

1

Strategies for Studying and Test Taking

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If you are reading this chapter, you are likely concerned about how best to prepare to take your certification examination. Understanding your current study and test-taking strategies is an important step in deciding where you may benefit from making some changes or additions to these strategies. Studying for a certification examination is somewhat different from studying for a single test in a course you are taking. Test-taking skills and strategies are very important to success. Preparing yourself to be a successful test taker is as important as studying for the test. The primary goal of this chapter is to assist potential test takers in knowing how to study for and take a certification test. Please use the described strategies in a way that meets your individualized study and test-taking needs.

Strategy 1: Know Yourself

Over years of test taking, each of us has developed certain study and testing behaviors, some of which are helpful and others of which present obstacles to success. Take control of your preparation for your certification exam by identifying study and test-taking behaviors you need to change, recognizing those behaviors you have in place that are beneficial, and developing skills to improve your study and test-taking abilities.

Strategy 2: Know the Content to Be Studied

The National Certification Corporation (NCC) is the certifying body for women's health nurse practitioners (WHNPs), and the American Midwifery Certification Board (AMCB) is the certifying body for nurse-midwives and midwives. Both the NCC and AMCB provide content outlines as well as information on examination content development on their websites. The website for NCC is <http://www.nccwebsite.org>, and the website for AMCB is <http://www.amcbmidwife.org>.

The content of these certification examinations and the percentages for each area of content are based on periodic job analysis surveys of practicing advanced practice nurses representing the WHNP focus for NCC or the nurse-midwife and midwife focus for AMCB. Both NCC and AMCB use a rigorous process to ensure that test questions are reflective

of current evidence-based practice and that the questions are constructed using psychometric test construction principles.

NCC offers lists of study resources that include textbooks and other widely used reference books. These lists are not meant to be inclusive but to provide you with examples of resources you might consider, along with the textbooks you have from your courses. Although you want a variety of resources, do not overload yourself with too many books to review because this will be very time consuming, overwhelming, anxiety provoking, and likely redundant in information that you need to know for the examination.

Strategy 3: Know Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Read through the exam content outline provided by the certification examination body. Conduct a content self-assessment. Rate yourself on each content area. Use a simple rating scale such as the following:

- 1 = requires no review
- 2 = requires minimal review
- 3 = requires intensive review
- 4 = start from the beginning

Table 1-1 provides a sample exam content assessment (not all content included). Be honest with your self-assessment. It is far better to recognize

■ **Table 1-1 Sample Content Self-Assessment**

Gynecology: Gynecologic Disorders	
Category: Provided by Test Giver (representative list—not all content included in table)	Rating: Provided by Test Taker
Abnormalities of puberty	3
Menstrual disorders	3
Vaginitis/vaginosis	1
Sexually transmitted infections	2
Pelvic pain	3
Infertility—etiologic factors, initial workup	4
Cervical cytology, HPV testing	2
Breast disorders	2

your content weaknesses when you can study and remedy them rather than thinking during the exam how you wished you had studied more. And also be honest with your content strengths: If you know the material, do not waste time studying it.

Strategy 4: Develop a Study Plan

Use the exam content outline and your content self-assessment to develop a study plan. This should require no more than 60 minutes and is well worth the time, with the potential for reducing study stress and enhancing exam success.

The content outlines provided by NCC and AMBC include percentages for the major topic areas that approximate the number of questions that will be devoted to that content. These percentages can change from year to year.

Develop your study plan to coordinate with the following:

- Examination content outline
- Percentages for content areas
- Content self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses
- Time available for study before you plan to take the exam

Prioritize your study needs, and start with weak areas first. Avoid the temptation to start with what you know best. Allow for a general review at the end of the study plan. There is no single correct answer to the question, How much time should I spend studying? Spend as much time as you need, start the process early, know your strengths and weaknesses, plan, monitor your progress, and be flexible (Sefcik, Bice, & Prerost, 2013).

Table 1-2 illustrates a partial study plan developed on the basis of the exam content self-assessment in Table 1-1.

Strategy 5: Get Down to the Business of Studying

The quality of your studying is as important as the quantity of your studying. This is directly influenced by organization and concentration.

