

Language Modifier

Guidance Examples

Contents

Carrier Language	4
Carrier language in tasks and resources	4
Complex sentences.....	5
Elaborate Language for its own sake	6
Some examiners may argue that “given that” or “fall through” is a subject-specific term that ought to remain.	6
Vocabulary	6
Jargon.....	7
The Passive Voice	8
Subordinate clauses	10
Phrasal verbs	11
Verbs vs Nouns – keep it active	12
Ellipsis	13
The negative.....	14
Difficult word order	16
Multiple meanings.....	18
Idiom.....	18
Confusion caused by metaphor - use literal language	19
Coursework design	20
Clarity of Instructions	21
Appendix 1: The language of modification.....	22
Examination Language.....	22
Bloom’s Taxonomy	22
Other commonly used exam words.....	26
Appendix 2: LM Checklist.....	27
Appendix 3: Glossary of Terms	28

Carrier Language

Carrier language in tasks and resources

Introduction

Carrier language can be defined as the language used by the teacher to set a task or test, rather than that involved in teaching new concepts. There is of course no strict boundary between carrier and other language, and most teaching, learning and assessment situations are a blend of many styles of communication. Carrier language by definition is not the language being assessed (except in those examinations or tests that test the skill of reading), it should therefore be presented in assessments in the most simple format possible to allow all candidates to access the question or task being tested.

Carrier language can be presented in oral, signed or written form, and can have effects on access to learning and the assessment of learners.

For example, deafness can affect a child's linguistic development, both written and spoken. For some deaf learners English may be their second language, with British Sign Language (BSL) their first.

Students with language impairments, including some of those with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), will have verbal (and therefore written) difficulties that affect their acquisition and development of English vocabulary, grammar and syntax. In addition all learners with ASDs have difficulties understanding and using language flexibly and appropriately to fit different contexts. This often means they misunderstand or get confused with ambiguous language, and may express themselves using more rigid or formal language than the situation requires. This will occur in both verbal and written language, and across both social and academic communication. Thus the language used to explain exam protocol may need to be modified as well as the language used within the exam papers.

It is important to make carrier language as accessible as possible for the candidate in assessment, while acknowledging that he or she must be aware of appropriate technical terms.

Many of the examples on the following pages deal with modifications that might be made to carrier language.

Complex sentences

Use short sentences where possible.

Example

The following GCSE Science question is unnecessarily complex:

If a student were provided with three painted metal rods, one of which was known to be made from brass, one from magnetised steel and one from non-magnetised steel, describe how, without scratching the paint, the student could identify each of the rods.

This redraft presents the same information more simply:

A student has three painted metal rods. One is made from brass, one from magnetised steel and one from non-magnetised steel. Describe how the student could find out which rod is which, without scratching the paint.

This could be modified further.

A student has three painted metal rods.

- **one rod is made from brass**
- **one rod is made from magnetised steel**
- **one rod is made from non-magnetised steel**

The student is not allowed to scratch the paint on the rods. Describe how the student could find out what each rod is made of.

Avoid difficult grammatical structures containing multiple parts. Put subordinate clauses into separate points.

Elaborate Language for its own sake

Elaborate phrases may seem to add gravitas. In practice, they often introduce unnecessary complexity.

Example

The phrase “in conjunction with” says no more than the word “with”.

The following question is clumsily expressed:

Given that a stone takes 1.8s to fall through 16m, how long does it take to fall through 25m?

This plainer version uses two sentences and removes empty phrases such as “given that” and “fall through”. It is therefore easier to understand.

A stone takes 1.8s to fall 16m. How long does it take to fall 25m?

Some examiners may argue that “given that” or “fall through” is a subject-specific term that ought to remain.

Vocabulary

The LM should also consider the choice of vocabulary used in questions. Sometimes this can be more elaborate than necessary.

Where it is possible the LM should say:

- **use** rather than *utilise*
- **find** rather than *locate*
- **need** rather than *require*
- **enough** rather than *adequate*
- **with** rather than *in conjunction with*
- **before** rather than *prior to*
- **when** finished rather than *on completion of*
- **in making** rather than *in the production of*

Be aware that the words in italic might be subject-specific; for example “production” is a technical term in Design Technology.

