



**CCHRA • CCARH**

Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations  
Conseil canadien des associations en ressources humaines

**National Knowledge Exam® (NKE)  
Item Writing Guidelines**

## **CCHRA NKE Multiple-Choice Item Writing Guidelines**

### **Introduction**

Thank you for your interest in writing multiple-choice test items for the CCHRA NKE certification exam. Reading this brief manual is the best way to start. It highlights and discusses the training and orientation that item writers receive when developing content for the NKE. We have prepared this manual to extend the opportunity for writing items to HR professionals and academics throughout Canada. We hope that you read it, and find it to be a valuable resource for writing multiple-choice test items for the NKE and other exams.

In recent decades, HR has emerged as a recognized and vital profession. At one time limited to personnel recordkeeping, and sometimes assigned to whomever had some extra time, HR management is essential to the health and well-being of companies of all sizes. HR professionals sit at the interface of protecting the often competing best interests of employers and employees. Knowing, understanding, and applying legal and regulatory expectations can save employers significant amounts of litigation expenses. This expertise can help create office harmony, employee retention, and an overall sense of fairness. The ultimate beneficiary is corporate productivity.

Passing the NKE is a career milestone for HR professionals. But for the resultant certification to be meaningful for HR professionals and companies that rely on their expertise, the exam must be valid, reliable, and fair. The exam must be more than a collection of questions, the questions must test more than memorization, and the wrong answers must do more than camouflage the right answer.

### **Multiple-Choice as the Exam Format**

The NKE is a multiple-choice exam. Many individuals have negative perceptions of the multiple-choice format, regarding it as limited to assessing recall of isolated facts. Actually, multiple-choice questions can be very effective in assessing higher level thinking skills such as evaluating, correlating, judging, determining, and integrating. These are the types of skills that a valid certification exam should assess because they are the skills that are used everyday professionally and therefore, are the skills that are necessary for competent performance. If a certification exam does not test these skills, its resultant deficient validity is a failure of item development, not the multiple-choice format.

Multiple-choice exams have other advantages. They are able to cover a broad scope of content of the Canadian HR Body of Knowledge. As a result, it is unlikely that weak examinees will pass on the basis of luck – the little content they know was, luckily, the content on the exam. Similarly, strong examinees are unlikely to fail due to bad luck – the little content they did not know was the dominant exam content. Examinees are informed of the content scope, its consistency, and its derivation from a job analysis. Another advantage of multiple-choice exams is objective scoring, and rigorous statistical analysis and quality control. Educators can use these statistics to identify, for example, misconceptions that their instruction did not effectively overcome. The teaching-learning process can benefit significantly from these data.

### **Some Basics**

Let's get a few obligatory definitions out of the way quickly. Up to this point, we have referred to test items as multiple-choice questions. The more correct term is multiple-choice *items*. The question part of an item is known as the *stem*. The stem can be stated as a question or an incomplete statement (neither one is intrinsically preferable), which is why "item" is more generically correct than "question." The wrong answers are referred to as *distractors*. NKE items have one correct response and three distractors. Now let's get to the creative part.

### **Conceptualizing an Item Stem**

Competency as an HR professional begins with knowledge. Workplace regulations, federal law, and contract requirements are just a few of the requisite essential knowledge areas. What is most important is not that one has knowledge but rather, that one can *use* or *apply* that knowledge in preventing HR problems, and in handling problems effectively if they occur.

As applying knowledge is a major component of on-the-job competency, a certification exam must test this cognitive skill in order to be valid. This is where your contribution will have the most impact on the NKE. Although CCHRA welcomes items that test recall of important facts and principles, items that test application of knowledge are strongly encouraged. Fortunately, they are not difficult to write. Here are some suggestions to get started.

#### *HR Situations*

Think of HR situations that you have experienced or observed that are referenced in the Canadian HR Body of Knowledge. Each situation can be the basis of an item stem.

*You are ...*

Consider two words that lead naturally into an HR situation – “you are.” By their nature, they place examinees in an HR situation that, when continued to completion, will require knowledge to be applied. Then, end the stem by asking what information should be obtained, what decision should be made, what recommendation should be offered, what action should be taken, what problem should be resolved, or another related issue. “Which of the following should you do?” is one of many ending sentences that indicate what judgment the examinees are expected to render.

### *Examples*

Examples are as numerous and varied as human behaviour. Consider the following abridged situations from an employer perspective. Some HR recommendations, decisions, and/or actions are needed to protect the company, all of which must conform to legal and regulatory HR workplace standards.

