

TEST-TAKING PROBLEMS

Difficulty taking tests in nursing school generally falls into one or more of three categories: anxiety, test-taking skills, or preparation.

Anxiety

Some anxiety can heighten mental acuity. A moderate level of anxiety has been found to be helpful in test taking by making you more mentally alert and in a state of readiness for the testing situation. More extreme levels of anxiety can be paralyzing. Knowing the source of your anxiety may help you conquer it.

Poor Test-Taking Skills

As noted earlier, nursing students can be divided into two groups of learners. Each style of learning leads to different mistakes in interpreting test questions.

The 70% of nursing students, who have a sensing preference, like to learn in a step-by-step manner. They do a good job of learning the facts from the textbook and classroom presentations. Multiple choice test items that test for application, analysis, or synthesis are asking the student to translate these facts into a slightly different cognitive situation. The sensing student often "knows" the information required to answer the question, but "reads additional information into" the question or misinterprets the information that is there.

The remaining nursing students have a preference for intuitive learning or learning that starts with a general principle and then attaches supporting information or facts to the principle. The facts are remembered because they relate to the principle. These students often miss test questions because they failed to learn all the facts related to the principle or overlooked a fact in a test item. The intuitive learner is more likely to miss an important fact or piece of information in the question that would change the answer. The techniques that you find helpful may depend on your style.

All of us are capable of using sensing and intuition and do so on a daily basis. We may have a preference for one over the other and therefore have developed the use of the style that we prefer. For that reason students may make a combination of mistakes in test taking. As you read the suggestions given below, choose to use only those that apply to you.

Preparation

Nothing can substitute for adequate preparation. Schedule your study time well in advance of the test. Learning should take place before you sit down to study for the test. Studying for a test should be reviewing the material and formulating applications of the material to the clinical setting.

Form a study group. The study group will be most effective if it includes both learning styles. You can learn from each other. One style will insist on vigorous memory work exercises. Drill and practice routines will help the information to be readily available for recall during the exam. The second style will insist that the group understand the information and view it as part of a bigger picture; that is, there is a reason for knowing the information.

To have a successful study group both styles of learning need to respect the contribution of the other, so they can benefit by learning and applying the methods of the opposite style. It can be

helpful but not necessary to know your learning style and that of the group members. When you are in a conflict over how to study, often it will be because of the conflict between styles. The thing to do is stop and make an agreement to spend some time with both styles of studying. (It will pay off.)

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR TEST TAKING

Immediately Before the Test

Sleep well. Get to bed at your usual time and get your usual amount of sleep. Your body and mind will function best when your circadian rhythms are synchronized with your need for activity.

Do not take mind-altering drugs. This is not the time to start a new antidepressant, borrow a Valium from your neighbor, or try a different antihistamine. Any of these drugs can make you drowsy or produce a feeling of jitteriness. Do not believe anyone who tells you that you can learn more by relaxing with any drug whether it be prescription or street drugs.

Eat well. You should not have a heavy meal right before the test, but you should eat a balanced meal that will maintain your energy level throughout the test. Some sources recommend a high-carbohydrate, low-fat meal.

Avoid negative people. If you have a friend who gets test anxiety, don't spend time with him or her right before the test. Anxiety can be caught. Have confidence that you have studied well and know the material, and the test can be fun. One test does not generally make or break the academic career of a student.

During the Test

Pace yourself. Teachers generally allow a minute to a minute and a half for a multiple-choice question. You can actually read and answer the question in about half that time. Plan to leave yourself some time at the end to review the questions where you were not certain of the answers.

Answer all of the questions. Teachers usually do not give a penalty for guessing as some standardized tests do. With four possible answers, you have a 25% chance of getting the right answer by random guessing. You can often increase that to 50% by intelligent guessing.

Read each question carefully.

Read it a second time.

Read all the options.

Read them a second time.

You want to be concentrating while you read. Don't let your mind jump ahead to the answers. Intuitive learners are less likely to read the questions carefully. They get an overview of it and

make a leap to the answers, missing some detail that made a difference. When students leave the test 20-30 minutes into the examination period, they are usually intuitive learners. Just a little more care in reading can make a difference.

Do not "compulse." Do not "read into" (add information) questions. Avoid asking "what if?" The correct answer is based only on the information given not the client you had yesterday at the hospital, or the example given in class. Use only the information that is presented to you in the question. Usually the students who need this advice are sensing learners, and they are the last to leave the room. That's OK when they are using their time well.

Sensing learners also need some practice in using intuition on a test. If you don't find the answer, then mentally step back from the question and try to get an overall sense of the question. This exercise may help you see what principle is being tested.

Note key words. Two answers may be correct, but one is a better answer for some reason. The reason is often simpler than you think: logical, obvious, or even common sense.

Key words in the question may help you distinguish between two apparently correct answers.

"Most important"—This phrase is asking you to establish a priority of some kind. Often that priority is safety. For example, if the question asks which step of the procedure is most important, the answer is probably one that if you leave it out the situation is not safe for the client.

"Best"—You may be able to substitute another phrase for best. For example, if the question asks "Which is the best definition?" you might substitute "Which is the most complete definition?" or "Which reflects the philosophy of nursing?" "Best" might also be asking you to establish a priority for care.

"Except"; "Not true"—Many teachers try to avoid these kinds of questions, but you will probably find a few on any test. If more than one answer seems correct, go back and make sure you did not miss one of these words.

Be Sure You Realize What Is Being Asked Students sometimes make difficult questions out of easy ones. For example, if the question asks which is a *preventive* health measure, there may be four nursing measures that are correct for the situation, but only one is a preventive measure.

General Hints. Some questions are factual, with only one correct answer. It is easy to get overly involved with test-taking skills and try to make a "trick" question out of a straightforward question.

If you can narrow the options down to two, go with your "gut" response. You have a 50% chance of guessing the right answer at this point.

Sometimes you read the question and know the right answer. You read the answers, and the "right" answer is not there. Think about the question in a different way (called reframing) and choose the best response that is there.

Accept unanswered questions. Move on. Getting upset will cause you to lose your concentration. You can come back when you have finished the test, and the answer may seem obvious at that time.

Do not get angry at questions. There is a way to answer the question, based on the information given. Getting angry will not help you see the answer.

There are no questions designed to "trick" students. You will not believe that, but it is true. Nursing teachers are nice people who want you to be successful. The questions are designed to test your ability to think and apply the information.

Do not "yes, but" the questions. That's what I mean by reading into questions. Saying "yes, but if the client ... then.... " is a particular temptation for students who have really studied and know more than is on the test.

Sometimes a "true-false technique" will help. Treat each response as a true-false question. You can often eliminate some responses.

Establishing Priorities. Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be useful in establishing priorities. Physiological needs are the bottom line, followed by safety on the next level.

The ABC's of cardiopulmonary resuscitation prioritize the physiological needs. Airway, Breathing, Circulation. The function of the other vital organs would come next. Nutrition and gastrointestinal problems would be low on the list when it comes to sustaining life.

Ordering Activities. The steps of the nursing process are assess, plan, implement, and evaluate, in that order.