Jargon

The LM might well have to address the use of jargon in questions. Jargon is language that is overused by specific groups of people

Examples

The government spin-doctor said ...

really means

The government spokesperson said ...

blue sky thinking

suggests

grand ideas that might be difficult to put into practice

and

women face a glass ceiling in management

means

women find it difficult to get top managerial jobs

Be careful to distinguish jargon from technical or subject-specific language.

Might this last example be seen as subject-specific in Sociology? You have to make a professional judgement at the time. If you are unsure on whether a word or phrase is subject-specific, it's better not to modify.

The Passive Voice

The passive voice of a verb tells us that:

Something is being done (passive voice)

rather than

Someone is doing something (active voice)

The passive voice can be a difficult structure for some readers to grasp. The passive voice is one of the last syntactic structures to develop and may not be acquired by some learners with language difficulties.

The solution is to change the passive to the active form wherever possible. This can mean that the person carrying out the action becomes more of a focus than the examiner might have wanted: nevertheless it will help weak readers.

It is not always possible to change to the active voice. Consider this:

The body was discovered in the forest

It might have been a person, a group of people or perhaps a dog that discovered the body.

Example of Passive Voice	Active Voice used
	subject - verb - object
The house was sold by an estate agent	An estate agent sold the house
The show was watched by a large audience	A large audience watched the show
The invisible man can't be seen	You can't see the invisible man
Dinner is eaten at 7 o'clock	We eat dinner at 7 o'clock

Examples

A GCSE Science examination contained the following task:

Identify two faults that have been made in the design of the experiment shown, describing in each case how the fault can be corrected.

Some candidates will not grasp that the fault has been made by the person who designed the experiment. Distancing the action of designing the experiment from the task of saying what the fault was can be very misleading.

Use of the active voice, as follows, gives candidates a more direct lead.

**Identify two faults in the design of this experiment.
Describe how to correct each fault.**

Try to sort this one out for yourself:

Built on the Tiber, the city of Rome is full of statues that were created as the likenesses of past emperors.

Subordinate clauses

In English there are three types of sentences: simple, compound and complex.

Sentence Type	The Sentence contains	Example
Simple	A subject and a verb	She grabbed the little boy
Compound	Two or more simple sentences joined together with conjunctions such as “and” or “but”	She grabbed the little boy but spoke gently to him
Complex	A main clause and one or more subordinate clauses	She grabbed the little boy who had run across the road but spoke gently to him The subordinate clause is who had run across the road

Many candidates find complex sentences hard to interpret. To make a text or question easier to read, you can usually separate out the subordinate clauses.

Example

She grabbed the little boy who had run across the road but spoke gently to him.
(complex sentence)

could be written as...

The little boy ran across the road. She grabbed him but spoke gently to him. *(1 simple sentence, 1 compound sentence)*

Phrasal verbs

These are difficult for students with weak language skills to understand. Phrasal verbs rely on combining verbs and prepositions i.e. words which are not obviously linked.

Examples of phrasal verbs include:

cut off

put over

set to

Examples

The school plans to carry out a survey ...

this is better as:

The school plans to do a survey ...

Even though many people would argue that “carry out a survey” is a perfectly normal use of English, it is not always accessible for the kind of candidates who need help from a LM.

He was cut short in mid-sentence

would be clearer as:

He was interrupted

Where possible, the LM should change phrasal verbs to more accessible and direct forms. However, phrasal verbs are often used in everyday English, so it may be difficult to think of a commonly used alternative.

Verbs vs Nouns – keep it active

Consider using verbs rather than the related abstract nouns.

Examples

In which states were slaves set free?

rather than...

In which states were slaves given their freedom?

and...

Pasteur discovered that disease came from microorganisms

rather than...

Pasteur made the discovery that disease came from microorganisms

However, nouns are sometimes more frequently used than the verb equivalent. “Behaviour”, for example, is more frequently used than ‘behave’.

Don’t change nouns in an exam if you think they may be subject-specific words.

Ellipsis

It is quite common for a writer to leave out a word or phrase so as not to repeat it. To most readers repeating something unnecessarily can seem clumsy. Some candidates however, can find it difficult to look back to reconstruct a phrase.

There are three main carbohydrate groups.
Sugar is one of these.
a. Name the other two groups

Ellipsis

Ellipsis

The diagram illustrates ellipsis by showing a text box with three lines of text. Two yellow ovals labeled 'Ellipsis' have arrows pointing to the word 'groups' in the third line and the word 'these' in the second line, indicating that the word 'groups' is repeated unnecessarily.

