



Tips on Taking the NCLEX-RN

by Judith C. Miller



What does NCLEX-RN® stand for?

NCLEX stands for National Council (of State Boards of Nursing) Licensure Examination. It is one of the most important exams you will ever take.

Why do nursing students have to take the NCLEX-RN?

Passing the NCLEX –RN is one of the requirements to obtain a license anywhere in the United States or its territories.

How do I apply to take the examination?

You need to apply to both the state board of nursing in the state you wish to be licensed in, and the testing service, Pearson-Vue. You must complete the state form and submit the required fees to the state. In addition, your school of nursing must verify that you are eligible for graduation. This form is usually sent directly to the board of nursing by the school after you have requested it. The second form and fee go to Pearson-Vue. The testing service application can be completed by phone, or mail, and in some cases online, so check the instructions carefully.

How often is the exam given and at what locations?

The exam is given weekdays (excluding holidays) at designated testing centers at selected Pearson Professional Centers. When you receive your authorization to test (ATT) notice, you will also receive a list of authorized Pearson Professional Centers.

How do I schedule my exam?

Your authorization to test (ATT) indicates that all your credentials have been approved and all your fees paid. Once you receive this, you must either call the center of

your choice or schedule through the NCLEX candidate web site (www.pearsonvue.com/nclex).

When should I take the test?

When you receive your ATT, you will be given an expiration date for your authorization and you must take the exam before the ATT expires. If you wait until near the end of the validity period, there may not be an opening before your ATT expires, so you should schedule the exam right away. If you do not take the exam before your ATT expires, you have to submit another application and an additional \$200.00. You should test soon after graduating so the material is fresh in your mind. You cannot work as a registered nurse until you pass the NCLEX-RN!

How many first-time NCLEX test-takers pass the exam?

Usually, between 80 and 90 percent of first-time test-takers pass the exam.

What topics does the NCLEX cover and how long is the exam?

You will need to review all of the areas of study: medical-surgical, maternal-child, and psychiatric nursing. There are a significant number of pharmacology questions on the exam, so don't forget to review drugs for every condition you study. The only things to memorize are lab values. You must know normal values to recognize abnormal values when they appear in a scenario. Questions on the exam are written to test your nursing judgment, not your ability to memorize.



What is the best way to prepare for the exam?

First, review the content of all the major subject areas. If there is an area that was difficult for you during school, spend extra time clarifying concepts. Second, attend a good review if one is available or utilize an online review. Third, practice a lot of questions. Four thousand different questions from reputable review books, CDs, or online courses should be sufficient. If you are not scoring at least 70% when you take a test containing items you have never seen before, you should continue to do more questions.

What do I bring with me to the test center and into the exam?

You will need to provide two forms of identification, one of which is an official photo ID with a signature such as a driver's license or passport. Be sure the name on the photo ID is the same name you put on your application. You will be fingerprinted and photographed when you sign in to take the exam. The photo is not on your license. Leave all books, papers, notes, calculators, pencils, pens, etc. at home. Do not bring them into the testing center.

What does CAT stand for?

CAT stands for Computerized Adaptive Testing. This means that the test is on a computer and that it adapts to you.

How does the CAT work?

Questions on NCLEX are all rated with a difficulty level. When you answer a question correctly, the computer selects a harder question for the next question. If you miss a question, the computer selects an easier question for the next question. The computer is constantly calculating your average difficulty level. If it is at or above the predetermined passing level, you will pass the exam.

Are all the questions multiple choice?

The vast majority of the questions are multiple choice, where you must select the best answer out of four. You may also find a question in which you must type in a response. For instance, you may have to type in the correct answer to a calculation question. Another new item type is "select all that apply," where you must identify the most appropriate responses from the list.

How is the test scored?

An absolute pass score is determined before the exam is administered and the test is adaptive, meaning that it adapts to you. When you answer correctly, your next question will be of equal or greater difficulty, with the difficulty level increasing until you miss. When you answer an item incorrectly, you will receive an item of equal or lower difficulty until you answer an item correctly. The computer is continually trying to find your competency level. When the computer determines with 95%

accuracy that you surpass the minimum competency level, you will pass the test and the test is over. Likewise, when the computer determines with 95% accuracy that you cannot pass the test, the computer will stop.

The minimum number of items on the test is 75 and the maximum is 265.

Are some candidates chosen at random to answer 265 questions?