1. An employee is habitually late for (or absent from) work.
2. An employee’s work is consistently inaccurate.
3. An employee has used abusive language to other employees (or supervisors).
4. An employee’s appearance is unprofessional (e.g, t-shirts with inappropriate language, revealing attire, etc).
5. An employee’s manner of communication is unprofessional.
6. An employee uses company equipment for personal use.
7. An employee proselytizes his or her political or religious beliefs.
8. An employee is reported to be stealing company property.
9. An employee has embarrassed the company by behaviour on a social networking website.

Here are abridged situations from an employee perspective.

1. An employee reports being mistreated by his or her supervisor.
2. An employee feels bullied by a coworker.
3. An employee reports being blamed for the errors of a coworker.
4. An employee has been disqualified from receiving a fringe benefit because of misplaced paperwork by his or her supervisor.
5. An employee has been denied a workplace disability accommodation that is not work related.
6. An employee feels coerced to support a political party or candidate, or charity.
7. An employee reports being subjected to disparaging jokes related to personal and/or demographic traits.
8. An employee reports being denied earned vacation (or sick) leave.

There are many more situations to be described as a basis for typical, challenging HR situations. Some situations may contain excerpts from employment or third-party contracts, or perhaps visual data requiring assessment. For example, a photo of a workstation could be embedded in a stem asking about a mandatory ergonomic modification.

As social norms, culture, fashion, and trends continually evolve, HR challenges will evolve, stride for stride. The NKE will need to evolve to correspond to this continually changing environment.

### *Stems with variables*

Each of the preceding situations is nuanced in the real world by variables. These variables affect the situation, and the correct response. Consider the following variables that could be included in each of these situations.

1. The length of time that this problem has been occurring
2. Whether there is objective evidence to document the problem
3. Whether the problem been discussed (e.g., with the accuser, accusee)
4. Whether formal action (e.g., placement on probation) has been taken
5. If discussed, how the employee has reacted (e.g., attitude, change in behaviour)
6. Whether the company has a written policy governing the problem behaviour
7. Whether the company has objective, understood definitions of professionalism

These variables are all part of the background or description of the situation. They are considered variables because they are changeable and as they change, they may affect the correct answer and even the accompanying wrong answers. For example, the problem may have occurred once, or has been ongoing. There may be substantial documentation of the problem, or perhaps some documentation needing further verification, or there may be none. The employee may already be on probation or perhaps, the problem has never been discussed.

When these variables interact with each other and change, several versions of the stem may be created. This is good! Cloning items, as this practice is known, helps CCHRA expand its database of exam items and enables CCHRA to administer different versions of the NKE that are equivalent in content and difficulty.

### *Sequential and ineffective solutions*

As mentioned earlier, a situational stem asks about the outcome – for example – actions, decisions, and recommendations. Some stems are best concluded by asking which action should be done *first*? This is appropriate when several actions might be appropriate, but their correctness is differentiated by sequence. For example, placing the employee on probation might be the best response if the workplace violation has been discussed previously, with receipt of a written warning signed by the employee. However, this would not be appropriate if the problem has not been discussed with the employee previously. In this context, asking what should be done *first* provides the context needed to justify the correct response.

For some situational, a negative conclusion to the stem may be appropriate. For example, there may be several responses that are correct or perhaps, the best response is arguable

or controversial. In this context, asking what *not* to do might be the best way to conclude the stem. This might be particularly compelling if avoiding a particular action is necessary to avert violation of a workplace regulation. “You may do all of the following *except*.” or “Which of the following actions should be avoided?” are acceptable and possibly desirable stem endings in this context.

### *Entry level*

All items should be written at entry level. This target is elusive and is the subject of lengthy discussion at exam development meetings. The NKE is targeted at individuals who are HR generalists working at the level of an independent contributor with 3-5 years of experience. Educationally, most of these individuals have a baccalaureate degree or HR diploma in HR. Use this as a working definition of NKE entry level.

In aiming for this level, the stem is the most important component in determining whether the item is properly targeted. Therefore, in developing situational stems, think of frequently encountered situations that are consequential, and would distinguish between a person who is capable of achieving the CHRP designation and a person who is not. Avoid situations which require the knowledge skill of an attorney or regulator. These situations are likely to be beyond entry level and therefore, not appropriate for the NKE.

A stem testing recall should focus on an important fact or principle that is referenced in the HR Body of Knowledge (or RPCs). Workplace regulations are good sources of recall items. In contrast, items testing recall of isolated facts that are “nice to know,” but not consequential, are usually below the quality expected of the exam.