This is much easier for candidates to understand if it is written in the following way:

There are three main carbohydrate groups.
Sugar is one of these groups.
a. Name the other two carbohydrate groups.

It is also quite common to see examples such as:

Many would argue that...

It is not obvious to everyone that this means...

Many **people** would argue that...

or that...

When checking the cake, you need a large needle

means...

When **you are** checking the cake, you need a large needle

The negative

Although the negative may be a concept that is learned early, it can be missed under the pressure of reading in an examination. It can sometimes be avoided.

One solution may be to phrase the question so that it ends in the word “except”.

Example

Each of the following is a colour except:

- A. Blue
- B. Green
- C. Funny
- D. Orange

Another solution is to give more guidance.

Example

Three of the following are metals .

One is not a metal.

Which one?

- 1. Iron
- 2. Copper
- 3. Carbon
- 4. Lead

The main problem with the negative in a question is that the main subject matter of the question is actually the opposite of the real focus of the question.

More than one negative in a sentence can be very confusing

Example

Without these skills, students are less likely to succeed at college

rather than

With these skills, students are more likely to succeed at college

Try to work this one out for yourself:

Which option would you not take if you did not want to confuse the student by failing to not use the negative?

Examiners often highlight a negative word in bold.

Candidates might still benefit from re-wording.

Example

Explain why the Lake District does **not** have a dry climate.

might be....

Explain why the Lake District has a wet climate.

Be careful: Do not change the emphasis of the question
Do not change subject-specific words

Remember: A candidate who has not noticed a negative is unlikely to ask for modification

Difficult word order

Case 1) *Example*

The following sentence is short, but hard to disentangle:

What kind of cleaning agent will remove the hard-water stains left by a dripping tap on a wash-basin?

The following redraft is simpler because:

- information is separated from the question
- it follows a logical pictorial flow
- the information is written in easier subject-verb-object order

**A dripping tap leaves hard-water stains on a wash-basin.
What kind of cleaning agent will remove these stains?**

Case 2) *Example*

The following question contains a sentence that is short but dense:

**Four-fifths of a Year 11 class of 35 pupils are going on a field trip.
How many pupils will be on the trip?**

It is easier to grasp what is required if the first sentence is divided:

**A Year 11 class has 35 pupils. Four-fifths of them are going on a field trip.
How many pupils will be going on the trip?**

Case 3)

One major cause of this problem is the embedding of more than one question in a sentence. It can be very difficult for language-impaired candidates to extract important information.

Example

A question on environmental issues asked candidates to:

Name one everyday product that can be recycled, identifying the main material that can be recovered from it.

The text contains two questions. Separating them improves clarity.

Name one everyday product that you can recycle.
What material can you recover from the product you have recycled?

Case 4) *Example*

**Figure 3 shows a play item that is part of a child's activity centre, to be used by children aged 1 to 3 years.
State and explain four important safety factors which have to be considered when designing a toy of this kind**

A possible modification is

Figure 3 shows a toy that is part of a child's activity centre. Children aged 1 to 3 years will use this toy.
Designers must think about safety factors when they design a toy like this.
State four important safety factors *and* explain each of these four factors.

Using passives or subordinate clauses in a sentence is likely to affect word order.

Multiple meanings

Avoid words with multiple meanings, unless they are the focus of the assessment. Unless the context leaves no room for uncertainty, candidates can make different, valid decisions as to what is meant.

Examples

Settlement can mean village, agreement or payment
Volume can mean book, loudness or amount of space
Revolution can mean uprising or rotation

Idiom

Idioms are sayings that do not literally mean what they say. The idiom:

over the moon

actually has nothing to do with space travel; it means very happy. Idioms have come into use for a variety of reasons and are difficult to interpret. You either know an idiom or you do not.

English has many examples of idiom. It is quite common to read:

Idiom	Meaning
He was as sick as a dog	really disappointed
She lit up the room	everyone noticed her beauty
It was wide of the mark	not the right answer

These might be perfectly easy for a strong reader to understand. Weaker readers can struggle to make the links between ideas that idioms rely on. In addition, many idioms belong to particular areas of the country. It is unfair to expect a candidate to know such obscure forms of language. Awarding bodies try to avoid using idiomatic language but the LM should still look out for it.

