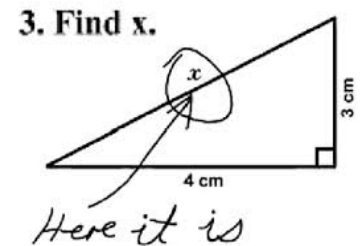


# Taking Exams

Lisa Medoff, Ph.D.  
Education Specialist  
Stanford School of Medicine  
lmedoff@stanford.edu

- In addition to studying the content, plan for actually taking the exam
  - Know where you will sit to avoid distractions, such as a clock that ticks too loudly or watching the progress of others.
  - Have a plan for allocating time and how you will approach questions when you do not know the answer.
- Taking the exam
  - Underline the key words in the question, especially words such as, “always,” “not,” “never,” and “except.” Make reviewing these questions a priority when you double-check your answers.
  - Think about and try to answer multiple-choice questions as if they were short-answer instead to avoid second-guessing yourself with alternative answer choices.
  - Consider each multiple-choice answer a separate question unto itself. What context/condition would fit that answer? This strategy can be especially helpful if you are having trouble working from the prompt.
  - If you get stuck, try to trigger your memory by taking a few seconds to visualize or jot down anything you know about related topics.
  - Always check your answers if you have time. Do not change answers unless you misread the question or have other proof that your original answer was incorrect.
- Test anxiety
  - Prepare for test anxiety before and during the exam. What strategies or routines help you stay calm the night before, a few minutes before, and during the exam?
  - For some people, deep breathing, a quick walk, or muscle relaxation is helpful. For others, combatting automatic thoughts (e.g. challenging the thought “I’m not meant to



be in medical school.”), having a mantra, (e.g. “You’ll be fine, you’ll be fine.”), or positive visualization (e.g. seeing yourself smiling when you get the graded exam back) are useful. Try a combination and see what works for you.

- Taking a minute to jot down information you are afraid you will forget before you even look at the questions can also be a calming exercise.
- Keep the exam in perspective. Of course doing well on exams is important, but even if your worst-case scenario happens and you fail one exam, it is not the end of your medical career. Use poor performance only as a cue to analyze and alter your study habits, rather than as an absolute judgment about your ability to complete medical training.
- Post-test analysis
  - Take the time to review exams, noting why you got both correct and incorrect answers. Adjust your future study and test taking plans accordingly. Some reasons to consider regarding incorrect answers are:
    - Did not study (Did not know to study? Ran out of study time?)
    - Misunderstood information while learning it
    - Learned the information, but could not recall it during the exam
    - Ran out of time to complete the exam
    - Misread the question
    - Test anxiety
    - Physical issues (e.g. not feeling well, tired, hungry).
    - Overthought the question
    - Got down to 50/50 and picked the wrong one

**There was a  
back side on  
the test ?!**



If you need help with in the area of testing, make an appointment with your Education Specialist!