



NBME Medicine Clinical Science Subject Examination Short-Answer Question (SAQ)

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the short answer question format?

A: Students are presented with a vignette. Instead of being given a list of options from which to choose an answer, the patient information will be followed by a question such as “What is the most likely diagnosis?” The answer must be typed into the response field; there is a 60-character limit allowed in the response field. See the [tutorial page](#) for additional information.

Q: Will the number of questions remain the same?

A: The total exam length will remain at 110 questions.

Q: You mentioned in the announcement that instructions for the short-answer items will be incorporated into the existing tutorial section. Since students quickly click through the tutorial section, how will they know to review this section thoroughly?

A: Students will receive information about the item type in the tutorial. For all exams, students should review the tutorial. For your students’ reference, please feel free to provide a copy of the [tutorial page](#).

Q: Where will they appear? Will these questions be randomly placed within the exam or will they be sequenced so they appear at the end of the exam?

A: The questions will be randomly placed within the exam.

Q: Are the Medicine subject exam scores issued before the SAQs comparable with the scores based on forms with SAQs?

A: Yes, the equating process adjusts for any differences in difficulty between forms with and without SAQs.

Q: Will students receive any additional time if the short-answer questions are incorporated into their exam?

A: No additional time will be given for the short-answer question format. A pilot was conducted last fall and the results indicated that participating students did not require additional time.

Q: Will the short-answer questions be incorporated into the student’s final score or are these being pilot tested?

A: Some questions are included on the exam that are not scored. We do not identify which questions are scored and which questions are not scored. All questions that are scored are worth 1 point. If a question is not scored, it does not contribute any points towards the total score.

Q: Should medical school faculty grade their students differently on the Medicine subject exam before and after SAQs are introduced?

A: No, grading is not affected. The equating process adjusts for any differences in difficulty between forms with and without SAQs.

Q: Does NBME plan to include short-answer question items on additional clinical science subject exams?

A: Currently, we do not plan to include short-answer question items on other subject exams. However, NBME reserves the right to include new items formats on any subject examinations as we strive for innovation and the advancement of products and services to meet the needs of medical education.

Q: I have heard that free-text response questions are less reliable than Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ). Why has the NBME decided to pursue SAQs?

A: SAQs require constructed responses with a limited number of words. Research shows that SAQ items requiring very short free-text responses can be as reliable as MCQs. Therefore, SAQs can be scored in an objective way. This objectivity of scoring leads to consistent results. SAQs have an added advantage of eliminating any possibility of answering correctly purely by chance.

Cited from <https://www.macpeds.com/documents/GuidelinesforDevelopmentSAQRoyalCollege.pdf>.

Using an SAQ version of the same question helps assess the validity of scores (removing any cue to answer items correctly). Consequently, SAQ assessments may result in increased validity because this item format requires active generation of a response rather than recall based on a fixed number of pre-specified options.

Cited from <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/josotl/article/view/19106/27131>)