### *Other considerations*

There are other factors to consider in writing the stem. First, be sure that the stem has sufficient focus. When a stem has sufficient focus, examinees can provide the correct response before even reading the options. When a stem lacks focus, it does not provide sufficient information for the candidates to answer. An example is: *Which of the following statements about disability accommodations is correct (or incorrect)?* Because the stem lacks focus, examinees must read each of the options to determine the intent of the item. This problem is corrected by being sure that examinees can answer the item before reading the options.

Another important factor is to avoid double negatives. They hinder clear direct communication. Usually, they are readily observable. For example: *Which of the following characteristics about spousal medical insurance is not uncommon?* Examinees with adequate HR knowledge to answer the item correctly can get confused needlessly by whether *not uncommon* means rare or frequent. However, occasionally a double negative is formed between the stem and an option. When this occurs, the simplest revision is to replace the offending option.

## **Distractor Options**

This is the easy part. What wrong answers would examinees indicate in response to having only the stem? These wrong answers become the distractors. Therefore, the distractors should be real (not made up or tricky), logical, plausible, but *wrong*. Examinees should not be misled or tricked.

Answers that represent partial knowledge usually form good distractors. Partial knowledge can be a response that could be correct under somewhat different circumstances, but is not correct based on the circumstances in the stem's scenario. Another type of distractor can be a response that is generally perceived by the public as correct, but is wrong. For example, many people believe that a student with a documented reading disability is automatically entitled to time-and-a-half on standardized exams. While this type of accommodation is often provided, the degree of accommodation may be based on the extent or severity of the disability.

These are the types of distractors that distinguish among examinees with varying degrees of expertise. These distractors are vital for the test to measure effectively, which is to distinguish between examinees who should and should not be certified in HR.

Each item should have three distractors, for a total of four options. Be sure that the option lengths are reasonably similar. For example, if three options contain 2-5 words, and the fourth option is three lines in length, the examinees will be drawn to the excessively lengthy option whether it is correct or incorrect. Most of the text should be in the stem. As the options answer or complete the stem, their length should be short-to-moderate in length, relative to the stem length.

Combination responses such as "all of the above," "none of the above," or other combination options (e.g., "a and b above") are not acceptable for the NKE. These options are inherently flawed, whether correct or incorrect. Each item shall contain one, and only one, correct response.

## **Avoiding Bias**

It should be obvious that there is no room for bias in competency assessments. While this is generally understood, and it is easy to assume that item writers concur, bias can sometimes be subtle and inadvertent. Therefore, it is important for item writers to be attentive to the presence of bias, and to remove it when detected.

It is particularly important to be aware of linguistic sensitivity. There are some words and phrases that are syntactically correct but have culturally-related derogatory implications.

Bias might be present in items that refer to knowledge or situations which are regional or provincial in emphasis, but do not generalize nationally. However, more frequently, bias is not in any one item, but rather, is cumulative across many items. For example, in situational items, if the HR professional is consistently depicted as a middle-aged female, and the non-compliant employee is consistently depicted as a young male, that would represent a both a gender and age bias. To avoid this occurrence, items should be varied with regard to how knowledge is covered, and how it is manifested in situations.

Among its objectives in reviewing and editing exam items for content accuracy and compliance with technical standards, CCHRA reviews items for potential bias within and across items. CCHRA has the right and responsibility to remove any form of bias that is detected.

### **Final Checklist**

As in creating other documents, be sure of the following.

- Grammatical correctness
- Factual/technical correctness (refer also to the next section on References)
- Applicable nationally (rather than being specific to only a region or province)
- Devoid of jargon
- Devoid of bias

CCHRA uses the style sheet shown in Appendix A for standardization and consistency in words and usage. This list may be a useful reference for preparing other documents as well. However, all submitted test items are reviewed by CCHRA for usage, as well as for technical accuracy and compliance with psychometric standards. Any word usage that is not consistent with this style sheet will be edited to attain compliance.

Finally, as in other high-stakes certification exams, the confidentiality and security of NKE items must be maintained. In this regard, all item writers must sign and submit a confidentiality statement. Appendix B contains a copy of this statement.

### **References**

Each item should refer to a knowledge element listed within the Canadian HR Body of Knowledge, and should have at least one supportive reference. In providing this documentation, it should be recognized that scenario-based items are usually more difficult to reference than short items testing recall of knowledge. To the extent that an item writer bases an item on personal HR experience, that exact situation is not going to be precisely referenced. For these items, it is sufficient to provide a general reference – not the exact page of a book or article.

Item writers should also be aware of references that may be contradictory. If two or more references contradict each other, the item needs to be revised such that there is only one correct answer.

