Test-taking Techniques

Multiple-Choice Questions

THE STEM
The stem is the initial part of a multiple-choice item. The purpose of the stem is to present a problem in a clear and concise manner. The stem should contain all the details necessary to answer the question. The stem of an item can be a complete sentence that asks a question. It also can be presented as an incomplete sentence that becomes a complete sentence when it is combined with one of the options of the item. In addition to sentence structure, a characteristic of a stem that must be considered is its polarity. The polarity of the stem can be formulated in either a positive or negative context. A stem with a positive polarity asks the question in relation to what is true, whereas a stem with negative polarity asks the question in relation to what is false.

Identify the Word in the Stem That Indicates Negative Polarity
A negatively worded stem asks you to identify an exception, detect an error, or recognize nursing interventions that are unacceptable or contraindicated. Look for key words such as not, except, never, contraindicated, unacceptable, avoid, unrelated, violate, and least.

Example:
Which should a nurse never do when rubbing a patient’s back?

1. Apply pressure over vertebrae
2. Use continuous strokes
3. Wipe off excess lotion
4. Knead the skin

The key word in this stem is never. The stem is asking you to identify which option is not an acceptable practice associated with a back rub. If you missed the word never and were looking for what the nurse should do for a back rub, there will be more than one correct answer. This should alert you to the fact that you may have missed a key negative word.

Identify the Word in the Stem That Sets a Priority
Read the stem carefully while looking for key words such as first, initially, best, priority, safest, and most. These words modify what is being asked. This type of question requires you to put a value on each option and then place them in rank order. Answering a test question that asks you to establish a priority requires you to make a decision using clinical judgment. It requires you to use perceptual, inferential, and/or diagnostic judgment to arrive at the correct answer based on the data in the question and options. To do this, you must draw on your knowledge of theory, concepts, principles, and nursing standards of practice.
Example:
A nurse is caring for a patient who just had a long leg cast applied for a compound fracture of the femur. Which is the most important nursing intervention when caring for this patient?

1. Turn and position every 4 hours.
2. Take pulses proximal to the casted area.
3. Cover rough edges of the cast with tape.
4. Inspect the cast for signs of drainage or bleeding.

The word most in the stem sets a priority. Use the ABCs (Airway, Breathing, Circulation) to identify the most important option. No options are associated with airway or breathing. However, options 2 and 4 are associated with circulation. If you identify that assessing a distal, not proximal, pulse is important, then you can eliminate option 2. You have arrived at the correct answer.

Identify Key Words in the Stem That Direct Attention to Content
Generally, a stem of an item is short and contains only the information needed to make it clear and specific. Therefore, the use of a word or phrase in the stem has significance. A key word is the intentional or unintentional use of a word or phrase that provides information that leads you to the correct answer. Sometimes a key word is a word or phrase that modifies another word or phrase in the stem.

Example:
To meet a patient’s basic physiological needs according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which should the nurse do?
1. Maintain the patient’s body in functional alignment.
2. Pull the curtain when the patient is on a bedpan.
3. Respond to a call light immediately.
4. Raise both side rails on the bed.

An important word in the stem is physiological. It is an intentional use of a word to specifically limit consideration to one aspect of Maslow’s theory.

Identify the Central Person in the Question
When a stem is limited to just the patient and the nurse, the patient is almost always the central person in the question. However, some questions focus on the needs of others, such as a child, parent, spouse, or roommate. To select the correct option, you have to identify the central (significant) person in the stem. The significant person is the person who is to receive the care. Sometimes, in addition to the patient, a variety of people are included in the stem. The inclusion of others may set the stage for the question or test your ability to discriminate. These people also may distract you from who is actually the significant person in the stem. Therefore, to answer the question accurately, you must determine WHO is the central person in the question.
Example:

A nurse will be going on vacation. To involve the patient in the excitement, which is the best response by the nurse?

1. “Tell me about some of your favorite past vacations.”
2. “Do you want to hear about the plans for my trip?”
3. “I’ll bring the brochures for you to see.”
4. “What do you think about vacations?”

There are two people in this stem, the patient and the nurse. There are two clues in the stem. The first clue is “involve the patient.” To involve the patient, the patient must be active. Therefore, options 2 and 3 can be eliminated because they focus on the nurse, who is not the central person in the question. The second clue is the word best. The word “best” is asking you to set a priority. More than one option may include appropriate nursing care, but only one is the “best” action. Options 1 and 4 include appropriate nursing care. However, option 1 requires a more detailed response than option 4. Reminiscing involves more than just giving an opinion.