Confusion caused by metaphor - use literal language

Metaphors can mislead. Some groups of candidates may take them literally and misunderstand the question. Avoid them unless they are the focus of the assessment.

Examples

Instead of:

Why did the government frown on the regime?

write...

Why did the government object to the regime?

and

She had the weight of the world on her shoulders

could easily become...

She was very worried

Get rid of unnecessary information (but be sure that it is unnecessary).

Coursework design

Readability and legibility are as important for coursework set within the classroom as they are for examination papers.

Try to design tasks that address assessment objectives precisely, but without unnecessary prescription. Tasks should permit valid alternative modes of information gathering and response.

Ensure that the purpose of each coursework task is clear. People with language difficulties will often answer questions with short answers that may match the question length. If you expect a page or more of written information to answer the question, state that clearly.

It is always a good idea to consult subject specialist staff before making changes to coursework tasks. It is also helpful if subject specialist staff consult the person(s) who works regularly with the learners who will be candidates that require a LM.

Allow for such different methods and modes in the coursework design:

Example

A Business coursework project asked candidates to:

Sample the opinions of employees about a formal training programme. Evaluate their comments and report to the employer on the programme's success.

The wording of the task meant students with hearing or communication difficulties could gather the required information.

Candidates could complete the task validly using a written questionnaire, a computer programme, signing or an interpreter. Further, they could 'report to the employer' using various means of communication without compromising the validity or challenge of the task.

Clarity of Instructions

Make it clear what candidates are allowed to do and any modifications they are allowed e.g. asking for repetition.

Some candidates, such as those with ASDs, often get very anxious if they don't know all the rules. They will not be able to focus on their work if they are worried about doing things incorrectly or feel that the LM is not doing the role they expected.

Example

A GCE History coursework task was unnecessarily specific with regard to the form of product required. It asked candidates to:

Write an account contrasting aspects of working life in Victorian Britain with working life today.

The question was intended to extend access by permitting the accounts to be presented in alternative forms. However, it would be even more inclusive (and simpler) if the task were to begin:

Contrast aspects of working life in Victorian Britain with working life today.

Example

GCE Design and Technology coursework projects require candidates to demonstrate 'design and make' skills. Part of the assessment typically focuses on the skills of modelling, sketching and rendering of design proposals. The design proposals are subsequently realised by candidates using appropriate manufacturing processes and materials.

Familiar terms may need to be rethought as technology provides new ways of performing practical tasks. For example, the assessment of 'making' has traditionally required the activity to be conducted by hand.

Where there is access to appropriate CAD/CAM equipment, though, candidates with limited motor skills may be able to complete valid 'design and make' tasks and receive appropriate recognition. (Again, you would need to refer to the awarding body before suggesting this to a candidate.)

Appendix 1: The language of modification

This appendix contains information that should be useful to a LM who wishes to further develop the skills necessary for re-wording questions.

Much of the information relates to the work of someone who would actually modify the paper. We hope that this information will help the LM to gain a clearer understanding of some of the technical aspects of language that affect the modification of questions.

Examination Language

Not all instructional language used in examinations is the same. There is a clear hierarchy of language that is used when setting questions. This hierarchy must be preserved.

