Multiple Choice Test Taking Techniques

Each question has a stem and four or more options - 1 correct and the remaining are distractors. Each time you are able to eliminate one distractor, the chance of selecting the correct answer increases.

Characteristics of Low-Scorers on Tests
1. Assume when they read the question that they either "know" or "don't know" the answer. Fail to reason.
2. Give up too soon.
3. Rely on other test questions to help select the answer.
4. Don't over-concentrate on the QUESTION.

Selecting Your Answer
1. Choose the answer that matches the question in scope
   - General Question - general answer
   - Specific Question - specific answer
2. Use reasoning to eliminate absurd or unlikely answers. If you don't know the answer, reason carefully and guess reasonably. Remember, there is not a wrong answer penalty on our tests.
3. Select the answer that addresses the question - not just one that is correct in itself.

POLARITY

Look for key words in the stem that indicate **polarity**. A negatively worded stem asks you to identify an exception, detect an error, or to identify a nursing intervention that is contraindicated. These words are sometimes brought to your attention by underlining, capitals, or boldface.

**EXAMPLE:**
Which action would violate medical asepsis when making an occupied bed?
A. wearing gloves when changing the linen
B. returning unused linen to the linen closet
C. using the old top sheet for the new bottom sheet
D. tucking clean linen against the springs of the bed

The correct answer for the above example is B. If you missed the word violate when you first read the question, you identified more than one correct answer. If this happens, reread the stem for a word with negative polarity.

PRIORITY

Identify key words in the stem that set a priority. Look for words such as first, initially, best, priority, and most. This type of question requires you put a value on each option and place them in rank order. When key words such as "most important" are used, frequently all the options may be appropriate, but only one is the MOST important.

EXAMPLE:
Prior to administering an enema, the nurse's first action should be to:
A. verify the physician's order
B. collect the appropriate equipment
C. arrange for the bathroom to be empty
D. inform the patient about the procedure

The correct answer for the above example is A. The nurse should verify the physician’s order for the patient prior to explaining the procedure to the patient or beginning the procedure.

EXAMPLE:
The nurse observes another nurse treating a patient in an abusive manner. The nurse's initial action should be:
A. become a role model for the other nurse
B. tell the nurse in charge and write a report
C. talk with the nurse about the incident
D. reassure and calm the patient

In the above example, the questions are testing your ability to recognize that the patient's physical and emotional safety is the priority. The correct answer is D.
**CLUE PHRASE**

Identify clues in the stem. A word or phrase in the stem may provide a hint for choosing the correct answer. Sometimes, a word or phrase in the stem is significant because it is similar to or a paraphrase of a word or phrase in the answer.

**EXAMPLE:**

To meet a patient's basic physiological need according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs the nurse should:

A. pull the curtain when the patient is on a bedpan  
B. maintain the patient in functional alignment  
C. respond to the call light immediately  
D. raise both side rails on the bed

An important word in the stem is PHYSIOLOGICAL. The correct answer is B, because maintaining alignment reduces physical strain and potential injury, and prevent contractures. The other choices deal with self-esteem, safety, and security.

**EXAMPLE:**

To meet a patient's basic physical needs, the nurse should:

A. pull the curtain when providing care  
B. answer the call bell immediately  
C. administer physical hygiene  
D. obtain vital signs

An important word in the stem is physical. The use of the word physical in option c and in the stem is called "clang association" It is the repetitious use of a word. C is the correct answer.

**PATIENT-CENTERED OPTIONS**

Identify patient-centered options the focus of the nurse's concern should be on the patient. Questions that test your ability to be patient centered tend to explore patient feelings, identify patient preferences, empower the patient, and afford the patient choices.
EXAMPLE:
What should the nurse do first when combing a female patient's hair?
A. moisten the hair with tap water
B. apply a hair conditioner to the hair
C. ask the patient how she prefers to wear her hair
D. begin at the roots and comb with long even strokes

Option C is patient centered because it allows for choices and supports the patient as an individual. The Patient's Bill of Rights mandates that the patient has a right to considerate and respectful care and to receive information prior to the start of any procedure and/or treatment.

ABSOLUTES IN THE OPTIONS
Identify specific determiners in options a specific determiner is a word or statement that conveys a thought or concept that has no exceptions. Words such as **just, always, never, all, every, none, and only are absolute** and easy to identify. Statements that use all-inclusive terms frequently represent broad generalizations that are usually false. Some absolutes are correct such as "all patients should be treated with respect" absolutes should be examined carefully.

EXAMPLE:
To best improve circulation during a bath, the nurse should:
A. apply soap to the washcloth
B. keep the patient covered
C. use only hot water
D. use firm strokes

Option C uses the word "only" Because it allows for no exceptions, it can be eliminated as a viable option. The elderly, children, and those with sensitive skin cannot tolerate hot water. Pressure and friction produce local heat, which dilates blood vessels, improving circulation.