▪ **Table 1-2 Sample Study Plan: Gynecologic Disorders Content**

Study Day	Date	Content	Resources	Time
1		Infertility—etiologic factors, initial workup Rating 4	Chapter 7 Textbook A Chapter 14 Textbook B Class notes	6:00–7:30 p.m.
		Abnormalities of puberty Rating 3	Chapter 3 Textbook A Class notes	7:30–8:30 p.m.
2		Menstrual disorders Rating 3	Chapter 4 Textbook A Class notes	6:00–7:00 p.m.
		Pelvic pain Rating 3	Chapter 5 Textbook A Class notes	7:00–8:00 p.m.
3		Sexually transmitted infections Rating 2	Chapter 6 Textbook A Class notes CDC STD Treatment Guidelines	6:00–7:00 p.m.
		Cervical cytology, HPV testing Rating 2	Class notes ASCCP Guideline Algorithms	7:00–8:00 p.m.

If you expend effort on both aspects of exam preparation, you can increase your examination success.

Preparation for Studying: Getting Organized

Study habits are developed early in our educational experiences. Some of our habits enhance learning; others do not. To increase study effectiveness, organization of study materials and time is essential. Organization decreases frustration, allows for easy resumption of study, and increases concentrated study time.

Create Your Own Study Space

Select a study area that is yours alone, free from distractions, comfortable, and well lit. The ventilation and room temperature should be comfortable because a cold room makes it difficult to concentrate and a warm room may make you sleepy. All your study materials should be left in your study space. The basic premise of a study space is that it facilitates a mind-set that you are there to study. When you interrupt study, it is best to leave your materials just as they are. Do not close books or put away notes because you will just have to relocate them, wasting your study time, when you resume study.

Identify Your Peak Study Times and Maximize Them

Study in short bursts. Each of us has our own biologic clock that dictates when we are at our peak during the day. If you are a morning person, you are generally active and alert early in the day, slowing down and becoming drowsy by evening. If you are an evening person, you do not completely wake up until late morning and hit your peak in the afternoon and evening. Each person generally has several peaks during the day. It is best to study during those times when your alertness is at its peak.

Spread Out Study Time and Give Your Brain Breaks

Studying is more effective when spread out over a longer period of time. This is a concept called distributed effort or spaced studying (Medina, 2008) and is the opposite of cramming. In addition to spreading study time over

several days or weeks, you also need to give your brain rests during any one study period. The best approach to breaks is to plan them and give yourself a conscious break. This approach eliminates the daydreaming or wandering-thought approach to breaks that many of us use. It is better to get up, leave the study area, and do something non-study-related for longer breaks. For shorter breaks of 5 minutes or so, leave your desk, gaze out the window, or do some stretching exercises. When your brain says to give it a rest, accommodate it! You will learn more with less stress.

Focus on Major Concepts and Facts

Study the correct content. It is easy to become bogged down in the detail of the content you are studying. However, it is best to focus on the major concepts or the state-of-the-art content. Leave the details, the suppositions, and the experience at the door of your study area. Concentrate on the major textbook facts and concepts that revolve around the subject matter being tested.

Use Your Study Plan Wisely

Your study plan is meant to be a guide, not a rigid schedule. You should take your time with studying. Do not rush through the content just to remain on schedule. Occasionally, study plans need revision. If you take more or less time than planned, readjust the plan for the time gained or lost. The plan can guide you, but you must go at your own pace.

Study Actively

Active study techniques have been shown to strengthen neural connections and improve ability to remember materials being studied. Three techniques for active study are recitation, visualization, and association (Hopper, 2013).

- **Recitation:** When you recite something in your own words, you pay more attention. You also get immediate feedback. If you are able to explain something in your own words out loud, you understand it. Also when you hear something, you have used a different part of your brain than when you read it. Having a study partner or group can facilitate the use of recitation if you ask each other questions and answer out loud.
- **Visualization:** Try to visualize the concepts you are studying in some way, such as by imagining a patient, either someone you have met or a fictional person, with a specific condition. Use illustration and pictures from textbooks as you study. Take notes or make flashcards to promote visualization. Convert connected information into a visual graph (pie, chart, concept map).
- **Association:** You can remember information more efficiently if you link new information to something you already know. Ask yourself: If I were to put this in a computer (brain) file, does a similar or related file already exist so that I don't have to create a new one?

