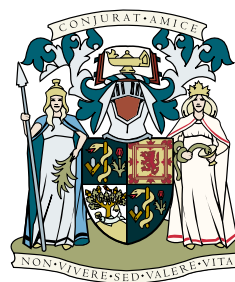


JANUARY 2010

MRCs  
DO-HNS

Fair access by design

Guidance on designing  
inclusive examinations



## Contents

Purpose and use .....	3
General principles .....	3
Question papers: Design points.....	4
Diversity amongst candidates .....	4
Readability of questions.....	4
Legibility of questions.....	5
Mark schemes: design points.....	6
Checklist .....	7
Command words .....	8

## Acknowledgements

ICBSE gratefully acknowledges the Joint Council for Qualifications as the source of this document.

## Purpose and use

1. This document provides practical guidance on how examinations can be designed to give all candidates the fairest possible opportunities to show what they know, understand and can do. Examinations that provide these opportunities effectively are said to offer 'fair access'.
2. The guidance that follows aims to help examiners avoid bias and barriers to the recognition of attainment.
3. Throughout this document, the phrase 'all groups' includes candidates:
  - » at all levels of attainment within the specified standards of award
  - » of both sexes
  - » from different socio-economic backgrounds
  - » from different ethnic and cultural groups
  - » with different religions and/or beliefs or those without faith
  - » with physical and sensory disabilities
  - » with difficulties in aspects of communication, language and literacy
  - » with emotional, behavioural and related access difficulties.
4. A checklist at the end of the document draws the guidance together in summary form.

## General principles

5. Colleges must maintain examination standards.
6. Users of examination results need to be confident that the awards reflect appropriate and consistent standards fairly applied.
7. MRCS/ DOHNS examinations are designed to reward positive achievement. They should discriminate between candidates purely on grounds of demonstrable performance.
8. Examinations must be as fair and valid as possible for all groups of candidates. They must accordingly be free from gender, ethnic or other discrimination and stereotyping and must avoid creating barriers for particular groups
9. All candidates deserve freedom from ambiguity and hidden expectations.
10. Plain language and clear presentation in assessment materials promote fair access for all groups and are in the interest of every candidate.
11. Questions must cover required content to the expected overall standard without bias or stereotype.

12. Examiners must be clear about what they plan to assess. They must tell candidates unambiguously and economically what information they require and how that information should be presented. If candidates do not understand what is required they may, in effect, answer the wrong question and their attainment may remain unrecognised.

## Question papers: Design points

### Diversity amongst candidates

13. The following points will assist in recognising the full diversity of the candidate population.
  - 13.1 Ensure that people represented in assessment materials reflect the diversity of society.
  - 13.2 Avoid narrow, negative or stereotypical representations of different groups. Adopt a balanced approach to roles, activities and appearances. Ensure that the life-styles, languages and developmental activities of peoples across the world are presented accurately and with respect.
  - 13.3 Use contexts for questions that reflect the experience of all groups of candidates in a balanced way.
  - 13.4 Avoid biased, derogatory and racist language, even in contexts intended to be critical of the usage.

### Readability of questions

14. The following points deal with aspects of readability.
  - 14.1 Use simple sentence structures in questions. Wherever possible, use a logical conceptual flow (subject, verb and object) to minimise unnecessary burdens on memory and interpretation. Avoid subordinate clauses: they often disrupt candidates' absorption of information.
  - 14.2 Avoid dense text, superfluous words, clumsy phrases, unnecessary metaphors and redundant information.
  - 14.3 If long sentences are unavoidable, make them as straightforward as possible. They should be simple in structure and accurately punctuated.
  - 14.4 Divide even relatively short sentences if they contain much condensed information.
  - 14.5 Avoid embedding more than one question in a single sentence.
  - 14.6 Avoid the passive wherever possible: it can make sentences unnecessarily impersonal and complex.
  - 14.7 Avoid negative ('not') or partly negative ('only') expressions wherever possible. If a negative is essential to the question, put it in bold typeface to ensure that candidates notice it.
  - 14.8 Separate questions from any associated statements.
  - 14.9 Examiners should avoid questions in which failure to answer an earlier part makes

it impossible to answer later parts successfully, unless the linkage is the focus of assessment. Such 'consequential' errors penalise the candidate repeatedly for the same shortcoming.

- 14.10 Ensure the choice of vocabulary is suitable to the level of the examination and the context. Examiners should take care to ensure that differentiation is based on subject content rather than on the vocabulary used in questions.
- 14.11 Use verbs rather than the related abstract nouns.
- 14.12 Avoid words with multiple meanings. Unless the context leaves no room for uncertainty, candidates can make different, valid decisions as to what is meant.
- 14.13 Use command words consistently and correctly. Use different command words to elicit different kinds of responses, not purely for the sake of variety. A glossary containing some common command words appears at the end of this booklet.

### **Legibility of questions (presentation, layout and rubrics)**

- 15. The following points deals with aspects of legibility. The visual content and impact of a question should support its purpose. Cluttered presentation, like dense text, can impede effective communication.
  - 15.1 Adopt a clear typeface of sufficient size.
  - 15.2 Make consistent and uncluttered use of bold and italic typefaces, underlining, boxes and indentation as reading cues.
  - 15.3 Use headings, sub-headings, bullet points and numbers to ensure questions are well structured and easily managed. Avoid long lines of text closely packed together.
  - 15.4 Use simple rubrics in plain and correct English to make the purpose of the task clear. Avoid superfluous material.
  - 15.5 Where additional resources are used include clear and precise instructions of what candidates are allowed to do, for example make notes.
  - 15.6 Incorporate diagrams, pictures and photographs in questions only when there is a clear purpose or benefit to all candidates.
  - 15.7 Present diagrams, pictures and photographs in familiar form, unless interpretation of novel formats is a focus of assessment. Use sharp contrast, clear definition and sufficient size to allow important information to be identified comfortably.
  - 15.8 Avoid superfluous information in diagrams, pictures and photographs. Where appropriate, label significant features using keys rather than lines and arrows.
  - 15.9 Present graphs with as little background 'noise' as possible. This will help to avoid visual confusion between structural incidentals (such as grids) and significant information.

