

Test-Taking 101

Center for Academic Success
School of Nursing - UMDNJ

I. before

A. prepare mentally using your...

1. SYLLABUS

- a. number of exams in the course
- b. where and when they take place... add them to your calendar, planner, etc. at the start of the semester
- c. how much each exam counts towards the overall grade
- d. general description of material covered by each exam
- e. how many questions and what format (multiple choice, etc.)

2. INSTRUCTOR

- a. specifically what material will be emphasized on the exam... they may not tell you, but it can't hurt to ask
- b. who writes the questions, especially for team-taught courses, classes with guest speakers, etc.
- c. instructor's area of specialization, interest, or research
- d. When instructors dwell on a topic, repeat things, or hint that something is particularly important, take the hint and star, underline, or highlight that thing in your notes and/or book.

3. CLASSMATES

- a. Talk with a friend/mentor/tutor who has taken the course already... ask how to prepare, what stands out in their memory about that course's or instructor's exams, helpful tips, etc.

4. AVAILABLE REVIEW RESOURCES

- a. Consider buying comprehensive NCLEX review books... use the sample questions broken down by topic/content.
- b. NCLEX review card decks are great for studying on the go... use them on the train or bus, while waiting in lines, etc.
- c. Use NCLEX review questions to see how instructors may ask about certain topics, to practice answering types of questions you may be asked, and to tip you off to content areas you missed or forgot to review.
- d. If possible, review past years' tests.
- e. Form or join a study group and quiz each other using practice questions.

**** further information on studying/study groups, stress/anxiety, and time management is available in the Center for Academic Support Services, 1124 Bergen Building

B. prepare physically

1. SLEEP

- a. As often as possible, stick to a routine that includes healthy amounts of nightly sleep (6-8 hours.)
- b. A full night's sleep the night before a test results in higher grades than pulling an all-nighter... exhausted brains are slow and unreliable.
- c. Know when it's time to close the book and your eyes.

2. EXERCISE

- a. A workout is a GREAT stress reliever.
- b. Increased blood flow feeds oxygen to your brain.
- c. Exercise helps promote deep, restful sleep (but not when done right before bed.)
- d. If pressed for time, kill 2 birds with 1 stone... study while on an exercise bike, treadmill, elliptical, etc.

3. NECESSARY SUPPLIES

- a. Get your things prepped the night before the test... doing anything last-minute creates extra anxiety.
- b. Pack #2 pencils, snack, drink, watch, sweatshirt if exam room gets too cold, ear plugs if noise distracts you, etc.
- c. Gas up the car or find tokens/change/train passes the day before... one less thing to worry about on test day.

4. RELAX

- a. Take a well-deserved break, even if just for 15 minutes.
- b. Relaxation serves to promote general well-being (physical and mental) and lowers stress.
- c. Take a walk outside, watch your favorite TV show, share a meal with friends, hang out with your kids, take a bubblebath, etc.

5. EXAM DAY

- a. Eat a healthy meal a couple of hours before the exam.. if anxiety has killed your appetite, at least try a sports electrolyte-replacement drink.
- b. Get to the room 10-15 minutes early to pick the test-taking seat YOU prefer (aisle, front, away from the door, near the vent, etc.)
- c. Remind yourself that a small amount of anxiety is actually a good thing.. it helps you focus and keeps you motivated (if your tension is distracting or overwhelming, please visit the CASS office.. we're happy to help or direct you to help.)
- d. Think positively.. if you've done everything necessary to prepare, this is your opportunity to demonstrate that fact by doing your very best.

II. during

1. ANATOMY OF A TEST QUESTION

- a. A multiple-choice question has 3 main parts: background statement, stem, and list of options.
- b. The background statement is a brief scenario that describes the case: "Mrs. Green arrived at the hospital in early labor." The background statement does not always provide information essential to answering the question. It may be included to determine how effectively you can sort through data and select pertinent information.
- c. Other background statements are critical to answering questions correctly, so you must discriminate essential from nonessential information: "Mrs. Green, aged 41, at term and diabetic, arrived at the hospital in early labor."
- d. The stem contains the specific problem or intent, and can be presented in the form of a question or an incomplete statement:

"Which of following assessment data should the nurse obtain upon admission?" OR

"The assessment data that the nurse should gather includes:"

- e. The options are a list of possible answers to the question, or solution to the problem. There is one correct response, and the other 3 are distracters.
- f. In answering the test question you will select the option that BEST completes the question or statement.

2. WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, READ THE DIRECTIONS

- a. You would be surprised how often valuable information is missed including opportunities to earn bonus points, key words, etc.
- b. If something on the test is not clear, ask the proctor/instructor. The worst thing they can say is "I'm sorry, I can't tell you that."

3. BLOCK OUT DISTRACTIONS

- a. Resist the urge to look up and around... it wastes time and could be mistaken by proctors as "wandering eyes." If necessary, sit away from the window or in the front row.
- b. If noises (chairs scraping, cars outside, air conditioners, coughing) bother you, get permission from the proctor to wear earplugs. They're cheap, easy, and can raise your test score! (Trust me, I've seen it happen!)
- c. Don't bother keeping track of who finished the test when... it is not a race and there is nothing wrong with using every single minute you're given.