Use your individual study quirks. Some people stand, others walk around, and some play background music. Whatever helps you to concentrate and study better is what you should use.

Use Study Aids

Although there is no substitute for individual studying, several resources, if available, are useful in facilitating learning. One study aid already discussed is the detailed content outlines provided by NCC and AMCB. Review courses and review books such as this one can provide an effective means for organizing or summarizing your individual study. They generally provide the content parameters, the major concepts of the content that you need to know, and an opportunity to clarify not-well-understood content, as well as a review of known material. Question-and-answer resources provide practice in test taking and are most helpful when answer rationales

are included to reinforce the correct information. Study groups are an excellent resource for summarizing and refining content. They provide an opportunity for thinking through your knowledge base, with the advantage of hearing another person's point of view. Each of these study aids increases understanding of content and, when used correctly, increases effectiveness of knowledge application.

Know When to Quit

It is best to stop studying when your concentration ebbs. It is unproductive and frustrating to force yourself to study. It is far better to rest or unwind, and then resume at a later point in the day. Avoid studying outside your morning or afternoon concentration peaks and focus your study energy on your right time of day or evening.

Strategy 6: Become Testwise

Purpose of a Test Question

Test questions are developed to examine different cognitive domains: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. You will most likely see questions in the knowledge, comprehension, application, and analysis domains on the certification exam. A knowledge question requires the test taker to recall a fact; comprehension questions require the test taker to understand the meaning of the fact; application questions require the test taker to be able to apply knowledge in a concrete situation; and analysis questions require the test taker to be able to break down information, identifying parts, relationships, and organization (Wittman-Price, Godshall, & Wilson, 2013).

When taking a test, you want to be aware of whether you are being asked a fact or to use that fact. An example of a knowledge question is as follows:

Which of the following statements about herpes genitalis is true?

- Suppressive therapy does not reduce viral shedding.
- Systemic symptoms are uncommon during recurrences.
- Topical acyclovir is as effective as oral acyclovir for recurrences.
- Transmission of the virus is unlikely to occur during the prodromal phase.

To answer this question correctly, you must retrieve memorized facts. Understanding the fact, knowing why it is important, and analyzing what should be done with the fact are not needed.

An example of a question that tests comprehension is as follows:

A 24-year-old female presents with complaint of itching and pain in her genital area that started 2 days ago. She also complains of pain with urination. Physical examination reveals bilateral inguinal lymphadenopathy, vulvar edema with multiple vesicles and ulcerated lesions, and a large amount of watery vaginal discharge. The most likely diagnosis is:

- Genital herpes
- Genital warts
- Syphilis
- Trichomoniasis

To answer this question correctly, you must retrieve several facts about the signs and symptoms of herpes genitalis and understand that, put together, the findings are likely indicative of herpes rather than some other diagnosis.

An example of an application question is as follows:

A 24-year-old female presents with a history of herpes diagnosis 6 months ago and asks if there is anything she can do to deal with recurrent outbreaks.

She has had two recurrences since her initial occurrence. Appropriate information for this patient would include which of the following?

- Comfort measures and topical acyclovir are the best approach to managing her recurrences.
- She can be assured that she is unlikely to have more than one or two recurrences a year.
- She can consider episodic therapy for recurrences or suppressive therapy with acyclovir.*
- Suppressive medication is not recommended for someone who has less than four recurrences a year.

To answer this question correctly, you must know and comprehend facts about herpes recurrences and suppression, and apply this information to an individual patient situation. You must think through each answer and decide its relevance and importance to the situation in question.

An example of an analysis question is as follows:

A 24-year-old female tells you her sex partner for the past year has a history of herpes genitalis. You order a herpes type-specific serologic test. The results show HSV-1 positive and HSV-2 negative. The accurate interpretation of these results is that she:

- has acquired a herpes infection from her sex partner.
- has not acquired a herpes infection from her sex partner.
- does not have the herpes virus type that causes genital herpes infection.
- may or may not have acquired herpes infection from her partner.*

To answer this question correctly, you must be able to break down the information about the type-specific serologic test results and identify the parts and relationships with the information you have about the patient and her partner.

