

Test Taking Strategies – USMLE Style Questions & Exams

Test-taking can be challenging, especially when you are faced with exams that include types of questions you are not used to responding to. Whether you're doing practice tests, preparing for an exam or quiz, try these strategies.

- 1. Read the question – usually the last sentence of the vignette (then reread it)**
 - Read the first sentence and the last sentence or two (the actual question) of the vignette
 - Most frequent errors made in tests are due to misreading information or misinterpreting the question
 - Questions include pertinent info that will lead you to the correct answer
 - Trust what you are being asked
 - Consider what you know about what the questions is asking
 - Look for “doctors” (words that would change the meaning if deleted, often opposites, i.e., gain/loss, early/late, ab-/ad-, etc.)
 - Rephrase the question in your own words to simplify it
- 2. After you have read the question, make a prediction and answer it**
 - Predict the answer
 - Do this as though the question were a short-answer or open-ended question rather than multiple-choice
 - Don't look at the answer choices
 - Try to answer the question in your head before looking at the answers
 - Then, look at the answer options to see if “your” answer is there
 - If so, pick it! If not...keep trying by following the steps below
- Determine if you **need more information from the vignette** to better answer the question – if so, skim through the vignette, look for clues, then...
 - Consider the answer choices deliberately
 - Start with the first answer choice and cross eliminate the wrong answers as you go
 - Continue this process uncovering one at a time until you have it down to **two (2) possible answers**
 - Look at the two options that are left
 - Think: **HOW are they DIFFERENT?** Is there **one answer that is MORE correct?**
- Select the **BEST answer** based on your **ACTIVE analysis** of the question
 - Don't flag an answer once you have made a choice
 - Many people are tempted to flag an answer when they are torn between two choices
 - If you are anxious or suffer with test anxiety, you can end up with flagging 30-40% of your questions
 - **ONLY** flag things because you plan to do something other than check an answer

CAUTION – DO NOT force an answer on the question or change the question to force it on an answer

- Sometimes, we change the question to match an answer – this is a common test-taking mistake
- Be mindful of what is being asked and the best answer choice that can answer it
- Remember: Answers – or part of an answer – that are unrelated to the topic are more than likely incorrect
- If an answer gives information that is irrelevant to the question or introduces new information, it is probably incorrect

- If you still cannot answer it, skip and move on to the next one – a question that comes later may give you hints to the answer for the question you are having trouble with

Images & Pictures

- If there are images associated with the question, look at it first & try to figure out what the image is showing you BEFORE reading the question & vignette

When you are stuck between 2 answers, try this

- Make the question a true/false question; of the 2 options, which one makes the question true?
- If any piece is missing, then the option is wrong and the correct option is the other option
- Ask yourself whether the answer you're considering completely addresses the question
- If the test answer is only partly true or is true only under certain narrow conditions, then it's probably not the right answer
- If you have to make a significant assumption in order for the answer to be true, ask yourself whether this assumption is obvious enough that the test maker would expect everyone to make it. If not, dump the answer overboard
- If after your very best effort, you cannot choose between two alternatives, try vividly imagining each one as the correct answer
- If you are like most people, you will often “feel” that one of the answers is wrong. Trust this feeling. Research suggests that feelings are frequently accessible even when recall is poor. For example, we can still know how we feel about a person even when we can't remember the person's name!
- **The correct answer will be clearly correct.** If you think two answers are so close that you cannot reasonably choose between them, then the odds are that neither one is correct; you need to look carefully at a different option.

For USMLE exams or practice tests, understand Exam Distractors

- Getting a question correct means selecting the best answer
- Incorrect options are called “distractors”
- A “distractor's” purpose is to get you to pick them rather than the best answer (it is not trickery – it is just incorrect answer choices)
- Few of the distractors will stand out as obviously incorrect
- Distractors may be partially right answers but not the best answer (if it is partially right – it is not right!)

Trust your gut (unless you are proven wrong)

- Your gut is usually right
- If you know the answer, you just know it
- Do not second guess yourself, but if you see an answer that answers the question better than your original choice, don't be afraid to change it

One question at a time, one block at a time

- Manage your time wisely
- You should spend no more than 90 seconds on each question
- If you have time after a block of questions, review them or go back to the ones you were unsure about – don't overthink them, though

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