

Tips on Changing Answers on High-Stakes Medical Exams

Changing answers is often beneficial—but only when done for the right reasons. Research consistently shows that more answer changes convert incorrect → correct than the reverse, though benefits depend on judgment and strategy.

Evidence-Based Tips

1. Don't blindly “trust your first instinct”

- The belief that first answers are best is a common **myth** not supported by most research.
- In large-scale medical exams (e.g., USMLE Step), examinees who changed answers were **more likely to improve scores than harm them**.
- Be open to changing answers when you have a clear reason.

2. Change answers when you identify new information or reasoning errors

- Answer changes are most beneficial when driven by new recall, recognition of a misread question, or improved reasoning.
- Studies show changes are more often **wrong → right than right → wrong**.
- ONLY Change your answer if:
 - You recall a key fact you initially missed
 - You detect a misinterpretation of the vignette
 - You recognize a flawed reasoning step

3. Avoid changing answers based on anxiety alone

- Emotional factors (e.g., doubt, regret aversion) distort decision-making and contribute to the “first instinct fallacy.”
- Metacognitive studies show answer changing is effective **only when guided by accurate self-monitoring**, not uncertainty alone.
- Don't change: “This just feels wrong...”
- Do change: “I misread labs / now I recall the guideline”

4. Limit excessive answer switching

- Repeated or excessive changes **do not improve scores** and may reduce accuracy.
- Additional changes beyond the first reconsideration show **diminishing or negative returns**.
- Re-evaluate once carefully; avoid “over-editing” answers multiple times.

5. Allocate time for review strategically

- Students who change answers often do so after **spending more time reconsidering items**, especially difficult ones.
- Time pressure reduces the likelihood of beneficial corrections.
- Mark uncertain questions
- Reserve time (5–15%) at the end for targeted review

6. Focus on higher-order questions when reviewing

- Changing answers is more beneficial for **analytical or reasoning-heavy questions** than simple recall items.
- Prioritize revisiting:
 - Clinical vignettes
 - Multi-step reasoning questions
- Spend less time second-guessing factual recall items unless you remember a specific detail.

Common Pitfalls

- Overconfidence in first answers
- Changing answers due to stress, not evidence
- Over-reviewing and second-guessing every item
- Running out of time due to excessive revisiting

Quick Memory Aid for Exam Day

CHANGE if:

- You found new evidence
- You corrected a misread
- You can explain why your first answer is wrong

KEEP if:

- You feel vague doubt
- You're reacting emotionally
- You're guessing again without new reasoning

Need more help? Schedule an appointment with [Dr. Jade J. O'Dell](#)

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