- 15.10 Present tables in clearly separated columns. Use a typeface of sufficient size and avoid an excess of data.
- 15.11 Avoid using handwritten material unless it is a requirement of the assessment. If such material is essential, consider using a print typeface that simulates handwriting.
- 15.12 Position the text of a question and any supporting material closely together – wherever possible on the same side or double spread. This will help candidates to link related materials efficiently.
- 15.13 Box labels and titles against pale backgrounds. Where possible, match the typeface and the font size to those in associated material.
- 15.14 Provide enough space for candidates to enter information between question parts or on diagrams, where that is required.

### **Mark schemes: design points**

- 16. Mark schemes must be designed to ensure consistent interpretation and application by all examiners. They must show clearly and unequivocally where marks are to be earned.
- 17. Effective mark schemes help ensure that demonstrations of required knowledge, understanding and skills receive fair reward.
- 18. Mark schemes should be sensitive to the diverse ways in which candidates may demonstrate what they know, understand and can do.
- 19. Some multi-part questions may explicitly be designed to test a sequence of logical thought. Generally, though, mark schemes should not permit a failure on one part of a question to make later marks harder to earn.
- 20. Each of the following points considers an aspect of the design of mark schemes. Good design helps to ensure that candidates who possess the required knowledge, skills and understanding receive full recognition for their subject attainments.
  - 20.1 Ensure that the distinctive purposes of each assessment component are fully reflected in the associated mark scheme.
  - 20.2 Check that the mark scheme permits recognition of a variety of appropriate responses.
  - 20.3 Use plain, unambiguous language and clear presentation. Aim to make mark schemes as readable and legible as the tasks to which they relate. There will then be less risk of introducing unintended ambiguity or unnecessary complexity.
  - 20.4 Ensure that marks are awarded for each task in a manner that fully and consistently reflects the agreed interpretation of command words.
- 21. Post hoc reviews of questions and mark schemes based on feedback from candidates and examiners can help to identify access problems and establish how best to avoid them for the future.

22. Mark schemes should be evaluated by experts who have had no previous involvement with the materials.

## Checklist

23. This checklist draws the main guidance together in summary form, to assist examiners as they develop assessment materials and mark schemes.
24. Before signing off any examination paper Examiners are advised to be sure that:
  - 24.1 all text is written in plain, clear and consistent language and is free from ambiguity and hidden expectations.
  - 24.2 no unnecessary material is included that could present barriers to entry for particular groups of candidates.
  - 24.3 the rubrics are clear and readily distinguished from the questions.
  - 24.4 only essential and relevant source material is included.
  - 24.5 all pictorial, tabular and graphic material is presented in a clear, uncluttered and logical way.
  - 24.6 all materials associated with a particular task are closely co-located in a logical manner.
  - 24.7 each item makes a significant contribution to the balance of the overall examination.
  - 24.8 it promotes equality.
  - 24.9 it will not cause offence because of inappropriate subject matter or language.
25. Before signing off any mark scheme Examiners are advised to be sure that:
  - 25.1 all text is readable, legible and valid in relation to the objectives of the assessment component.
  - 25.2 the scheme is clear and can be easily and consistently applied.
  - 25.3 the scheme is fully sensitive to the diverse ways in which candidates can demonstrate their subject attainments and includes an indication of the nature and range of responses likely to be worthy of credit.

## Appendix 1: Command words

The definitions below draw on and simplify the common ground found in available material.

<b>Analyse</b>	Separate information into components and identify their characteristics.
<b>Apply</b>	Put into effect in a recognised way.
<b>Argue</b>	Present a reasoned case.
<b>Assess</b>	Make an informed judgement.
<b>Comment</b>	Present an informed opinion.
<b>Compare</b>	Identify similarities.
<b>Consider</b>	Review and respond to given information.
<b>Contrast</b>	Identify differences.
<b>Criticise</b>	Assess worth against explicit expectations.
<b>Debate</b>	Present different perspectives on an issue.
<b>Deduce</b>	Draw conclusions from information provided.
<b>Define</b>	Specify meaning.
<b>Describe</b>	Set out characteristics.
<b>Discuss</b>	Present salient points.
<b>Estimate</b>	Assign an approximate value.
<b>Evaluate</b>	Judge from available evidence.
<b>Examine</b>	Investigate closely.
<b>Explain</b>	Set out purposes or reasons.
<b>Explore</b>	Investigate without preconceptions.
<b>Identify</b>	Name or otherwise characterise.
<b>Illustrate</b>	Present clarifying examples.
<b>Interpret</b>	Translate information into recognisable form.
<b>Justify</b>	Present a reasoned case.
<b>Outline</b>	Set out main characteristics.
<b>Prove</b>	Demonstrate validity on the basis of evidence.
<b>Relate</b>	Demonstrate interconnections.
<b>Review</b>	Survey information.
<b>State</b>	Express in unequivocal terms.



- Suggest** Present a possible case.
- Summarise** Present principal points without detail.