



How to Construct a Better Exam

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The art of constructing a customized exam is often neglected as too many instructors rely totally on test banks. While the first exam could be considered an experiment, all future exams for a particular class should be well thought out. The construction of your exams should have definite goals in mind. The selection of questions, the structure, the wording of the test, even the type of question should be examined.



My Approach

I use statistics in my exam grading and look for that familiar bell curve indicating that the test was neither too difficult nor too easy. A shift in either direction from the center of the bell guides me in designing the difficulty of the next exam.

In addition, I allow 25 percent of any exam to be questions requiring memory skills. The next 50 percent is conceptual-type questions requiring analytical thought and reasoning. The last 25 percent of the exam is constructed of purely theoretical questions requiring higher levels of understanding.

The structure of an exam is an integral part of its design and requires much thought. Imagine a long, arduous journey, and the thought of having to begin that trek. Therefore, why not make the first few questions the simplest, thus encouraging your

students to continue and complete the exam?

I recommend creating a section of matching, fill-in-the-blank, or true/false questions. These question formats are very familiar and allow your students to relax and gain confidence.

Choice of Vocabulary is Important

A thorough understanding of your students is essential when describing exams to them. Just the word “exam” or “test” can cause an anxiety attack and perhaps inhibit their creative capabilities. Therefore, I prefer terms such as “chapter review” or “quiz”. These words carry the same weight as an exam, but the students experience less anxiety when hearing them.

Skill Identification is Key

I urge you to identify the knowledge and skills that are to be covered on the exam prior to your lectures and preparation of the exam. This allows you to adjust your lectures to achieve maximum student comprehension and still cover the material to be tested.

Those who master the art of exam creation carefully evaluate question topics, structure, wording, and even the number and type of questions selected. You may then realize that designing exams takes more effort and skill than spending a few minutes in a test bank selecting questions at random.

A well-designed test is much more than an arbitrary method of assigning grades. Don't your students deserve the most carefully designed and highest quality tests? After all, it's their grade and their future that hangs in the balance.