

Test Taking 101

Nursing is very different from many courses of study. The primary difference is that not only are you required to remember, you will be required to understand virtually everything from your basic nursing courses. Each course builds on the others and every day you are in the clinical area you apply what you have learned. Testing in nursing courses is designed to measure your ability to understand and apply knowledge that has been acquired.

Nursing exams are intended to evoke the use of critical thinking and decision making skills. In the clinical area, there is seldom one clearly right answer out of the choices of action that are possible—but there is a best answer. Nursing exams are all about application and choosing the BEST answer. Some tips for test taking:

- Manage your anxiety – Most of us have some anxiety when taking tests, but some students allow their anxiety to overwhelm them. Obviously being prepared will reduce anxiety, but there are some other things that will help. One of the most important is getting enough rest. Cramming the night before is not going to help on a nursing exam, but getting rest is. Allow yourself enough time to not be running late. Learn some methods for relaxation and try taking relaxing breaths and concentrating on positive thoughts before the exam begins.
- Read the directions carefully – Often, students realize after receiving their tests back that they have missed a question because they did not read carefully or misunderstood what was being asked.
- Read the question carefully – Ask yourself, “What is being asked?” Do not read into a question something that is not there. Do not think about the one example that you know of clinically that may or may not be typical.
- Eliminate implausible answers – Watch for absolutes and qualifiers. Answers that say “always,” “all” or “never” are usually not correct.
- Read the case studies thoroughly – Questions are often based on case studies. More than one question may apply to the same case study. Be sure that you have carefully read the case study and understand it before answering questions.
- Scantrons – Be careful marking your answers on the scantron. Be sure that you are marking the correct number on the scantron. It is the final answer and if you have made an error in marking it could mean a number of questions are marked wrong. If you have erased on the scantron, tell your instructor so they can initial them. Occasionally the scantron machine picks up erasures and marks a correct answer wrong. If it has not been initialed by the instructor it is unclear what has happened.
- Multiple multiples – Students often refer to multiple choice questions that have more than one correct answer as “multiple multiples.” Again these questions reflect clinical practice. Often times in the clinical setting when we set priorities and make a decision about what needs to be done for a patient, there are several things that needs to be done simultaneously. The multiple multiple questions reflect this reality. Questions similar to these are also included on the N-CLEX exam. That is why they are included in tests in nursing school: to help you prepare both for N-CLEX and for clinical realities.
 - The following are some suggestions for doing your best on multiple multiples.

- Read each possible answer separately and decide if it is correct or not, circle the answer and move on to the next possible answer. After you have done this with each possible answer, go back and read the question again, read each answer you have selected looking to be sure that one answer does not negate a previous answer and that it all makes clinical sense.
 - Know that it is possible that there is only one correct answer, even when the question says mark ALL of the correct answers. It is also possible that all the answers are correct.
- Don't change answer erratically – Often when students are given an opportunity to review a question they missed they realize that they had it right, but changed it to the wrong answer. If you finish early, look over your test and ensure that your Scantron is marked correctly. If you have clearly misread the question or know the answer to a question you did not know before, change your answer. Otherwise, DO NOT CHANGE ANSWERS. Most of the time, it is more likely that your first answer is correct.
 - Go over your test – If you did not do well on an exam, make an appointment with your instructor and go over the test. This is a great learning tool.
 - Get tutoring help if you need it – In some classes group tutoring is available, which students report as being very helpful. There are, however, a limited number of tutors so do not wait until the last minute to ask for tutoring help.
 - Review sessions – Many instructors will hold review sessions—go to them. To not take advantage of them is wasting a resource. At least skim the material for the test before you go and have questions ready. If some point is confusing or if the text and lecture are different, a review session is the time to ask.
 - Get to the test on time – On the day of the test, allow enough time to get to the classroom, put your belongings away, choose a seat, sit down and relax before the exam.
 - Do not engage in the post-test discussions with other students – These raise anxiety levels and do not help you change the answers you already provided on your exam. Just because six out of eight students put b and c for the answers does not make them correct.

References

Chenevert, M. (1995) *Mosby's Tour Guide to Nursing School*. St. Louis, Mosby Publishing.