**Five Secrets for guessing answers on Classroom and Comprehensive Counseling Exams: 2025 and Beyond!**

Hi, this is Dr. Howard Rosenthal. Welcome to my first article of the new year.

I’ve been creating written and auditory counselor licensing and certification exam prep materials for what seems like eternity. I also wrote a title to assist human services workers who wish to become board certified. Along the way I’ve had my share of related professionals such as psychologists and social workers use my materials – generally (hopefully!) merely as a supplement -- since my books and audio programs are not 100% targeted to their specific disciplines.

The key point is I’ve rubbed elbows with thousands of people who have wrestled with these exams.

After corresponding with this seemingly endless stream of helpers I came to an epiphany and I’m going to share it with you right now. In terms of the counselor or student’s exam score: what they do when they don’t know an answer to a question is nearly as important as what they do when they do know the answer!

Or to put it a different way: Folks who score high on these comprehensive exams know a heck of a lot about the material, but they are also extremely adept at guessing answers! Some helpers just intuitively can guess very well. Most of us are probably just average ability in this respect.

**How I’m going to make you a good guesser**

So, for years I’ve taught folks the material, but now I’m going to teach you some insider secrets about how to guess when you don’t know an answer. Truth be told these exams are generally tough and, in my experience, communicating with test-takers almost everybody guesses when answering at least some of the questions.

Let me first emphasize the obvious point which is that the best strategy to answering the questions is for you to know the material. I mean seriously folks, that’s why I’ve been slaving over a freshly dusted or during COVID, a recently disinfected keyboard and talking into the wind screen of a microphone for more years than I care to remember.

Okay, let’s get into it.

**Secret #1.** The first tip is if you don’t know an answer always guess! Thou shall not leave answers blank. Check it out before you take the test, but most exams in our field do not have a penalty for guessing. Therefore, if a sane person doesn’t know the answer they should guess.

Now before you say everybody knows that I beg to differ. And even if you are correct that they do know it, they certainly don’t put their knowledge into practice. As a college professor who has taught over the years at several different institutions at both the undergraduate and graduate level, I can tell you I have almost never come across a class where some students did not leave some test answers blank. Now you might say, “That’s because the test takers are careless or didn’t check over their work.” You may be right. However, I’m just saying, whatever the reason, it occurs and will adversely impact the individual’s score.

**Secret #2.** If two answer stems mean the same thing eliminate them both. For exam, if answer choice A reads, “50 percent of the participants in a study,” and choice B reads, “half of the participants in a study,” you automatically know choices A and B are incorrect since each question only has a single answer choice and both choices mean precisely the same thing ergo both cannot be correct.

Now, before we forge on, I want to give credit where credit is due. These gems of wisdom I am now going to share now are not my ideas. They are the work of William Poundstone. Why Poundstone?

Glad you asked!

Poundstone, who studied physics at MIT and is the author of fourteen books, looked at 100 different tests, 34 from schools including colleges, and 66 from other sources (e.g., the driver’s license exam or even some tests in magazines.) and he analyzed 2456 questions. That’s a lot of questions. He basically discovered, and this is monumental, that guessing need not be a random activity. *Some answers had a better statistical chance of being correct than others.*

**Secret #3.** For example, on most A, B, C, D answer stem exam, choice B is most likely to be the correct answer. Many of us were taught by well-meaning professors and mentors to guess C, but it turns out that was bad advice. In fact, his data illuminated the fact that choice C is statistically the worst guess. Horrors! Who knew? Well, now you do!

If your exam is one of those rare breeds with five answer stems (A, B, C, D, and E) then E is the best bet by a small margin.

**CPCE Test-Takers: Read This Before Taking the Exam!**

In 2024 the CPCE changed from a four-answer stem choice format (i.e., ABCD) to three answer stem choices (i.e., ABC). Therefore, the good news is that guessing on an exam with just three answers is statistically easier than the old format using four answer stems. But I wouldn’t get too excited just yet inasmuch as Poundstone’s findings concluded that on exams with the ABC format the advice to guess B when in doubt **will not work**. In fact, no letter choice enjoys an advantage.

However, the good news is that all the other strategies in this article can and should be used to guess like a seasoned pro . . . so go for it!!!!

**Secret #4.** Pick the longest answer. The folks who write these exams must be sure the correct answer covers all the bases, so the right answer is often a tad longer than the other choices. Eyeball each answer choice to determine the length and count the words if you must.

**Secret #5.** This one is the best. I mean the crème of the crop; the absolute bomb. If the answer choices include “all of the above” or “none of the above” you have just won, the test-takers lottery since there is a huge chance one of these key choices will be the correct answer. In one text he analyzed with chapter tests 65% of the answers fell into this category. Overall – looking at all the tests he analyzed – 52% followed this pattern. Seriously, that is jaw-dropping amazing.

If you are unsure whether to employ these strategies, I implore you to remember these sage words of Andrew Salter, the father of conditioned reflex therapy, “In the report card of life nobody gets a mark for effort,”

Now, for the first time in history, you really can make educated guesses on these seemingly larger than life exams.

If you want to learn more, and I mean a lot more, an in-depth discussion of the strategies discussed herein including the whole scoop on classroom true/false tests, check out my YouTube video *Dr. Rosenthal swears these tips for guessing NCE/CPCE and other counseling exam answers are ethical!* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GguY660SmU*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GguY660SmU)

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