Question Format

Most standardized tests such as those used for nursing licensure and certification use multiple-choice questions (MCQs) composed of three or four answer options for which you are required to select the one best answer. Both NCC and AMCB certification exams use MCQs with either three or four answer options (American Midwifery Certification Board, 2016; National Certification Corporation, 2016).

Successful test taking depends not only on content knowledge but also on test-taking skill. If you are unable to impart your knowledge through the vehicle used for its conveyance, that is, the MCQ, your test-taking success is in jeopardy.

Components of MCQs

MCQs include two basic components: a stem and a set of answer options. The stem presents information needed by the test taker to select an answer. The stem may be short, consisting of just a phrase or a sentence or two, or it can be a paragraph in length. When the stem is more than a phrase or sentence in length, it usually includes a separate interrogatory question or statement that poses the question to be answered. The interrogatory question or statement helps to direct the test taker's thinking.

The answer options are three or four possible responses to the question. The correct option is called the *keyed response*, and all other options are called *distractors* (Sefcik et al., 2013). The keyed response may be the only correct answer or it may be the best answer. Higher-level questions usually have a best answer along with distractor options that may be partially correct or that may not address all of the data presented in the question stem.

Knowing the components of a test question helps you sift through the information presented and focus on the question's intent. Always

▪ **Table 1-3 Anatomy of a Test Question**

Stem	A woman using the contraceptive vaginal ring (NuvaRing) removes the ring during sex in the evening and realizes the next morning that she forgot to reinsert it.
Interrogatory statement	If this is week 1 or 2 for this ring, she should be advised to:
Options	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> discard this ring and insert a new one immediately. discard this ring, wait for withdrawal bleed, and insert a new ring. reinsert this ring with no backup needed if it has been out for fewer than 8 hours. <i>reinsert this ring and use a backup method for 7 days.</i>

focus on the information in the stem and, more specifically, what the interrogatory question or statement is asking. Avoid reading elements into the question that aren't specifically included in the stem and options (see **Table 1-3**).

Practice, Practice, Practice

Taking practice tests can improve performance. Although they can assist in evaluation of your knowledge, their primary benefit is to assist you with test-taking skills. You should use them to evaluate your thinking process; your ability to read, understand, and interpret questions; and your skills in completing the mechanics of the test.

Exam resources, including sample questions for the NCC and the AMCB, are available in the examination content information. The questions at the end of each chapter of this book and the separate test questions available online provide you with more than 900 MCQs. The answers to the questions are provided along with rationales.

Strategy 7: Apply Basic Rules of Standardized Test Taking

Read All Directions Carefully

Be sure that you have completed all information needed to register for the exam and that you have all required documents and personal identification. Know what you are permitted to have in the testing area and what is not permitted. It is helpful to list everything you need for admission to the examination as well as permitted items you want to have with you during the exam.

The Night Before the Test

Follow your regular routine the night before a test. Eat familiar foods. Avoid the temptation to cram all night. Go to bed at your regular time.

The Day of the Test

Be prepared for exam day. It is important to familiarize yourself with the test site, the building, the parking, and travel route prior to the exam day. If you must travel, arrive early to allow time for this familiarization. On exam day, allow yourself plenty of time to arrive at the site; plan to get there 30 minutes before your scheduled exam time. Wear comfortable

clothes and have a good breakfast that morning. Know whether you will be able to have food or drink in the exam area or will be able to have them available for a short break.

Know what to do if you experience any electronic or other difficulties during the examination. In addition to addressing the issue at the test site, you should also notify the certifying board.

Use Your Time Wisely and Effectively

Most standardized, computer-delivered exams have a digital clock on the computer indicating how much time you have remaining. This feature may be turned off and on during the exam if you find it creates anxiety for you. Know the number of questions on the exam and the total amount of time you have to complete the exam. For example, if there are 175 questions and you have 3 hours to complete the exam, you have approximately 1 minute per question. If there are 175 questions and you have 4 hours to complete the exam, you have approximately 1½ minutes per question. Remember that a good number of questions will likely take you less than 1 minute to answer. Skip or make an educated guess on difficult questions, and mark and return to them later.