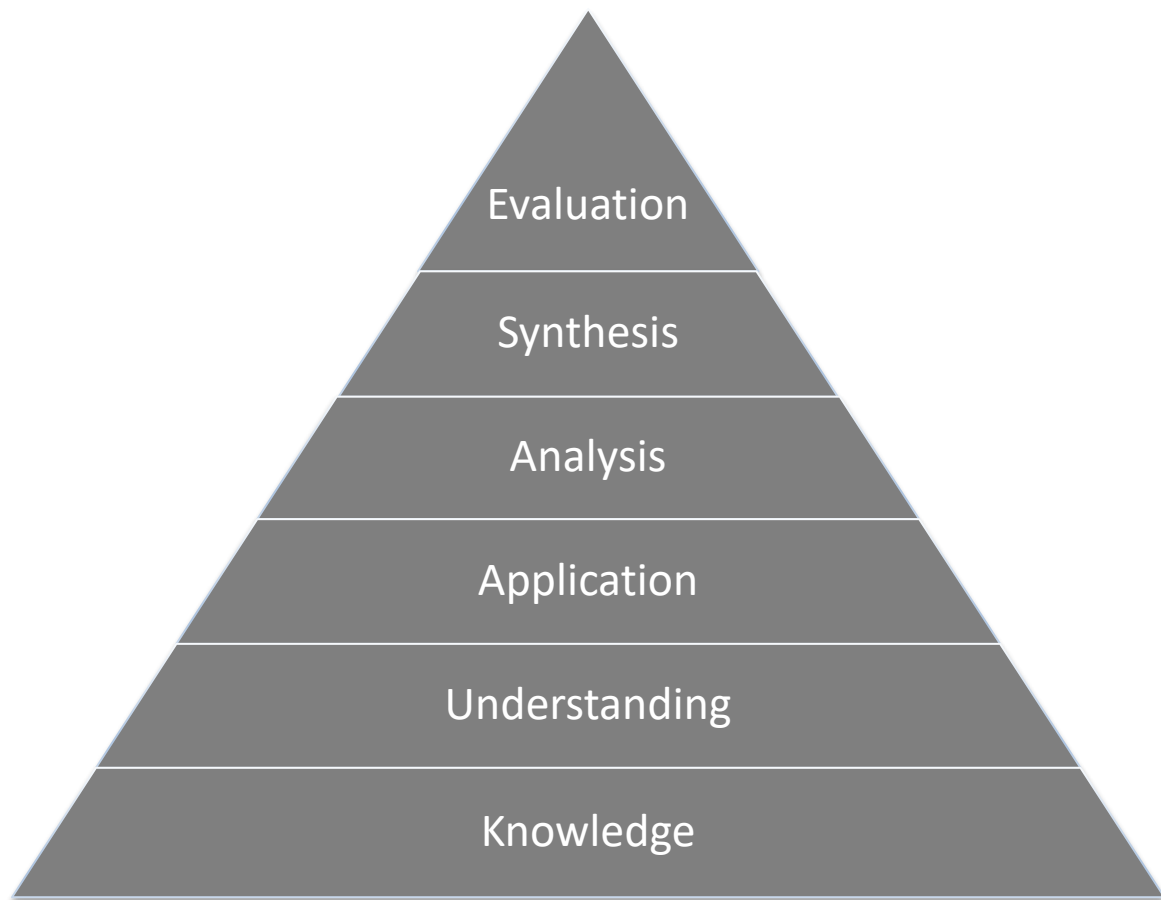
An American educational psychologist called Benjamin Bloom researched this hierarchy of educational objectives and published what is now known as Bloom's Taxonomy in 1956.

Bloom's Taxonomy

There is a hierarchy of instructions from "write down" to "evaluate". Examiners know that choosing certain words makes increasing demands on the candidate. Examiners are careful in choosing the correct instruction word to fit their requirements and the mark scheme. The LM must therefore be very wary of changing these words or the meaning or requirement of the question may be changed. Candidates should be taught the meaning and importance of instructional verbs. Past papers and Awarding Body specifications are useful sources of commonly used commands. It is important that an LM is familiar with this hierarchy of words. A simple version of Bloom's Taxonomy is shown on the next page.

Bloom's Taxonomy		
Level	Domain	Typical words used:
Level 1	Knowledge (Recall)	define, duplicate, label, list, memorise, name, order, recognise, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce, state
Level 2	Comprehension (Understanding)	classify, describe, discuss, explain, express, identify, indicate, locate, recognise, report, restate, review, select, translate
Level 3	Application	apply, choose, demonstrate, dramatise, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, practice, schedule, sketch, solve, use, write
Level 4	Analysis	analyse, appraise, calculate, categorise, compare, contrast, criticise, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test
Level 5	Synthesis	arrange, assemble, collect, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, manage, organise, plan, prepare, propose, set up, write
Level 6	Evaluation	appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose, compare, defend, estimate, judge, predict, rate, select, support, value, evaluate

You might find it easier to think of this as a pyramid. Each higher level builds on the levels below it **BUT** can be independent.



There are also many common examination words, often abstract, which a candidate might find difficult to understand. LMs may find it a problem changing these words in a question. It would therefore help candidates to know at least some of these words.

There may be exceptions. For example:

“how”

is a difficult question word and can sometimes be replaced by

“in what ways”

to make the meaning clearer.

