TEST-TAKING TIPS FOR MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

CODE: TT—Test-Taking Tip
ST—Study Tip
Italicized option: Correct options in example questions and their rationales are italicized

IDENTIFY POSITIVE POLARITY IN A STEM
TT: The correct answer is in accord with a truth, fact, principle, or action that should be done. It attempts to determine if you can understand, apply, or differentiate information to identify the correct answer to the question. The question has only 1 answer that is appropriate. This is different from a question that asks you to pick the best action.
ST: Review content being tested. Identify additional things the nurse should do.

IDENTIFY NEGATIVE POLARITY IN A STEM
TT: The correct answer reflects something that is false. The words contraindicated, unacceptable, not, except, least, avoid, violate, untrue, side effect, and exception indicate negative polarity. If 3 answers appear correct, you may have missed the negative word in the stem.
ST: Change the negative word to a positive word and then answer the question.

IDENTIFY WORDS THAT SET A PRIORITY
TT: The correct answer is what should be done first. The words first, initial, main, primary, initially, greatest, best, most, and priority require ranking of options from the most to the least desirable. If you are unable to easily identify the correct answer, eliminate the least desirable option and repeat eliminating options until left with the final option.
ST: After selecting the correct answer, select what action should be done next.

IDENTIFY CLUES IN A STEM
TT: Words in the stem that are identical, similar, paraphrased, or closely related to words in the options are called clangs. Clangs can be obvious or obscure. Generally, options with clangs are correct answers.
ST: Identify additional similar words (e.g., motion, moving, movement).

IDENTIFY KEY WORDS IN THE STEM
TT: Identify important word or words that modify another word in the stem. A key word limits information in relation to the word it is modifying.
ST: Change key words in the stem; this changes the focus of question and increases opportunities for learning (e.g., If you changed early signs to late signs, the answer would be different).

IDENTIFY PATIENT-CENTERED OPTIONS
TT: Correct answers testing principles in the affective domain focus on empowerment as well as patient feelings and preferences.
ST: Examples of patient-centered options: Acknowledging feelings—“Losing your independence must be difficult.” Offering a choice—“Would you like your bath at 7:00 or 10:00 today?” Empowering—Encourage the patient to write down questions for the physician. Determining preferences—“What foods do you like to eat?”

IDENTIFY OPTIONS THAT DENY A PATIENT’S FEELINGS, CONCERNS, NEEDS
Options that deny a patient’s feelings, give false reassurance, focus on the nurse, encourage cheerfulness, or change the subject cut off communication and should be eliminated.

Examples of options to be eliminated: Denying feelings—“Don’t cry. It is not so bad.” False reassurance—“You’ll feel better tomorrow.” Focusing on the nurse—“The thought of dying frightens me.” Cheerfulness—“Cheer up. It’s a beautiful sunny day.”

IDENTIFY OPTIONS WITH “ABSOLUTE” TERMS

The words all, just, none, only, never, every, always have no exceptions. One of these words before a statement that is correct generally makes it false. Options with “absolute” terms are more often incorrect.

Examples of options with absolute terms: Never position the child in the semi-Fowler’s position; just prescription medications can cause drug interactions. Two exceptions might be “always wash your hands” and “always maintain a patent airway.”

IDENTIFY OPPOSITES IN OPTIONS

When two options reflect extremes on a continuum, frequently one of them is the correct answer. Opposites may be obvious or obscure.

Examples of opposites: hypo- vs. hyper-; increase vs. decrease; brady- vs. tachy-. Identify what is associated with the incorrect opposite.

IDENTIFY EQUALLY PLAUSIBLE OPTIONS

When 2 options are similar, and one is not better than the other, generally both are incorrect.

Identify other equally plausible options from your knowledge base related to either the three incorrect options or the correct answer.

IDENTIFY THE UNIQUE OPTION

When 3 options are similar in some way and one is different, the unique option often is the correct answer.

Examples of unique options: 3 options begin with verbs, and the correct answer begins with a noun; 3 options are foods that are fats and the correct answer is a protein; 3 options promote a bowel movement and the correct answer causes diarrhea.

IDENTIFY THE GLOBAL OPTION

A global option is a broad general statement, whereas the 3 other options are specific. Specific options inherently may be included under the mantle of the global option.

Identify what else could be included under the global option.

IDENTIFY DUPLICATE FACTS IN OPTIONS

If 2 or more facts are in each option and identical or similar facts are in at least 2 of the 4 options and you can identify at least 1 fact that is incorrect or correct, you can eliminate at least 2 options.

Identify additional facts that may be correct.

USE MASLOW’S HIERARCHY TO IDENTIFY THE CORRECT OPTION
TT: Answer the question in light of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Basic physiological needs are 1st-level needs that are a priority and are followed by needs associated with safety and security (2nd), love and belonging (3rd), self-esteem (4th), and self-actualization (5th).

ST: Identify an intervention associated with each level of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in relation to the question.

USE MULTIPLE TEST-TAKING TIPS

TT: First analyze the stem for 1 or more test-taking tips. Then analyze the options for 1 or more test-taking tips. When you focus on what the stem is asking and can eliminate options from consideration, you maximize the ability to select the correct answer.

ST: Practice answering questions at the end of a chapter or in test-taking books using the presented test-taking tips.

Adapted from the Vitale, B. (2007). NCLEX-RN Notes: Core Review and Exam Prep. F.A. Davis: Philadelphia