



Education Commission
of the States



Frequently Asked Questions

Items and Rating Scales

What is a multiple choice knowledge item? A multiple choice attitudinal item?

The *multiple choice items*, which make up the bulk of this assessment, are questions that contain four possible choices for responses. More specifically, in a *multiple choice knowledge item*, one of these answers is correct while the other three act as incorrect choices. These items are found in the Content Knowledge and Civic Thinking Skills sections. On the other hand, *multiple choice attitudinal items* have no one correct answer. These items are used in measuring Participatory Skills, Dispositions, and School Climate.

What is the difference between an item and a composite scale?

An *item* is a single question, while a *composite scale* is made up of several questions. Items will be scored in different ways depending on the type of question being asked. To form a score for a scale measuring a disposition, average the scores on each individual item within the scale. In a few scales an item or items may be reversed (because they are negatively stated). To form a score for a set of knowledge items, count the number of correct answers.

What are the advantages of using composite scales to measure self-assessments of skills and dispositions?

The composite scales presented here have several advantages over individual items. Notably, having more than one item to measure an outcome enables you to measure a concept from different perspectives, since each item in the scale relates to the concept in a slightly different way. For example, a scale may include several questions related to students being free to discuss controversial topics and make up their own mind over issues, which together measure the openness of classroom climate for discussion. Additionally, each scale presented here has been statistically tested (usually by its original developer) to ensure the items it contains go together to measure the same concept.

What does the term “validity” refer to? What about “reliability”?

The term *validity* refers to whether an instrument is able to accurately measure the particular concept it is designed for. The term *reliability* refers to how consistently the instrument is able to yield the same results when used in different situations. The items and scales presented here have been tested both for reliability and validity by their original developers, which help to ensure consistent measurement of the specific concepts that they are designed to measure.

What is an *alpha*, and why is it reported with the scales?



Cronbach's alpha is a measure of a composite scale's reliability. It reports how well the items in the composite go together to measure a common concept. High alphas indicate the items in a scale are related to the same underlying concept.

Do I have to use all the items presented in a scale?

The statistical tests performed on the composite scales to ensure quality were in most cases performed with the sets of items as listed. Therefore, users are strongly encouraged to take these scales in their entirety.

Can I form my own scales from different items?

If you are using knowledge or skills items with correct answers, you may make your own groupings of items. If you are using composite measures with rating scales, you should use all the items listed for that composite.

How to adapt and change items

How can I adapt an item to better fit with my school/district's curriculum?

Some possible ways to adapt items to better fit into a particular curriculum include:

- Changing the class subject listed in the item to the one responsible for teaching civics content (e.g., change "civics class" to "government class" or "social studies class").
- Changing a few words to correspond to usage in the district's curriculum or school setting (e.g., change "school councils" to "student government" or change "city park" to "local recreation area").
- Remember that these questions are intended to be useful with a variety of school programs and curricula. Check to make sure the assessment items used match closely the competencies that your students are developing.

How can I most effectively create a test from these items?

Some keys to effectively creating a test from these items include:

- Keep in mind our suggestions for the suitability of items for different grade levels, but also that items suitable for grades 6-8 will often be equally appropriate for grades 9-10 or even 11-12.
- Use several items from each of the content areas that you are interested in assessing.
- Include items relating to both content knowledge and civic thinking skills.
- Begin a test with a few of the items that seem easier.
- Use composite scales in their entirety, if they are appropriate for the test.

In addition, teachers are encouraged to use the school climate assessment instrument to help gain a better understanding of the context of their students' civic development.

Will there be new versions of this database?

New items will be added to the database as they are found and screened by the advisory committee. In particular, NCLC staff and advisors hope to fill gaps in skills and dispositions items, in items for the lower grades and in extended-response or performance-assessment rubrics.



Do I need permission to use these assessment instruments?

Because all items have been released from their primary sources (many of them on Web pages), gaining permission for use is not required. It should be possible for a teacher to use the items as part of a test within the school context without special parent permission (just as parent permission would not be sought to give a test that the teacher thought appropriate to cover the subject matter taught). Teachers, however, may need to seek parent permission if surveying students on their civic dispositions or opinions of their school climate. If one is using these items in University-based research where the data are analyzed and reported outside the school, be aware of the need to contact the Institutional Review Board of the University for approval and to ascertain what form of parent permission may be required.

What if this database does not have what I am looking for?

The goal is to continually improve this database, but it has been limited by the existing pools of items. Please send your suggestions to Jennifer Piscatelli (ECS/NCLC) at 303.299.3608 or jpiscatelli@ecs.org. The links available on this Web page also may be helpful for additional assessment instruments.

Can I change and rewrite items in the database?

Making small changes (such as grammar or adding specificity for your purposes) will not significantly change the test item. Be aware that making significant changes to one of the incorrect choices in an item with a correct answer will change the difficulty level of the item.

How do I reference the scales and items that I choose to use?

The sources of the items and scales should be cited. Sources are identified for each item and scale, and more detailed information about each source can be found below.

What if I still have questions?

Contact Jennifer Piscatelli (ECS/NCLC) at 303.299.3608 or jpiscatelli@ecs.org.

