



DEMIDEC TEST-WRITING GUIDELINES

JUNE 2008 EDITION

1. Make sure answer choices flow from the question stem. Too often, test questions read something like, "The Han Dynasty were famous for" with answer choices such as, "for their conquests" and "it was good at math." Not only is this a case of subject-verb disagreement (Dynasty vs. were), the "for" is repeated in one choice, "The Han Dynasty were famous for for their conquests." The other sentence, "The Han Dynasty were famous for it was good at math," makes no sense, even if math skills were the source of the Dynasty's fame.

2. Answer choices should be parallel. If the question is about the Huns, and the first choice reads, "The Huns did X," the second choice should not read, "They did x." They should all consistently refer to the people in question either as "they" or as "the Huns."

3. Never write "none of the above" or "all of the above" questions. Furthermore, if the question asks, "Where did John go yesterday?" an answer choice cannot be, "John did not go anywhere yesterday." This is a *covert none-of-the-above* question.

4. The words EXCEPT and NOT should always be capitalized. Often questions like these read more smoothly if they are inverted. For instance,

"Exams were written by all of the following authors EXCEPT"

could be more concisely rephrased

"Which of the following authors did NOT write exams?"

5. In general, one answer choice should not be much longer or shorter than all the others. Also, there should always be at least one distracter that can really trick students—preferably more than one.

6. Answer explanations should be more than just the question stem plus the correct answer. Here is an example of a poor answer explanation, which leaves us wondering, "what is an *ichigenkin*?"

For what Japanese instrument was Randy Raine-Reusch's piece "Dark Rain" composed?	<i>ichigenkin</i>	<i>koto</i>	<i>shakuhachi</i>	<i>shamisen</i>	<i>nigenkin</i>	47,2,3	"Dark Rain" was written for <i>ichigenkin</i> .
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Answer explanations should also never plagiarize USAD. In addition, they should note why tricky distracters were in fact wrong; if you have no tricky distracters, write some. Answer explanations should also stand on their own and not require referring back to the question. They should not be too long, however.

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Finally, make sure answer explanations don't simply restate the question. For example, "The Civil War ended in 1865," is not an acceptable answer explanation for the question, "When did the Civil War end?" Add some extra information for the test-taker, perhaps noting the circumstances of the war's end or the location of the surrender.

7. Be careful for situations in which one question answers another on the same exam. For instance, one question might ask who devised the Laws of Motion, then another question might ask, "What was Kepler's Second Law of Motion?"

8. Answer choices should only capitalize the first word and include periods if they are, in fact, complete sentences in and of themselves; they rarely are.

Here's an example:

3. What color is the puppy?
- a. white
 - b. blue
 - c. red
 - d. green
 - e. brown

Because the answer choices are not complete sentences, they are not capitalized. Nor do they end with a period.

Similarly, complete-the-stem questions do not have punctuated/capitalized answers.

1. The puppy is
- a. looking for a bone
 - b. rolling over
 - c. making a mess
 - d. running in circles
 - e. chewing her tail

The choices are not complete sentences in and of themselves.

Now take a look at this question:

1. What did Joe do on Sunday morning?
- a. He ran to the store.
 - b. He walked to the Laundromat.
 - c. He went to church with his wife.
 - d. He walked his dog.
 - e. He wrote an exam for DemiDec.

Because each of the answer choices is a complete sentence, we punctuate and capitalize it.

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9. Questions never end in colons.
10. As stated earlier, all answer choices should be about the same length. **Answer choices should be no longer than they need to be.** Many beginning writers create very long answer choices; these are not recommended. In general, never try to make an otherwise correct answer wrong by adding more information to it.
11. Source notes for questions from the USAD guide in your event should be in the format UXYRG:A,B,C where A,B,C are page, column, paragraph respectively, and XY are the initials for your event. Start counting 0 with an incomplete paragraph, 1 with the first complete paragraph. If you have more than one source note for a question, put a comma in between each one—not a paragraph break. Source notes from a DemiDec Resource or Power Guide are similar, but begin with DXYRG or DXYPG, and lack a column designator.
12. Topic codes under T1, T2 and T3 are from the USAD topic outline, which you should have. If not, please request it from tom@demidec.com. Each question should have at least one topic associated with it; many have more than one.
13. Distracters need to be wrong. Be careful – don't assume that just because something isn't said in USAD it is right.

For example,

1. A state university was founded in the same dynastic time period as the writing of
 - a. Wang Xiaoni
 - b. Li Po
 - c. Su Tung Po
 - d. Ch'en Lin
 - e. Ezra Pound

Because this question does not specify *which* state university, more than one of the answer choices is probably right. Lots of state universities were founded in the history of China!

14. Every question needs to stand alone. It may appear in a randomly-generated quiz containing questions from many events. So don't assume that a reader knows you're asking a question about art, or Latin America, or evolutionary biology.
15. Don't use contractions in questions or answer choices.
16. Here's a sample question:
 - Jon's actions reflect the theme of
 - a. care for the tricksters
 - b. care for the children
 - c. care for the kumquats
 - d. care for daughters
 - e. care for the terrorists

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Putting aside for a moment whether this is a sensible question, note that each answer choice begins with the phrase "care for"--which means this phrase ought to be moved into the question, as follows:

Jon's actions reflect the theme of care for

- a. the tricksters
- etc.

17. Look for novel ways to test information. Ask which of a set of events occurred first, or which two events occurred closest together. Look for ways that facts interconnect: don't just test individual facts all the time. Compare facts from across an entire event. A comprehensive, scimitar or focused exam should include at least 5-10 of these questions that combine information from throughout the curriculum or (for a focused exam) a segment of the curriculum.