Commonly encountered command words

Command Word	Usual Exam Context	Potential LM Issues
Analyse	Separate information into component parts and identify key characteristics	
Apply	Put into effect in a recognised way	
Argue	Present a reasoned case	Could mean “show defiance”
Assess	Make an informed judgement	
Comment	Present an informed opinion	
Compare	Identify similarities	
Consider	Review and respond to given information	
Contrast	Identify differences	
Criticise	Assess the worth of something against clear expectations	Has negative implications for many candidates
Debate	Present different perspectives on an issue	Not a meaning of the word that candidates are used to
Deduce	Draw conclusions from information provided	
Define	Specify meaning	
Describe	Set out characteristics	
Discuss	Present main relevant points	Can suggest “verbal” presentation of ideas
Estimate	Assign an approximate value	
Evaluate	Judge from available evidence	
Examine	Investigate closely	
Explain	Set out purposes or reasons	
Explore	Investigate something that does not have a definite outcome	Could be confused with physical exploration
Identify	Name or otherwise characterise	
Illustrate	Present clarifying examples	Might suggest drawing something
Interpret	Translate information into recognisable form	ESOL implications could be confusing
Justify	Present a reasoned case	
Outline	Set out main characteristics	
Prove	Demonstrate validity on the basis of evidence	
Relate	Demonstrate connections between ideas	The word is used re counsellors in some schools
Review	Survey information	
State	Express in clear terms	Has more than one meaning
Summarise	Present principal points without detail	

Other commonly used exam words

accurate	chart	disadvantage	include	precautions	style
advantage	comparison	drawback	increase	present	subject
affect	composition	effect	inform	prevent	survey
amount	consequence	essential	label	principle	table
approximate	contrast	estimate	lack	properties	task
attitude	convey	expand	maximum	purpose	term
benefit	criteria	extract	memorable	qualities	text
briefly	data	factors	method	quantity	theme
calculate	define	features	minimum	refer	
cause	details	fully	necessary	requirements	
challenging	develop	function	needs	response	
characters	devices	initial	other than	similar	
characteristics	diagram	insert	passage	source	

Notice that many words in this list have more than one meaning.

The above lists contain many of the words that are used in an examination context. The lists are not exhaustive. LMs should make their own lists, using past papers to make them relevant to a particular subject.

Appendix 2: LM Checklist

Keep the meaning of the question
Do not alter the weighting of the question If the question is worth 3 marks then that mark allocation is fixed – the LM must not give the impression that the question is worth more or fewer marks The LM must also ensure that a more complex question receives the attention that the examiner intended – the marks allocated to the question will indicate this
Do not change or introduce question numbers/letters - Question 3 must stay as Question 3
Do not change subject specific / technical language or source material
Be very wary about changing command words to keep the examiner's intentions
Separate multiple questions
Separate background information from the question
Use simple sentences: Subject – verb – object Clear pictorial progression
Use short sentences where possible
Avoid difficult grammatical structures such as: - Subordinate clauses - Passive voice - Phrasal verbs - Ellipsis
Avoid - Double meaning - Idiom - Jargon - Metaphor

Appendix 3: Glossary of Terms

Carrier Language

The language used by the teacher to set a task or test, rather than that involved in teaching new concepts.

Instructional language / command words and phrases

The language used on exam papers, in coursework tasks etc. to tell the candidate what to do (e.g. “describe”, “explain”).

Rubric

The instructions from the awarding body that tell the candidate how to approach the paper. One of the most common – and most easily avoided – mistakes that a candidate can make is to infringe the rubric of the examination.

Example

Answer one question from Section A and one question from Section B

Sometimes candidates have answered all of the questions on the paper. Choices such as this should be explained to the candidate before the examination. Past papers are a useful source of practice material (though the LM should check with subject staff and/ or the awarding body to see that requirements are still current).

Source Material

Many examination papers make use of a booklet of source or stimulus material (inserts, leaflets, maps etc). Some candidates may be confused by such material if they are not made familiar with it before the examination.

Stem

Usually the opening part of the question. For multiple choice questions candidates are usually given a stem and four options. Candidates should be aware of such constructions and looking at questions that involve a stem followed by options could form part of the teaching programme. A LM should not, in general, modify the options as there are sometimes only slight differences between them.

Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors

University of Hertfordshire

The School of Education

Hatfield

AL10 9AB

www.ciea.org.uk