Constructing test questions for the ACT Certifying Exam
Objective and outline

• **Brief overview** of key elements, things to do and things to avoid when writing exam questions

• Intended to be used in association with longer, more comprehensive descriptions

• Includes multiple choice and essay questions
Testing objectives

• Knowledge of key concepts and principles
• Questions that assess higher-order skills, rather than simply remembering, are strongly preferred
Multiple choice questions

• Two basic parts: problem (stem) and 5 solutions (alternatives), with 1 best answer and 4 distractors that are incorrect or inferior
• Stem is most commonly a direct question
• Stem can elicit a single correct answer or the best answer
• The stem is the foundation; it is usually longer than alternatives and should clearly indicate the problem or expectation, independent of the alternatives
Technical considerations

• Stem should have a clearly stated, specific question/problem that is brief but complete
• Stem should include as much of the item as possible (minimizes length and repetition in the alternatives)
• Avoid negative or completion-type questions (incomplete statements)
• Alternatives should be clear, concise, homogenous and mutually exclusive
• Alternatives should not contain vague terms, trivial differences, all/none of the above, or combinations (e.g. both A and B)
Tips to avoid technical flaws that make it easier to eliminate incorrect alternatives

• Alternatives plausible and of similar length and form
• Grammar of alternatives consistent with stem
• Avoid specific determiners (e.g. always, never, only)
• Avoid keywords that appear in both stem and alternatives
• Avoid textbook, verbatim phrasing
Essay questions

• Intended to generate evidence of higher-order thinking and understanding

• Poorly written essay questions may simply assess recall
General technical considerations

• Clearly define the learning outcome to be assessed
• Clearly define the task and use a directive verb and object to align it to the intended learning outcome
• Give the candidate clear direction regarding what is expected, including setting clear boundaries
• Present the task as a direct question or imperative task (e.g. compare and contrast)
• Situate the task within a problem
• Use structured prompts to divide the question into distinct parts (to elicit desired responses)