4. LEAVE YOUR MARK

- a. After getting permission from your proctor, feel free to write on the test. Use margins and backs of pages for "notes to self," acronyms, tables, diagrams, math problems, or anything you're worried you'll forget.
- b. Circle or underline key words such as MOST, BEST, FIRST, EXCEPT, NOT, etc.
- c. Cross out excess information in the background statement and stem that may be confusing and/or unnecessary.

5. TIMING IS EVERYTHING

- a. Knowing how many questions there are and how much time you have, you also know how much time you can spend on each question... usually not more than 1-1.5 minutes.
- b. Start by skimming the test and answering the easy questions (the ones you KNOW that you know.) Circle the ones you'll come back to. This builds confidence, leaves time to concentrate on tougher questions, and you never know... sometimes answers to previous questions are actually contained in later ones (and vice versa.) Just make sure you skip spaces on the answer sheet when you skip questions on the test!
- c. Go through the test a second time and make educated guesses on the tougher ones using a process of elimination, keeping in mind the limited time you have.

6. THE ELIMINATION ROUND

- a. When you read a question, try to answer it mentally first without looking at the options. Then, read ALL the options and see if your choice is among the list. If it's there and you're sure, answer it and move on. Don't waste time second-guessing yourself.
- b. If the answer does not become immediately clear, literally cross out any answers that are bizarre, inappropriate, and definitely wrong. This increases your chances and narrows down your options.
- c. Watch out for options that contradict basic nursing knowledge. Keep in mind key elements of the nursing process and role, patient needs/rights, communication, etc. You're taking a test made for nurses by nurses, so think like a nurse!
- d. Watch out for options that contain ABSOLUTES (all, always, never)... these answers are seldom correct.
- e. Watch out for PRIORITY words (initial, first, essential)... recall the ABC's and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.
- f. Watch out for NEGATIVE words or prefixes (except, not, un/in), especially in the stem ... these force you to find the answer that is NOT correct, so cross out answers that ARE correct.
- g. Watch out for "none of the above" or "all of the above" options... choosing ONE of the correct options will not get you credit.
- h. Watch out for answers that you've NEVER heard of... chances are it's there to distract you.

7. IF YOU'RE STILL NOT SURE

- a. Do NOT look for a pattern in the answers... a thought like "5 B's in a row... I must be wrong" is counterproductive.
- b. Words from the stem are often repeated in the correct option.
- c. If 2 or 3 options say the same thing with different words, none can be correct (unless the 4th choice is "all of the above.")
- d. When there may be more than one correct answer, look for umbrella options (one answer contains the others) because the most inclusive option is generally your best bet.
- e. When two answers are opposite such as high blood pressure and low blood pressure, or right side and left side, the answer is usually one of the two.

8. IF YOU ABSOLUTELY MUST GUESS

- a. Correct answers are most often an average length... not the longest or the shortest.
- b. Correct answers are most likely to be in the B position... I repeat: this is only if you MUST guess.
- c. If an answer is VERY different from the others, it is probably not correct because that would be too obvious.

9. THE TOP 3 RULES TO TAKING A MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST

- a. Answer the question as written... be careful not to mentally edit it, read too much into it, or over-analyze. Don't assume any information that is not given.
- b. Never EVER change your answer unless you are absolutely, positively, 150% sure that you made a mistake. Your first instinct is almost always correct, and you'll end up kicking yourself for changing it to an incorrect one. If you have to, leave the eraser at home!
- c. Assuming you finish with extra time, finish the test by reviewing your work.

III. after

1. DECOMPRESSION

- a. Do not bother dwelling on "what ifs" and "maybe I should have"... your time is too valuable and what's done is done. If you have regrets or doubts, use them to improve your performance on future tests (see ANALYSIS section below.) Do not punish yourself; learn from it instead.
- b. Reward yourself for surviving yet another test... you deserve it! (Just make sure your celebration is a healthy, relaxing one.)

2. ANALYSIS

- a. Ask yourself productive questions such as: What should I have studied more? How was my recall? What didn't I expect? What did I do right? Was I prepared enough?
- b. Use the test analysis below to identify your individual testing patterns. If you're still concerned about your testing results no matter what you've tried, speak with the CASS office, your instructor, or your advisor ASAP for specific assistance.

Test Analysis Worksheet

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Directions: Review each incorrect answer. Make a mark under all categories that account for the error. Look for patterns in your testing difficulties. Make appropriate corrections in your thinking and/or preparation. See the CASS office for additional assistance.

1. Didn't know or remember information

Where would information have been found

Notes

Text

Handouts

2. Changed my mind and answer

3. Careless mistake (filled in wrong bubble, did not read all answers, etc.)

4. Missed a key word or instruction (least, not, except, all, etc.)

5. Vocabulary difficulties

6. Excessive test anxiety / inability to focus

7. Difference of opinion with instructor about question

8. Difficulty choosing between 2 answers

9. Conflicting information between book, lecture, etc.

10. Read into question

11. Other