

TIPS ON TAKING THE NCLEX® EXAM



by Beulah Hall

One of the most important ways to insure success on the NCLEX® exam is to prepare as carefully and thoroughly as you can. Organizing your material, knowing what to study, and taking advantage of study tools will all help you achieve success. Preparing yourself mentally and physically for the exam, including the use of stress management tools, and increasing your self-confidence, are all factors in a positive final outcome. This article includes tips to help you prepare for the NCLEX® so you achieve the best possible results.

1 Create a Study Plan

Establish a study plan that allows you up to several months to prepare. Calculate your total study time and then arrange your study plan by the week, so you can break the material down into reasonable sections. As you study, organize the material into manageable segments of information. If your notes are not well-organized, add headings and subheadings so that the material makes sense, and use highlighter so they stand out. A whole page of information without any subtopics will only become blurred in your mind. Your memory works best if content is logically connected.

2 Use All Available Study Tools

The NCLEX® questions focus more on your ability to apply what you know, rather than on raw factual information. So as you study, do not focus only on learning the facts, but test your ability to

make a nursing judgment, or apply critical thinking. Use resources wisely. Many review books do an excellent job of organizing material, through the use of boxes, bullets, and chapter highlights that summarize the information. NCLEX® preparation courses are based on careful application of the test plan. There are often most valuable in highlighting the areas you may be weak in and offering drills so you can improve these areas. Study groups are an excellent means of preparation. The study group, which usually consists of between three and five people, meets regularly to cover a designated area. Group members prepare

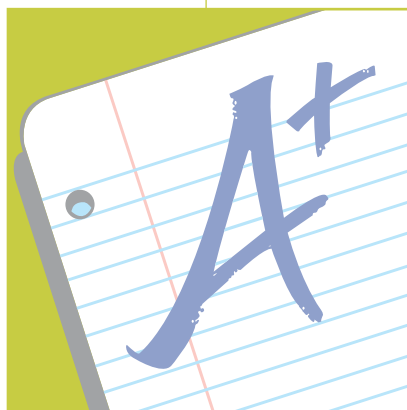
questions (for which they have studied the answers) that they then share with the group. Students then drill each other, including rationales for their answers. The group should provide a supportive learning environment, and should help speed your learning. If a study group is not productive, discontinue the group and either study on your own, or find a new group.

3 Beating Stress and Anxiety

It is to be expected that you will be nervous about the exam. But constantly comparing yourself to others, convincing yourself you will do terribly on the exam, or dwelling on your inadequacies are all forms of self sabotage. Try positive forms of "self talk" instead. Say to yourself, "I will pass this test." Consciously replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Think of tough situations you have survived in the past, and what you did for yourself that helped. Focus on your achievements. Did you improve on your practice tests? Be proud of yourself. Did you master an area you thought you never would? Good for you.

Be aware of how your body feels. Often, stress sneaks up on us. Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, are invaluable. Inhale slowly, and count to

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ten as you slowly exhale. Also, try to maintain a regular exercise schedule as you are studying, whether it be running, walking, aerobics, swimming, or yoga. Exercise is a wonderful tension reliever and will help provide you with the mental and physical energy you will need during stressful periods. Exercise also helps alleviate depression and anxiety. Maintaining good eating habits is also key. Try to maintain a balanced diet consisting of plenty of fruits and vegetables and complex carbohydrates. Avoid overloading on unhealthful snacks such as candy and refined sugar, as they will only make you more tired.

Try to avoid cramming just days before the exam, and get a good night's sleep, not only the night before the exam, but for several days beforehand.

4 Important Steps Before the Test

Once you arrive, you will need to leave your personal belongings outside the testing room. You will be taking the NCLEX® at a Sylvan Testing Center. Your nursing program will provide you with the contact information for the Center. In order to make an appointment at the Center to take the exam, you must first register with your State Board of Nursing, which will provide you with an *Authorization to Test*, good for thirty days. Information on this document will be used when you call to make your Testing Center appointment. You may tell the Center your preferred date for testing. When you schedule the date, write on the Authorization form the date and time you have chosen. The exam is five hours, and you should expect that you will need all that time, in addition to the time necessary to check in and be assigned a seat. You will not receive any confirmation from Sylvan.

Be sure eat a healthy breakfast the morning of the exam, and to bring your two forms of identification with you — you will need to keep them with you at all times. The day of the test, allow plenty of time to get to the test location. Bring your *Authorization to Test*, as it

reflects your legal name. If your name has changed since you applied to test, you must bring legal documentation that gives your new name, such as a marriage license, divorce decree, or court action and all documents needed for identification. You must bring one of the following types of primary ID: valid



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employee ID, school ID, state ID or passport, all of which must have a photo. You will also need a secondary form of ID such as bank card, your social security card, or credit card. You are not permitted to bring any study aids to the Center. At the Center, your photo will also be taken, and a thumbprint will be made. You will be oriented to the use of the computer before the start of testing. During testing, there is one mandatory break and another optional one.

5 How CAT Works

The NCLEX® uses Computer Adaptive Testing, which means that the computer adapts the test to the individual's particular knowledge base. The test begins with a question of moderate difficulty. If you answer the question correctly, it poses a question of greater difficulty, continuing until you answer incorrectly. As soon as you answer a question correctly, increasingly more difficult questions are asked until you answer incorrectly, and the process repeats itself.

When the computer determines that your answers reflect a certain level of knowledge in all these areas, testing is finished. If the knowledge level is sufficiently high in all areas,

you have passed the test. If the knowledge level is rated low, you have failed the test. The minimum number of test questions you must answer before the computer determines passing or failing is 75; the maximum number of questions that may be answered is 265. The questions used in the exam reflect the

required competencies for new registered nurses nationwide. This is established through periodic job analyses and employer surveys that estimate the knowledge beginning RNs need to practice safely. A cut-off point specific to each applicant is then developed,

which the computer uses to determine pass or fail.

Finishing the exam early (before the five-hour time period), means either that you correctly answered the more challenging questions and so quickly established competence, or that you consistently performed poorly on even on the easier questions and so failed the exam. Your computer grades your exam, and the results are transmitted to the organization that controls the testing process. The report is sent to your state board of nursing, and you will be notified by mail of the results within a month of taking the exam. ■

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Resources

<http://PassNclex.mcphu.edu>
The web site of the Medical College of Pennsylvania Hahnemann University, sponsor of NSNA's review course.

www.ncsbn.org

The web site of the National Council of State Board of Nursing. Includes information on all aspects of the National Council Licensing Exam.