OPPOSITES
Identify opposites in options Sometimes an item will contain two options that are opposite to each other. When opposites appear, they must be given serious consideration. One of
them will usually be the correct answer, or they can both be eliminated from consideration. When one of the opposites is the correct answer, you are being asked to differentiate between two responses. When the opposites are distractors, they are attempting to divert your attention from the correct answer, and if you recognize it, you can increase your chances of selecting the correct answer to 50 percent.

EXAMPLE:
The progress of growth and development in all elderly people:
A. slips backward
B. moves forward
C. becomes slower
D. becomes stagnant

Options A and B are opposites. Options C and D, although true for some individuals, are not true about ALL elderly. By focusing on options a and b, and then progressively examining and deleting options c and d, you have systematically scrutinized this item. Aging, from conception to death, advances and moves onward.

EXAMPLE:
The physician orders anti-embolism stockings for a patient. They should be put on:
A. while the patient is still in bed
B. when the patient complains of leg pain
C. when the patient's feet become edematous
D. after the patient gets out of bed in the morning

Options A and D are opposites. Examine these options first. Now assess options b and c. These options expect the nurse to apply anti-embolism stockings after a problem exists, and can be omitted. The final selection is between options A and D.

EQUALLY PLAUSABLE OPTIONS
Identify equally plausible or unique options. Sometimes items contain two or more options that are similar. It may be difficult to choose between them. Usually equally plausible
options are distractors and can be eliminated from consideration. If you find 3 equally plausible options, then the 4th option will probably be different from the others.

EXAMPLE:
To most effectively help meet a patient's basic safety and security needs, the nurse should:
A. serve adequate food
B. provide sufficient fluid
C. place the call bell near the patient
D. store the patient's valuables in the hospital safe

Options A and B are similar, providing nutrients. When assessed in relation to the concepts of safety, they can be eliminated.

EXAMPLE:
To promote circulation when providing a backrub, the nurse should:
A. place the patient in the prone position
B. use moisturizing lotion
C. apply baby powder
D. knead the skin

Options B and C use substances for backrub, without any information on the patient's skin condition. You can delete these options. Kneading causes friction and pressure against the skin that promotes localized heat, precipitates vessel dilation, and improves circulation.

EXAMPLE:
Passive range-of-motion exercises are done mainly to:
A. increase endurance
B. prevent loss of mobility
C. strengthen muscle tone
D. maximize muscle atrophy
Options A, B, and D all improve something: endurance, muscle tone, and atrophy. They are alike. Option B is different. It prevents something, and should be given careful consideration. The rationale for the correct answer is that passive range of motion is done to prevent muscle shortening, ligaments, and tendons that cause a joint to become fixed in one position. So, did you choose B? It is the correct response.

**DUPLICATE FACTS IN OPTIONS**

Identify duplicate facts in options. Sometimes items are designed so that each option contains two or more facts. Usually identical or similar facts appear in at least two of the four options. If you can identify a fact as incorrect when analyzing one of the items, you can eliminate that one.

**EXAMPLE:**
A patient has a vest restraint. While making this patient's occupied bed, what must the nurse do to promote patient safety?
A. keep the vest restraint tied and lower both side rails
B. keep the vest restraint tied and lower one side rail
C. untie the vest restraint and lower both side rails
D. untie the vest restraint and lower one side rail

This item asks two concepts: should a restraint be tied or untied when providing direct care, and should one or both side rails be lowered. If you know that the side rails should be lowered just on one side, then you can eliminate options A and B. D is the correct answer.

**EXAMPLE:**
When monitoring a patient who is at risk for hemorrhage, the nurse should assess the patient for:
A. warm dry skin, hypotension, bounding pulse
B. hypertension, bounding pulse, cold clammy skin
C. weak thready pulse, hypertension, warm dry skin
D. hypotension, cold clammy skin, weak thready pulse
This item is testing your knowledge about patient adaptations associated with hemorrhage. Three adaptations are presented: condition of the skin, blood pressure, and characteristic of the pulse. If you know that hypotension is associated with hemorrhage, you can eliminate options B and C. If you know that cold clammy skin is related to hemorrhage, you associated with hemorrhage, you can eliminate options A and B. Options that have 3 parts work to your advantage if you use the technique of identifying duplicate facts in options.

**DENY PATIENT FEELINGS**

Identify options that deny patient feelings, concerns, and needs. Any option that diminishes patient concerns, provides false reassurance, and/or cuts off further patient communication, or abdicates nursing responsibility to other members of the health team can be deleted.

**EXAMPLE:**

The night before surgery for a hysterectomy, the patient says to the "I am worried that I might die tomorrow." The nurse's best response would be:

A. "It is really routine surgery."
B. "You need to tell your doctor about this."
C. "The thought of dying can be frightening."
D. "Most people who have this surgery survive."

Answer C is correct. Effective communication contains open ended questions and statements. This type of communication allows for a better understanding on the patient’s feelings, concerns, and needs.

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