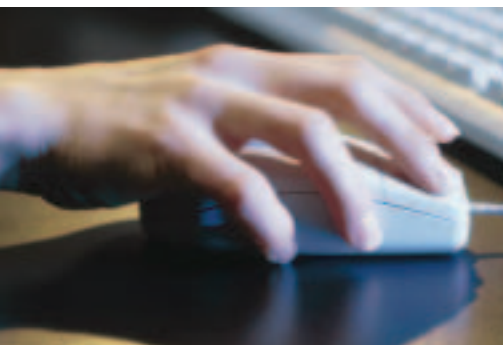
No. If you answer 265 questions, it is because the average difficulty level of questions you have answered is close to the passing line.

What are experimental questions?

Experimental questions are those being tested before they count on the examination. After questions have been written and evaluated by a number of committees, they are tried out on actual candidates before being admitted into the pool of test items. Each candidate gets 15 experimental questions. No matter how many questions you answer, you will only have 15 experimental questions.

Can I go back to a question if I don't know the answer?

No. The difficulty level of each question is determined by whether or not you answered the previous question correctly, so if you do not know the answer to a question, try eliminating obviously wrong answers and making your best educated guess.



What if I change my mind after I select my answer choice?

You may change your answer up until you submit it.

Is there any place to do calculations?

You will be given a dry erase type of board to make any notations you need or you can use the drop-down calculator on the computer.

How many questions do I have to answer?

A. If you answer more than 75 questions, it means that the average difficulty level of the questions you have answered is close to passing and you can still pass.

How long is the exam and what happens if I can't finish it?

The maximum amount of time you are allowed on the test is five hours and there is no minimum. As long as you can answer 75 questions in 5 hours, you can pass. It is always better to work steadily and accurately rather than rapidly and carelessly.

Are there any breaks?

There are two optional scheduled breaks - one at 2 hours and one at 3^{1/2} hours. You may take unscheduled breaks as needed. Keep in mind that when you leave the testing room for any reason you will be fingerprinted upon your return.

What happens if I don't pass the first time?

If you do not pass the exam, you will have to take it again. Most states allow you to retake the exam in 45 days, although some require a 90-day waiting period. Some states require remedial work before you can take the exam a third time.

When do I find out if I passed?

The state board of nursing will notify you. Many states have online registries where you can enter your social security number to check if you are licensed. It usually takes several days for this information to be available and it can take up to one month until you are notified by mail by your state board of nursing.

How can I reduce stress while taking the exam?

First, prepare adequately. Being comfortable with the material will boost your confidence greatly. Second, be well rested and well nourished when you take the exam. Make sure you have gotten sufficient sleep in the days before the exam - 8 hours a night at least. Stay away from junk food, and eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. Third, practice a relaxation technique before the exam, such as deep breathing, yoga, or meditation.

Once I am licensed in the US, can I work overseas?

This depends on where you want to work. If you want to work for a U.S. military base or installation, you may do so with a license from any state. If you want to work for a hospital in a foreign country, you may need to obtain a license from that country. You should check with the country for specific instructions, as requirements vary from country to country.

I am not sure where I want to work as an RN, so in what state should I take the test?

You might want to get licensed in the state where you live. You can always obtain a license in another state. Licensure by endorsement can be done once you are licensed in one state. You need to fill out

paperwork and send the required fee, but you do not need to take the exam again.

What happens if I want to work in a state where I am not licensed?

You must get a license in that state. Either call or write to the state board of nursing, or get an application from their web site if available. You do not need to retake the examination and you will receive a license by endorsement. You may have a license in more than one state. ☺

See pages 34-36 for information on the NSNA/Nursing Spectrum Review Course and new sites and locations for 2005!

resources

Online

Thomson Delmar Learning Nursing Review
www.nursingreview.com

Delmar Health Care
www.delmarhealthcare.com/nursing/nclex/nclex

National Council of State Boards of Nursing
www.ncsbn.org

Pearson Professional Centers
www.pearsonvue.com/nclex

Review Books

Alice M. Stein. *NCLEX-RN Review*, 4th Edition, 2005. Delmar Thomson Learning



Judith C. Miller, RN, MS, is founder and president of Nursing Tutorial and Consulting services, which helps nurses pass exams. She is also co-editor of *NCLEX-RN® Review*, published by Thomson

Delmar Learning, and teaches the NSNA NCLEX Review. (See ad on inside front cover.)