**Identify Patient-Centered Options**

Items that test your ability to be patient centered tend to explore patient feelings, identify patient preferences, empower the patient, afford the patient choices, or in some other way put emphasis on the patient. Because the patient is the center of the health-care team, the patient often is the priority.

**Example:**

When assisting a patient who recently had an above-the-knee amputation to transfer into a chair, the patient starts to cry and says, “I am useless with only one leg.” Which is a therapeutic response by the nurse?

1. “Losing a leg can be very difficult.”
2. “You still have the use of one good leg.”
3. “A prosthesis will make a big difference.”
4. “You’ll feel better when you can use crutches.”

Option 1 is patient centered. It focuses on the patient’s feelings by using the interviewing technique of reflection. Option 2 denies the patient’s feelings, and options 3 and 4 provide false reassurance. When a patient’s feelings are ignored or minimized, the nurse is not being patient centered. To be patient centered, the nurse should concentrate on the patient’s feelings or concerns.

**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. They place limits on a statement that generally is considered correct. Statements that use all-inclusive terms frequently represent broad generalizations that usually are false. Frequently these options are incorrect and can be eliminated.
Example:

A nurse is giving a patient a bed bath. How can the nurse best improve the patient’s circulation during the bath?

1. Use firm strokes.
2. Utilize only hot water.
3. Keep the patient covered.
4. Apply soap to the washcloth.

In option 2 the word only is a specific determiner. It allows for no exceptions. Hot water can burn the skin and also is contraindicated for patients with sensitive skin such as children, older adults, and people with dermatological problems. Because option 2 allows for no exceptions, it can be eliminated as a viable option.

**Identify Opposites in Options**

Sometimes an item contains two options that are the opposite of each other. They can be single words that reflect extremes on a continuum, or they can be statements that convey converse messages. When opposites appear in the options, they must be given serious consideration. One of them will be the correct answer, or they both can be eliminated from consideration. When one of the opposites is the correct answer, you are being asked to differentiate between two responses that incorporate extremes of a concept or principle. When options are opposites, more often than not, but not always, one of them is the correct answer. When the opposites are distractors, they are attempting to divert your attention from the correct answer. This test-taking technique usually cannot be applied to options that reflect numerical values (e.g., heart rates, blood pressures, respiratory rates, laboratory values).

Example:

Which type of intravenous solution is normal saline in relation to body fluids?

1. Hypertonic
2. Hypotonic
3. Acidotic
4. Isotonic

Options 1 and 2 are opposites. Appraise these words in relation to each other and their relationship to body fluids and normal saline. They are extremes in the concentration of solutes. Because normal saline is equal to body fluids in the concentration of solutes, these options are probably distractors. Now examine options 3 and 4. Acidotic refers to a low pH in body fluids and is not a type of intravenous solution. Option 3 can be deleted from consideration. In this question, the options that are opposites (1 and 2) are distractors and can be eliminated.

**Identify Equally Plausible or Unique Options**

It is difficult to choose between two similar options because they are comparable. One option is no better or worse than the other option in relation to the statement presented in the stem. When analyzing options use the “If → Then” technique. Ask yourself, “If I perform this
intervention in the option, then what will be the outcome?" In equally plausible options the outcomes frequently are the same or similar. Usually equally plausible options are distractors and can be eliminated from consideration.

**Example:**

Which should the nurse do to effectively help meet a patient’s basic safety and security needs?

1. Serve adequate food.
2. Provide sufficient fluid.
3. Place the call bell near the patient.
4. Store the patient’s valuables in the bedside table.

Options 1 and 2 are similar because they both provide nutrients. They are equally plausible when compared to each other and particularly when assessed in relation to the concepts of safety and security; neither relates to meeting a patient’s safety and security needs. These options are distractors and can be eliminated from consideration.

**Select All That Apply**

- Use test-taking techniques that apply to traditional multiple-choice questions such as identify specific determiners in options, identify opposites in options, and identify options that deny patient feelings, concerns, or needs.
- Identify each option you know is a correct answer. Then identify each option you know is an incorrect answer. Finally, examine any remaining options and make an educated decision as to whether they are correct or incorrect.

**OR**

- Identify one option you know is a correct answer. Then identify one option you know is an incorrect answer. Continue to alternate the identification of correct and incorrect options until all options have been determined to be correct or incorrect or if there are remaining options that you cannot classify as correct or incorrect. Then examine these final options and make an educated determination as to whether they are correct or incorrect.

**References**