



Lions, Tigers, and Test Taking . . .

Oh my!

*Jeri Ashley, MSN, RN, AOCNS®, CHPN
Certification Advocate*

Fear of taking tests is a common source of anxiety. It stems in part from doubts about one's ability to take tests. ONCC exams include multiple-choice test items to evaluate critical thinking and mastery of oncology nursing knowledge. The use of sound test-taking strategies can give a candidate a sense of control over test questions and lessen one's sense of anxiety.

To begin, examine the structure of a multiple-choice item. The three components are

- **Stem:** This is the part of the item that contains the necessary facts that you need to choose the correct answer. Put another way, it contains the problem to be addressed.
- **Background Information:** Found in the body of the stem is information related to the problem; however, these added facts do not necessarily assist in answering the question.
- **Options:** In ONCC's multiple-choice items, four answer options are provided. Only one is the correct answer, while the other three serve as distracters. Use the "anatomy of test questions" in the following test-taking strategies.

Read the stem with attention to the details. One overlooked or misread word can change your thought process as you proceed to the options.

Know what the question is asking before reviewing the options. A common mistake reported is a nurse "recognizing" an option as an important fact that was learned; however, this option does not answer the question. We become drawn to the familiar. One suggestion for avoiding familiarity bias is to not look at the answers until you clearly have determined what the question is asking.

Pay attention to only the facts presented in the stem and background. Do not "read into the question," for this can contribute to a false sense of security that is based on assumptions—not the facts. Assuming certain facts should be present, you may add those to your decision making.

Use prioritization in responding to the correct option. For example, the "ABCs" of airway, breathing, and circulation is a way to think about prioritization. Questions asking, "What is the best response. . ." often require the process of prioritization. Read all four options carefully before making a decision. One colleague reported that she prioritizes by thinking, "What is going to kill the patient first?"

Frequently, one has ambivalence toward the options that contribute to a sense of lost control over the test item. On those items, use a process of elimination to determine the correct response. Some test takers use a framework of "true-false" to examine the options. If you find that a part of an option is false, conclude that the complete option is false. Once you are left with one or two options that could be correct, reread the question, then choose the best option to respond to the question.

At the end of the day, no test-taking strategy replaces knowledge of the subject content. Begin test preparation early to give ample time for mastery of the test blueprint content. Armed with content knowledge and test-taking strategies, you will feel less like the nurse sitting at the computer testing center, staring at the keyboard, saying, "I keep hitting 'escape' but I'm still here!"

Please note: ONCC does not guarantee success with the use of these strategies.