Board Prep with Practice Questions: Knowing, Thinking & Guessing

Completing numerous practice questions from a board review question bank is probably the single best way to prepare for board exams, providing the greatest return on invested time and effort. Practice questions provide exposure to biomedical science content in a clinical, problem-solving context with concomitant opportunities to hone reasoning skills. Completing practice questions can help identify and fill knowledge gaps, improve test-taking skills, and be used to gauge progress toward a performance goal.

However, to use practice questions most effectively, you must not only do them but also thoughtfully analyze your performance. This requires more than a simple review of the explanation as to why the right answer was right and the wrong answers were wrong.

One way to really put your Q-bank to work for you is to incorporate the KTG method described below. You do not have to do this level of analysis every time you complete a set of questions, but it is *particularly helpful if you feel you are not making sufficient progress or often find yourself surprised by scores that are lower than you expected*. An important goal of this exercise is to provide an objective means of shining a light on problems that may otherwise be cloaked by faulty perceptions. Once a problem is identified, a solution can be sought!

10 Steps for Analyzing Your Performance Using the KTG Method

1. Use your question bank to create a block of 25 questions (mixed or subject-based).
2. Use the timed mode.
3. Before you begin, number from 1-25 on a piece of paper—don't skip this key step!
4. Work at a pace of 1 minute per question.
5. For each question, after you've selected your answer but before you move to the next question, write down two* (2) letters:
    1) Your answer selection—A, B, C, D, or E—the one* you believe is the best option
    2) K, T, or G—a *qualitative estimate of your level of confidence* in your answer selection
        K = Know = very confident
        T = Think = somewhat confident, able to eliminate three (3) or more options
        G = Guess = not confident, could only eliminate two (2) or fewer options
6. After completing all 25 questions, tally the number of Ks, Ts, and Gs.
7. Calculate your overall percent correct and mark the questions you got wrong.
8. Calculate the percent correct for each category of questions: K, T, and G. Example: Marked 10 questions as K; got 8 of 10 correct = 80% correct for K.
9. Analyze your results. If your metacognitive skills are working well, you should have a much higher percent correct (>90%) for the K questions, followed by T, then G.
10. Review explanations as indicated on page 2.

*If you tend to narrow down the options to two (2) and then guess, also record your second choice, but clearly indicate which of the two you would select as your final answer. If you get any of these wrong, check to see if your 2nd choice is indeed correct. If neither option is correct, then try to figure out where you went wrong in your thought process because something in the question led you astray.

What to do with incorrect answers on 'K' questions? These warrant a detailed evaluation. You should get almost no K questions wrong, but if you do, it may mean you either made a silly mistake (e.g., unintentionally clicked the wrong answer option) or *incorrectly ruled-out the best answer*. This is really important to figure out because **of all the types of errors one can make while answering a question, the latter is irrecoverable**: once you've ruled-out the right answer, there's no way to even guess correctly. If incorrect K questions are more than rare occurrences, the underlying cause may pose a significant barrier to getting a good score. Your combined errors in answer selection *and self-judgment* suggests a problem that goes beyond lack of content knowledge and could mean you misread or misinterpreted the question, jumped to a premature conclusion, overlooked important details, or were over-confident in your understanding of the facts of the question, etc. You must go back to these questions and pick apart your thought process. If you are unsure what your results mean or what to do about it, consider making an appointment with an academic advisor.

- Silly mistakes can be costly, e.g., the difference between a passing and a failing score. If you're making silly errors more than 1% of the time, you may be losing task-focus. Are you sleepy, hungry, distracted by the environment, or plagued by negative thoughts? Sometimes when people are nervous, they forget that determining the right answer is only the first step and a worthless one at that if wandering attention results in absent-minded answer-clicking.

What to do about 'T' and 'G' questions? Regardless of whether or not you guessed correctly, you should thoroughly review the content of these questions because if you're only able to rule out a few options, you have a clear knowledge gap. Take notes and use a review book, such as USMLE Step 1 Secrets, to study this content thoroughly.

What to do if you have very few 'K' questions and mostly 'T' and 'G' questions? The answer partly depends on whether you are getting more of these right or wrong.

- If you're *correctly* answering a high percentage of T and/or G questions, you may suffer from low self-confidence that is causing you to doubt your own knowledge and second-guess yourself more often than you should. You would greatly benefit from building your confidence. Using the KTG method on a regular basis might help you learn to trust your "intuition" and come to recognize you know more than you think you do. You may also want to consider personal counseling to directly address the underlying reasons for low self-confidence.
- If you're *incorrectly* answering a high percentage of these questions, you would likely benefit from further content review as well as improvement in test-taking skills.

What to do if you are answering a majority of questions correctly? Congratulations! Yet, even if you answer a question correctly, there is an opportunity to learn from it. If even a single detail was unfamiliar, review it because the real test could have a question about it. If you're doing well, but want to improve even more, think about how you could change the details of the vignette to make each wrong answer right, or try to imagine other questions based on the same vignette. For each clinical vignette, you could potentially ask many different questions: about the etiology, diagnosis, or treatment of the patient's problem; about the relevant anatomy or histology; about the underlying mechanisms involved in the immunology, physiology, pathophysiology, genetics, or biochemistry; about the microorganisms involved; about the pharmacology; or about principles and techniques of OPP/OMT, etc. Each question provides a world of possibilities to expand your knowledge and skills.