Identify key words in the stem before looking at the options for each question. Confine your thinking to the information provided.

Read and consider all options. Be systematic and use problem-solving techniques. Relate options to the question and balance them against each other. Eliminate answers you know are wrong and focus on the remaining most likely correct responses.

Answer all the questions on the exam. Currently, the NCC and AMCB certification examination scores are based only on the total number of correct answers selected. This means that you are not further penalized for an incorrect answer. So answer all the test questions, even if you are only guessing (American Midwifery Certification Board, 2016; National Certification Corporation, 2016).

Go back to questions you were not able to answer on the first pass through the test. You may have gained information from subsequent questions that is helpful in answering previous questions, or you may be less anxious and more objective by the end of the test.

However, avoid second-guessing answer choices you have already made. Your first response is likely the best response. If you tend to second-guess your responses, review only those questions that you could not answer on the first pass through the exam. Computer-based exams allow you to mark questions that you may want to address later in the exam.

Do not change an answer without a good reason. Good reasons might be realizing you misread the question the first time or running across information in later questions that either jogs your memory or gives you a better idea of what the correct answer might be (Lamonte, 2007; Sefcik et al., 2013).

Strategy 8: Psych Yourself Up

Adopt an “I Can” Attitude

Believing you can succeed is the key to success. Self-belief inspires and gives you the power to achieve your goals. Without a success attitude, the road to your goal is much harder. This “I can” attitude must permeate all your efforts in test taking, from studying to improving your test-taking skills, to actually completing the exam. Think positively. Performance is influenced not only by knowledge and skill but also by attitude. Individuals who regard an exam as an opportunity or challenge will be more successful.

Take Control

By identifying your goal, deciding how to accomplish it, and developing a plan for achieving it, you take control. Do not leave your success to chance; control it through action and attitude.

Manage Anxiety

A little stress or anxiety can be productive because it can serve as a motivator to take a test seriously and to prepare for it adequately. Too much anxiety can have negative consequences that include not using study time productively; misreading questions; changing answers from right to wrong; and developing physical symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea, and palpitations.

Active anxiety-control strategies include relaxation techniques (i.e., guided imagery, meditation), stress management, attention to wellness behaviors (i.e., healthy eating, adequate sleep, regular exercise), combining individual review with review in small study groups for social support and increased confidence, completing practice questions, preparing well in advance, and taking the time to review all the processes on examination day (Lamonte, 2007; McDowell, 2008).

For persons with severe test anxiety, interventions such as cognitive therapy, systematic desensitization, study skills counseling, and biofeedback have all been used with some success. Techniques derived from these approaches can influence the results achieved by changing attitudes and approaches to test taking and thereby reducing anxiety.

Persevere, Persevere, Persevere!

Endurance must underlie all your efforts. Call forth those reserve energies when you have had all you think you can take. Rely on yourself and your support systems to help you maintain a sense of direction and keep your goal in the forefront.

Reward Yourself

Reward yourself during your exam preparation and once the exam has been completed. You alone hold the key to success; use what you have wisely.

Know How You Will Manage Failure

An initial failure on the certification exam is a possibility. Keep in mind that passing or not passing the test is not a measure of an individual's self-worth or a reflection of an individual's true value. An initial failure does not mean that the individual will not be an excellent nurse practitioner or midwife. If you do not pass the test on the first try, do not dwell on the failure. Recognize what you need to change in your preparation and move forward. Failure is a time to begin again; use it as a motivator to do better.

Summary

This chapter provided concepts, strategies, and techniques for improving study and test-taking skills. Your first task in improvement is to know yourself: how you study and how you take a test. You should use your strengths and remedy the weaknesses. Next, you need to organize your study time, and concentrate on using your strengths and new and improved skills to be successful. Create a study space, develop a plan of action, and then implement that plan during your periods of peak concentration. Before taking the exam, be sure you understand the components of a test question, can identify key words and phrases, and practice. Apply the test-taking rules during the exam process.

Finally, believe in yourself, your knowledge, and your talent. Believing you can accomplish your goal facilitates the fact that you will.

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