

Guidance on Short-Answer Question Writing for the ECVPH

This document is designed to support diplomates across the European College of Veterinary Public Health (ECVPH) in improving the quality of the short answer questions (SAQs) used for the ECVPH qualifying examinations. It provides a brief overview of the SAQ format that will be adopted, including basic rules for writing SAQ. This guidance is adapted from "[A Guide to Assessment in Veterinary Medicine](#)", and "[ABC of learning and teaching in Medicine: Written assessment](#)".

SAQs are generally questions that require students to construct a response rather than choose from a list of options (as in multiple-choice questions-MCQs). SAQs require a concise and focused response that may be factual, interpretive or a combination of the two.

SAQs are often used to test material which may be difficult to test using MCQs, such as questions involving an explanation (e.g., explain why X is important for the control of Y disease).

SAQ format

- They can have a lead-in, which often includes a **context or vignette** (e.g., a clinical case presentation), followed by either **one question** or **multiple questions**.
- A SAQ can also include **data or graphs** requiring the students to interpret, apply and analyse.
- It should be clearly indicated how the marks are allocated to each question.
- A model answer should be provided indicating where the marks are allocated.

Example 1.

QUESTION: Describe ten main differences between a screening and a confirmatory diagnostic test (1 mark per answer, up to 5 marks maximum for the screening test and up to 5 marks maximum for confirmatory test).

MODEL ANSWER

Screening test

- Presumptive identification of unrecognised disease in apparently healthy populations (1 mark)
- Assumes a healthy population (1 mark)
- Has high sensitivity (1 mark)
- Rules out disease (1 mark)
- Has a low false negative rate (1 mark)

Confirmatory test

- Distinguishes between animals that have the disease and those that have other diseases on your differential list (1 mark)
- Assumes a diseased population (1 mark)
- Has high specificity (1 mark)
- Rules in disease (1 mark)
- Has a low false positive rate (1 mark)

Basic rules for writing SAQs

1. Each question should focus on an **important concept or testing point** and not trivial facts.
2. Short answer questions are usually allocated **ten minutes per question**.
3. Questions are **marked out of ten**.
4. Questions should aim to assess a combination of **application of knowledge** and **recall of core knowledge**.
5. **Recall of facts** using SAQs is important and can be done but **should not be overused**.
6. Express the questions with **clear wordings and language** that are appropriate to the Resident population.
7. **Avoid indeterminate, vague questions** that are open to numerous and/or subjective interpretations.
8. Select verbs that match the intended learning outcome and direct students in their thinking. Some **useful verbs** to use when writing SAQs include “outline”, “briefly describe”, or “briefly explain”; and “state”, “list”, or “name” when very brief answers are expected.
9. **Avoid the use of “you” or “your”** in the question (e.g. “What would be your first choice diagnostic test in this case?” could be rephrased as “What is the first choice diagnostic test for this case?”). The examinee’s opinion may not be the correct answer.
10. **Review** the question using the following questions:
 - Does the question **align** with the learning outcome/s?
 - Is the **focus** of the question clear?
 - Is the **scope** specific and clear enough for students to be able to answer in the time allocated?
 - Is there enough **direction** to guide the student to the expected response?