

The Top Ten Not-So-Secrets about “The Boards”

From: Case SM, Swanson DB. *Constructing Written Test Questions for the Basic and Clinical Sciences, 3rd edition (revised)*. NBME, Philadelphia, 1999.

[www.nbme.org/about/itemwriting.asp]

The purpose of USMLE Step 1 is: “Testing an examinee’s understanding of and **ability to apply important concepts** of the basic medical sciences considered essential for the current and future practice of medicine.” (Emphasis added.)

“Application of knowledge” test items require the examinee to:

- Synthesize patient findings into a diagnosis
- Use pathophysiology to predict findings from conditions
- Explain why something has occurred
- Solve “If ...then” problems
- Interpret data, graphs, tables
- Use formulas to calculate a result

1. For “**true/false**” items, imprecise phrases and vague terms such as “is associated with” or “is useful for” or “is important” or “may” or “could be” or “usually” or “frequently” are avoided.

2. For “**true/false**” items, options must be absolutely true or false; no shades of gray are permitted.

3. For one-best-answer items, A-type questions are the *most common*:

Which of the following is the most effective agent for treatment of [condition X]?

- A. green
- B. orange
- C. blue
- D. yellow
- E. red

4. Many questions will have the following format:

Stem: (Clinical case presentation) A [patient with demographics] has [symptoms]. His past medical history includes [diseases]. On physical exam the findings are [details].

Lead-in: (Question) Which of the following is the mostly likely agent responsible for his symptoms?

Options:

- A. green
- B. orange
- C. blue
- D. yellow
- E. red

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5. Expect A-type questions to be written so that you could answer the lead-in without ever seeing the options (assuming you know the material!).

6. In the stem, expect that sometimes there will be incidental findings, but not “red herrings” or untruthful statements by patients.

7. Negative A-type questions will be *rarely if ever* encountered.

~~Each of the following is correct EXCEPT:~~

8. K-type questions are NOT used.

Answers

~~A: 1,2,3 only~~

~~B: 1,3 only~~

~~C: 2,4 only~~

~~D: 4 only~~

~~E: All are correct~~

9. R-type (extended matching) items are also used.

For each patient with [this particular scenario], select the most likely diagnosis.

1. Scenario 1

4. Scenario 4

2. Scenario 2

5. Scenario 5

3. Scenario 3

6. Scenario 6

Options:

A. Disease A

D. Disease D

B. Disease B

E. Disease E

C. Disease C

F. Disease F

10. Being “test-wise” isn’t going to be much help. Do NOT expect to see:

- Grammatical cues: distractors that don’t follow grammatically from the stem.
- Logical cues: a subset of the options that are collectively exhaustive.
- Absolute terms: terms such as “always” or “never” that are only in some options.
- Long correct answer: a correct answer that is longer or more specific or more complete than other options.
- Word repeats: a word or phrase that is included in the stem and correct answer.
- Convergence strategy: a correct answer that includes the most elements in common with other options.

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Sample lead-ins:

Which of the following tests would have predicted these findings?

Which of the following is the most appropriate intervention?

For which of the following conditions is the patient at greatest risk?

Which of the following is most likely to have prevented this condition?

Which of the following is the most likely explanation for these findings?

Which of the following is the most likely location of the patient's lesion?

Which of the following is the most likely pathogen?

Which of the following is the most likely diagnosis?

Which of the following is the most appropriate next step in diagnosis?

Which of the following is most likely to confirm the diagnosis?

Which of the following is the most appropriate initial (or next) step in patient care?

Which of the following is the most effective management?

Which of the following is the most appropriate pharmacotherapy?

Which of the following is the first priority in caring for this patient?