

---

## Test Taking Strategies

---

### For Multiple Choice Tests

#### A. General Strategies

---

- 1. Don't Be Too Hard on Yourself** First and foremost, relax and tell yourself that the most you can do is YOUR BEST. Don't assume that you will know the answer to every question on the exam. Counseling is a diverse field, and some questions may deal with areas that are unfamiliar or difficult for you. You might also draw a blank or two during the test about information you know, or see questions that are poorly written or have two or more answers that could arguably be right or "best". This will be true for every candidate taking the exam. Remember, you can miss some questions and still pass the exam!

To provide yourself a cushion (in case you are anxious during the exam), you might want to try aiming for a score of at least 80% on the last post-test. Above all, however, keep in mind that nobody, including you, is going to get a perfect score on the exam; your aim is to pass, not to answer every question correctly!

- 2. "Sub-Divide"** Rather than viewing the exam as one long test, you might divide it into more manageable "subtests." When the test booklet is distributed, note the starting and stopping times for the entire exam. Then divide the test into four equal subtests of 50 questions (one hour) and write in the booklet the time that each subtest should be finished. It is important that you stay within the time limits you set for each subtest. If you finish a subtest early, review only the questions on that subtest. Once you've finished a subtest, consider it done.
- 3. First Answer/Correct Answer** An INEFFECTIVE test-taking strategy is to initially hurry through the entire exam, with the intention of going back over the exam to change the answers you aren't sure about. This is a poor strategy for several reasons. First, your initial answer (assuming you thought it out) is usually the right answer. Many candidates report that when they have gone back and changed answers, many of their changed answers were wrong. Second, by the time you've been through the test once, you will be tired, and any decisions you make then will probably be less accurate than your original choices.
- 4. Don't Skip Around** This is related to #3. Skipping around through the exam can waste valuable time. It forces you to re-read questions and search for the questions you skipped. Answer each question in order. If you are baffled by a question, mark the answer you believe to be correct on the answer sheet, place a question mark next to the question in the test booklet, and go back to it later if you have time. Because there is no penalty for guessing, it is better to mark answers you aren't sure about than to risk running out of time and leaving questions blank.
- 5. Take Breaks** Proctors will allow candidates to leave the room for a brief period to go to the bathroom. We recommend that also you take a couple of short breaks during the test period. You can do this in your seat, by stopping for a moment or two, shutting your eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Clearing your head like this can give you just the rest you need to continue. You get no points for being the first person to finish the exam, so take short breaks if you need them.

If you pace yourself, taking short breaks will NOT prevent you from finishing the exam. Practice taking our post-tests within a four-hour time limit and, as you do so, practice giving yourself short breaks in your seat, as described above. Remember, most candidates find that four hours is more than enough time to complete and review the exam.

6. **“Trick” Questions** Do not assume that the writers of the exam have deliberately tried to get you to answer incorrectly by writing “trick questions.” Although some questions are difficult, questions are NOT intentionally written to deceive you. When you see a complicated question, relax and do your best – use your common sense, knowledge, clinical experience, and test-taking skills. Assume that there is at least a “best” answer to every question on the exam. In other words, if you see a question that doesn’t appear to have a “right” answer, use your common sense, knowledge, clinical experience, and test-taking skills to determine the BEST of the four answers.
7. **Read ALL of the Answers** Even if alternative “a,” “b,” or “c” seems to be correct or best, you must read ALL of the answers before marking the answer sheet. As we illustrate on our post-tests, sometimes two or more answers are good, but one is slightly more correct than the others – in some cases, the “most correct” or best answer will be “d.”
8. **Make “Educated Guesses”** Remember, there is no penalty for guessing. Therefore, if you are genuinely stumped by a question, it is to your advantage to make an “educated guess,” or sometimes, just a guess. There are several techniques you can use to increase the likelihood that your guess will be correct: (1) It is usually best to avoid selecting an extreme answer. Therefore, avoid answers that include absolute words such as “never” or “always.” Middle-of-the-road (conservative) answers are more likely to be correct. (2) If a question is about something you’ve never heard of, use your common sense to choose and answer. If an unfamiliar phrase or term appears on the exam, use your common sense to try to figure out its meaning; e.g., “transient situational disturbance” obviously refers to a disorder that involves a reaction to stress and remits relatively quickly.
9. **Watch for Qualifiers in Questions** Sometimes, questions ask for exceptions, the least true or worst response, things that are not true, etc. In other words, as we noted earlier, some questions (the reverse types) ask you to select the “wrong” answer. When you see questions like these, be prepared to think a bit differently from the way you do for other types of questions. Read these questions carefully to ensure that you understand what they are asking for.

In addition, remember that some questions will ask you to select a “best” rather than a “right” answer. Other exam questions might ask you to select what to do “first,” what is “most important,” etc. Questions with qualifiers appear on our post-tests, so you will bet practice approaching them before you take the exam. Be sure to study these questions and their rationales carefully.

10. **Additional Tips** When you have trouble selecting an answer, you can also check to see if any of the alternative answers: (1) Do not completely address the question (i.e., are only partly true or are too narrow); (2) reflect a misconception, rather than information supported by research; or (3) represent a layperson’s rather than a professional’s response. Answers like these will likely be wrong. Also, when faced with a question that has several answers that seem right, check to see if one more precisely answers the question than the others. For example, if a question presents a client with anxiety symptoms, your answer choices might include “anxiety disorder” and one or two specific anxiety-related diagnoses. If you have enough information to select a more specific diagnosis, do so. Conversely, if a question is very general, its right answer will also tend to be general rather than specific.