to a candidate who is guessing. Otherwise, again, the whole point of multiple-choice testing is lost.

These conflicting requirements tend to present the most demanding challenges to item writers. Do not be discouraged. Even when you find yourself totally convinced that there cannot be a third distractor for your draft item, to complement the two that you wrote relatively easily, there probably is.

The distractors should look similar in style and length to the key. Ideally, they should be “parallel” in that all of the options (key and distractors) present the same kind of information. Sometimes, this is very straightforward to achieve. The first item example has parallel options, as all of them are dates.



ACTION

Choose a learning objective from one of the subject syllabuses you have retrieved from our website.

Using the guidelines given above, write two questions on this learning objective.

FEATURES THAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR IN THE ITEM OVERALL

Having drafted your items, review them against the following criteria:

- rewriting the stem in fewer words, or using simpler words
- breaking down the stem into more than one sentence
- rewriting the options so that they all have the same grammatical structure, even though when you first thought of them they all looked different.

We want our questions to be presented as clearly as they can be otherwise candidates might fail, not because of lack of mastery of the technical content, but because of confusion caused by our wording. Multiple-choice item writing is a special, particularly creative form of technical authorship, and the normal rules of good writing apply.



ACTION

Using the criteria above, rewrite your questions, if appropriate.

FEATURES THAT WE *DO NOT* WANT

If you follow these guidelines, then you will be writing items of the type that we want. However, you will also have seen examples of item types elsewhere and might be tempted to follow these precedents.

Other item types might be appropriate in other contexts such as an aptitude test but in an achievement test such as ours the use of very different item types is justified.

We have listed below, features or types of item that would not be suitable:

- We do NOT want options that read “all of the above”
- We do NOT want options that read “none of the above”
- We do NOT want you to submit negative items. These would be items that ask what should NOT be done

EXAMPLE

“Which of the following types of fire extinguisher should NOT be used on electrical fires?”

- A Water,
- B Dry Powder, etc.

- We do NOT want you to submit items in the Roman Numeral format. The Roman Numeral format presents a first list of options labelled I, II, III and IV, and then a second list of options labelled A, B, C and D, which refer back to the first list

EXCEPTION: the only instance in which Roman Numerals will be accepted is when the learning objective requires candidates to pair options and put options in a sequence ie.

EXAMPLE

Which two of the following must be included in a periodic statement for a discretionary managed portfolio?

- I The total value of the portfolio at the end of the period
- II Details of transactions entered into during the period
- III Details of any assets loaned or charged
- IV Details of the customer’s investments objectives and attitude to risk

- A I and II only
- B I and III only, etc



ACTION

Draft *four* items, one on each of the different testing levels (knowledge, understand, be able to apply / be able to calculate).

The items must be written on an SII syllabus learning objectives, obtainable from our website.

Once you have reviewed your items put them aside for a while before moving onto the next section. This ensures that when you read your items again you are approaching them from a fresh point of view and are more likely to spot any errors.



ACTION

Use the Editing Checklist (opposite) to edit your items.

SII item editors are required to identify errors in an item and where possible, to amend items in order to make them acceptable. Editors are also requested to provide feedback to the writer on why their item was corrected and in some instances rejected.

Editing Checklist

	Yes/No
Is it written against the Learning Objective in the Syllabus?	
Is it worth asking?	
Is the stem a complete question or statement?	
Is the key option correct?	
Are the options parallel and of similar lengths?	
Are the distractors plausible but wrong?	
Is the item absent of any clues as to the key?	
Is the wording as short as possible?	
Is it easy to read?	

ITEM REJECTION

Below are several real examples of items that were rejected either by editors or SII during the editing process.

EXAMPLE

Learning objective:

Understand the terms money laundering, criminal conduct and criminal property and the application of money laundering to all crimes (Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 s.340)

Item submitted:

What relevance does the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 have to money laundering?

- A Firms complying with the Act can disregard the FSA's money laundering sourcebook
- B It is an adjunct to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2002
- C It widens the previous definition of money laundering to include the funds arising from any illegal act
- D The Act lists specific crimes, the proceeds of which fall into the definition of money laundering

Reason for rejection:

The item does not test the candidates *understanding* of the term money laundering and the distractors are not balanced.

EXAMPLE

Learning objective:

'know the rule on clear and fair communication (COB 2.1.1/2.1.3 – 2.1.5)

Item submitted:

COB 2.1 refers to which of the following rules?

- A Inducements and soft commission
- B Clear, fair and soft commission
- C Reliance on others
- D Chinese Walls

Reason for rejection:

This item does not test the candidate on their knowledge of the content and underlying principles of the COB reference. Instead it is testing a candidate's memory of the numbering of the Regulation and their ability to recall random bits of information.

EXAMPLE

Learning objective:

'know the application and purpose of the lending to private customers rule (COB 7.9.1/2), the restrictions on lending to private customers (COB 7.9.3), the exceptions on lending to private customers (COB



7.9.5) and the record keeping requirements regarding lending to private customers (*COB 7.9.7*).

Item submitted:

In connection with designated investment business, prior to lending to a private customer, a form is NOT required to carry out which ONE of the following (if the exceptions to this rule do NOT apply)?

- A Assess the private customer's financial standing based on the information provided by the customer
- B Ensure that the terms of the loan are competitive
- C Take reasonable steps to ensure that the arrangements for the loan are suitable
- D Obtain the customer's written consent to the terms of the loan.

Reason for rejection:

Negative question and too many variables for candidate to consider.

EXAMPLE

Learning objective:

'know the requirement to give the customer notice of the right to cancel, the requirements regarding post-sale notices and the consequences of the firm failing to send the post-sale notice.

Item submitted:

A customer, who is an individual and who is following investment advice to enter into an ISA agreement and has not been offered the right to cancel, has the right to withdraw from that agreement for how long after the offer was made?

- A 3 days
- B 7 days
- C 14 days
- D 1 month

Reason for rejection:

There are five variables in this item. There should only be a maximum of two variables in any item.



The most common reason for items being rejected is due to items not meeting the learning objective of the subject syllabus.

Please remember to refer back to the subject syllabus once you have completed your items and carry out a final check on these before submitting them to SII.



ASSESSMENT

Once you are confident that your batch of items meet SII requirements these need to be submitted to us for review and assessment. Please indicate which syllabus and learning objective the items relate to.

Full feedback will be provided to you and you may be requested to submit further items for assessment.

Your items must be submitted to Will Roberts MSI, Scheduling & Administration Manager for assessment.

If you would like to discuss your assessment items please contact Will on 020 7645 0613 or via email on will.roberts@sii.org.uk.