18. Never write fill-in-the-blank questions. For example, "John hit _____ in the head." Instead, rephrase this question as "Which of the following characters hit John in the head?"

19. Question marks always go outside quotation marks *unless they are part of the quotation*. For example, "Which of the following characters called Billy a 'slacker'?" However, if the quotation itself is a question, the question mark is placed inside the quotation marks. For example, "Which of the following characters asked, 'Where is our mother?'" Also, periods always go inside quotation marks.

20. If the question stem ends with an "a," write it out as "a(n)" ONLY if one of your answer choices begins with a vowel.

21. If you write a question beginning with "Which of the following," be sure to place a plural noun after "following." For example, the question, "Which of the following wrote *On Contagions and Contagious Diseases*?" flows better as "Which of the following scientists wrote *On Contagions and Contagious Diseases*?" Also, make sure the noun is applicable to ALL the choices, even the wrong ones. For example, if one of your answer choices is a woman, do not use "Which of the following men..."

22. Do not double space after periods and other punctuation marks. Always single space between sentences. This applies to *all DemiDec materials*.

23. Make sure you know the difference between "consequently" and "subsequently." Consequently refers to cause and effect (it is a synonym of "as a result"). Subsequently, however, refers to time (it is a synonym of "afterwards").

24. Never split infinitives. Write "to go boldly where no man has gone before" rather than the more popular "to boldly go."

25. Never use "they" to refer to one person. If the gender of the person is known, use "he" or "she." If it is not known, simply use the generic "he."

26. Avoid using passive voice when possible. For example, write

“Jack Ruby killed”

not

“Which of the following men was killed by Jack Ruby?”

Note that this reduces the length of the question by two-thirds!

26. Don't write answer choices with two parts. For example, in the question,

Who killed Abraham Lincoln?

- a. John Wilkes Booth, the Confederate spy
- b. John Wilkes Booth, the disgruntled actor
- c. Jack Ruby, the assassin
- d. Ulysses S. Grant, because he wanted power
- e. Ulysses S. Grant, the politician

This question only asks the name of Lincoln's assassin; it does not ask for his motives. Furthermore, this question lacks parallel structure. While choices A, B, C, and E begin with “the” after the comma, choice D begins with “because.”

27. Do not write answer choices in the following arrangement:

- a. Answer choice 1
- b. Opposite of answer choice 1
- c. Answer choice 2
- d. Opposite of answer choice 2
- e. Throwaway distracter

This combination makes it very easy for a good test-taker to eliminate an answer choice. Note that the question above is of this form.

28. Don't write EXCEPT questions in which two of the answer choices contradict each other. For example, if two of the choices are “Southerners owned slaves” and “Southerners believed all people should be free,” a good test-taker will realize that the answer has to be one of the two because they cannot both be correct.

29. Make sure your answer choices are consistent. For example, don't refer to Britain as “Great Britain” in one choice and “Britain” in another.

30. Always spell out the United States. Also, for economics, never abbreviate the Federal Reserve as “the Fed.” Always write it out.

31. Don't include “may be” in answer choices, as it is not an absolute statement and can be argued either way.

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32. Don't write questions with answer choices such as "increase," "decrease," and "stay the same." These are five-choice tests, not three-choice tests. Oftentimes, writers will add choices such as "increase, then decrease," but a good test-taker eliminates these instantly. Make sure you have five *distinct* answer choices.

33. Make sure one answer choice doesn't include another one. For example,

1. Where was Abraham Lincoln born?

- a. Kentucky
- b. Louisiana
- c. the United States
- d. England
- e. Illinois

Though A is the correct answer, Kentucky is part of the United States, and thus, C is also correct.

34. Events always occur from year x to year y." Never write that an event occurred from "1410-1430." Write it out. Also, it's the 1920s, not the 1920's.

35. Distracters should be legitimate; often, they could be the answers to other questions. Do not simply make up distracters. Also, make sure your distracters are plausible. Computers should not be an answer choice to the question, "What invention changed the world in 1810?"

36. Answer explanations need to stand alone. Don't assume the reader has the question in front of him or her. Thus, don't use pronouns to refer to items in the test question.

37. Another kind of question that is not permissible creates "sets" and "subsets" in answer choices. Questions like this usually include the word "only" or Roman numerals. Examples:

1. What country or countries lack access to the sea?

- a. Bolivia only
- b. Peru only
- c. Peru and Bolivia only
- d. Bolivia and Ecuador only
- e. Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru

or

1. What country or countries lack access to the sea?

- I. Bolivia
 - II. Peru
 - III. Ecuador
- a. I
 - b. II
 - c. II and III
 - d. I and II
 - e. I, II and III

38. Prepositions at the end of stems

It is okay to “end” a "complete-the-stem" style question with a preposition. Example:

1. The new puppy had a tremendous love for
 - a. the old puppy
 - b. rawhide chews
 - c. photography
 - d. Academic Decathlon
 - e. The World Scholar's Cup

What isn't okay is when an interrogative question ends in a preposition. Example:

2. What did the new puppy have a tremendous love for?
or
- 2b. The new puppy had a tremendous love for what?

The complete-the-stem approach above works, as does:

3. For what did the new puppy have a tremendous love?

39. The final and most important rule is **to study the official practice test in your subject**. You will want to match its style closely, especially if writing Comprehensive, Progressive or Mock exams.

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Please note that this list is not exhaustive. It will be updated regularly as more common errors are spotted. You will be expected to remain familiar with the most current version of this information. If in doubt, ask for clarification. You may also want to consult *The Little, Brown Handbook* for general writing guidelines with regard to style, grammar, mechanics and usage errors.