### **A Final Thank You**

Writing valid test items is one of the best contributions you can make to your profession. Valid tests protect and serve the public interest and promote professionalism by setting and maintaining standards of knowledge and performance. Thank you for facilitating this ongoing effort.

## **Appendix A: NKE Style Sheet**

### **Words**

Aboriginal (adj.)

Aboriginal people (n.)

aftershave (n.)

anthropometry (n.)

anti-social (adj.)

anti-union (adj.)

arm's-length (attr. adj.)

back-to-work (attr. adj.)

best-in-class (attr. adj.)

bylaw (n.)

call-routing (adj.)

cellphone (n.)

channelling (n.)

childcare (n.)

codetermination (n.)

coordination (n.)

cooperation (n.)

cooperative (adj.)

cost-of-living (adj.)

counselling (n.)

co-worker (n.)

data (n.) a plural noun, so takes a plural verb (e.g., data are...)

database (n.)

decision-making (adj.)

decision making (n.)

defence (n.)

disk (n.)

dues checkoff (n.)

eldercare (n.)

email (n.)

enrolment (n.)

extracurricular (adj.)

fact-finding (n., v.)

fast food (n.)

fast-food (adj.)

firefighting (n., adj.)

first aid (n.)

first-aid (adj.)

flextime (n.)

focused, focuses (v.)

gainsharing (n. + adj.)

goal-setting (n.)

grandparenting (v.)

human resources (n.) Avoid using *Human Resources* or *HR* in NKE and NPPA items (those usages okay for CCHRA marketing and communications outside of the test questions)

icebreaker (n.)

Industrial Revolution

Internet (n.)

intranet (n.)

intraorganizational (adj.)

job-sharing (n.)

judgment (n.)

judgmental (adj.)

labelling (n.)

layoff (n.)

lockout (n.)

lock out (v.)

midpoint (n.)

misjudgments (n.)

modelled (v.)

multi-employer (adj.)

multisource (adj.)

nailbiting (n.)

near misses (n. pl.)

non-binding (adj.)

non-compensable (adj.)

non-profit (adj.)

nonthreatening (adj.)

non-union (adj.)

occurred, occurring (v.)

offshoring (n.)

on-site (adj.)

paycheque (n.)

person-days (n.)

post-secondary (adj.)

post-test (adj.)

practice (n.)

practice (v.)

pre-retirement (adj.)

pre-test (adj.)

profit-sharing (n.)  
problem-solving (adj.)

Rand formula (n.)  
re-assign (v.)  
re-assignment (n.)  
re-circulate (v.)  
record-keeping (n.)  
red-circled (v.)  
re-enactment (n.)  
re-evaluate (v.)  
re-organize (v.)  
restate (v.)  
résumé (n.)  
return-to-work (adj., as in return-to-work program)  
role play (n.)  
role-play (v. + adj.)  
rumour (n.)

semi-skilled (adj.)  
skeptical (adj.)  
slowdown (n.)  
smouldering (adj.)  
stand-alone (adj.)  
subcontracting (n.)  
subcontractor (n.)

teamwork (n.)  
third-world (attr. adj.)  
time-consuming (adj.)  
toward (prep.)

union organizing drive (n.)  
union (adj.) Note: *union member* but *unionized employee, unionized worker, unionized workplace*

workday (n.)  
workers' compensation (n.)  
workforce (n.)  
workstation (n.)  
work-to-rule (n.)  
World Trade Center

Yellow Pages (proprietary term)

## Usage

Acts and titles of legislation

- No italics: The Labour Relations Act

#### Comma

- Use the serial comma.

#### Titles: spell out in full when referring to a specific person

- Not CEO, but Chief Executive Officer; not VP, but Vice President when referring a specific individual, but use lower-case letters for generic use: “a human resources manager,” “a supervisor.”

#### Emphasis

- For clarity, use underscoring to emphasize not and except in questions.

#### Capitalization

- First letter of each answer is an upper-case letter. No period at the end of the answer.

#### Numbers

- In general, use words for one to nine, use numerals for 10 and more
- For day, months, and years, use numerals: a 2-day suspension, a 3-month leave, for 5 years.
- In running text, use words: two employees, four tests.
- Use %, not *percent*, not *per cent*

**Appendix B: Item Writer Confidentiality Statement**



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**NKE Item Writer**

**Confidentiality Statement**

I agree that as an item writer for CCHRA's National Knowledge Exam<sup>®</sup>, I hold a position of trust. Furthermore, I agree never to reveal to anyone other than the CCHRA Office the wording of the exam items and answer sets which I develop for CCHRA.

Signed:

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Insert Your Name**  
NKE Item Writer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date