



# Landing a clinical practicum preceptor

Preparation and perseverance will help you find the right preceptor and site.

By Ginny Moore, DNP, WHNP-BC, and Sharon Fleming, DNP, PNP-PC

**JANIE DEE'S** excitement at being accepted into a nurse practitioner (NP) program is fading. She needs to find a preceptor for her clinical practicums, but after several calls to local agencies, she's received no responses. Janie's concerned that she'll lose her place in the program if she can't find a preceptor.

**M**any graduate NP programs require students to secure their own clinical sites and preceptors. The process can be challenging and frustrating, but taking an organized approach will help you find a preceptor in your preferred clinical setting.

## Understand the requirements

Before starting your search for a preceptor and clinical site, learn about your school's requirements.

The certifying body for your specialty and your school's credentialing organization determine the requirements for who may serve as a preceptor. Some specify that only an NP certified within your specialty may act as a preceptor, whereas others permit NPs outside of your specialty or providers (physicians, physician assistants) outside of your discipline. Knowing this information will help you narrow or broaden your search as necessary.

Site requirements may be defined by certifying and credentialing agencies and the individual program in which you're enrolled. Inpatient settings, outpatient clinics, private practices, health departments, and urgent care clinics are examples of sites that may be specified or excluded. The clinical coordinator for your program can help you identify settings most appropriate for your learning objectives.

## Prepare a preceptor packet

Prepare a packet of information to share with potential preceptors and sites. (See *What's in the packet?*)

Your cover letter should include how you learned about the practice and what you've heard about it. For example, if you were referred by someone, such as a classmate or a current patient who had positive experiences, include that information. And if the organization's mission statement resonates with you, include that as well. Remember this information and share it again during the interview process.

Some schools offer preceptor benefits in the form of monetary compensation, library privileges, workshop offerings, or adjunct faculty positions. Find out what benefits your school offers and include them in your preceptor packet.

## Begin your search

After you've researched the require-

ments and prepared your preceptor packet, you can begin your search.

### Get organized

Prepare a chart for documenting the details of your search. Include agency names, dates of contact, names and titles of who you spoke with or left messages for, and conversation or message details.

### Choose sites

The final list of sites you plan to contact should be those with a practice philosophy and care approach that resonate with you. If they have a mission or vision statement posted on their website, make sure it matches yours. You don't want to be in a practice with goals contradictory to yours.

You'll rely on your personal experiences to create the list, but you'll also want some outside input. Check in with family, friends, and colleagues to help you decide if a particular site or provider is a good match for you. Other resources include your school faculty, program alumni, and clinical coordinator. If you know where you want to practice after graduation, do an online search of practices in that area.

Practices that already have NPs may be more open to precepting NP students. But if these types of practices aren't an option, be a trailblazer and introduce the benefits of NPs.

Document as much information as you can about each practice on your list. You'll want to refer to these specifics when you start making contact.

### Make contact

Your initial contact—by phone or email—with potential sites will depend on personal preference and circumstance. If you're calling, avoid busy times of the day, such as when the site is opening or closing. If you're searching in distant areas, your only contact may be by phone or email; for closer locations, make an in-person visit.

For in-person visits, call ahead

## What's in the packet?

Before you begin your search for a preceptor and site, put together a packet of information that includes:

- cover letter
- résumé
- brief program overview and objectives
- required clinical hours
- required clinical experiences (including procedures)
- preceptor benefits
- evaluation process details.

and ask the receptionist the best time to visit and, if possible, make an appointment with the practice manager. Dress professionally and take your information packet to leave behind for the manager or provider.

Your objective for any method of contact is to determine whether the practice is willing to precept a student and the most appropriate person to speak with about a clinical placement. That person may be the provider, office manager, or administrator.

*Introduce* yourself and explain why you're contacting the practice. *Follow* with a positive statement about the practice or provider.

Prepare a script of consistent information to share with each site. Introduce yourself and explain why you're contacting the practice. Follow with a positive statement about the practice or provider. This statement may be based on your personal experience, positive feedback

from patients, or a sense of connection with the mission statement. Individualize the introduction for each practice you contact. After the introduction, your script should contain consistent information about your program requirements and course objectives. Conclude by asking when you can expect a response to your request.

### Follow up

After contacting each practice, send a thank-you email or note within 3 to 5 days. You want the practice to remember you, but you don't want to make contact too soon or too often. If you call, let the receptionist know that you're following up and who you spoke with previously. Express gratitude for any and all assistance you receive.

### Persevere

Preparation, though time-consuming, is key to finding a preceptor. Expect to make contact with several practices before securing a site. This is just the nature of the process. Perseverance coupled with a positive attitude will eventually lead to a successful clinical placement.

*Janie follows the advice in this article, and her preparation and organization pay off. She finds a preceptor and clinical placement that aligns with her professional goals and meets her specialty and school requirements.* ★

The authors work at Vanderbilt University School of Nursing in Nashville, Tennessee. Ginny Moore is an associate professor of nursing and director of the women's health nurse practitioner specialty. Sharon Fleming is a clinical instructor and clinical coordinator in the pediatric nurse practitioner primary care program.

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# Test-taking tips

Use your critical thinking skills to ace your next exam.

By Debra A. Hrelac, PhD, RNC

**T**est taking is a skill, whether you're a student currently enrolled in a nursing program or have just recently returned to school after several years in the workforce. In either case, these tips will help you build your test-taking muscles.

## Put on your critical-thinking cap

Multiple-choice exams can include charts, tables, or graphs, but usually you'll encounter three basic components to each question: the stem, the distractors, and the correct answer. The stem includes the situation or problem, all relevant information about the patient, including healthcare needs, and a question or an incomplete statement that you must answer. The distractors are the three incorrect answers that contain some correct information but aren't totally correct. Typically, one of the choices is completely wrong and easily eliminated. The right answer is the only totally correct choice.

The key to successful test taking is accurately identifying what the question is asking. Don't focus on the background information; think through the problem or situation as identified in the question. Whether it's a knowledge, application, delegation, or medication question, most questions are designed to test critical thinking. Several strategies will help you problem-solve your way to a correct answer.

## Reword the question

Carefully read the entire question. Don't rush through it or stop halfway through because you assume that you know what's being asked. Reword the stem to make it easier to understand, and answer the



question. Look for hints or key words, such as *most*, *all*, *first*, *best*, *primary*, *initial*, *always*, and *never*. On a paper exam, underline or circle those words so that you don't forget them when seeking your answer; on a computer exam, write them on scrap paper.

Questions with phrases in the stem stating "*further teaching is needed*" may indicate that the answer contains incorrect information or has a negative connotation. For example:

*The nurse has completed discharge teaching with the parents of a child suffering from atopic dermatitis. The nurse determines that further teaching is needed when the mother states it is most important upon discharge to:*

- Maintain a high-humidified environment to keep her child's skin moist.
- Keep her child's fingernails trimmed short and with no rough edges.
- Wrap her child's hands in soft cotton gloves.
- Dress her child in loose soft clothing.

The correct answer is "a." Since "*further teaching is needed*," you're looking for an answer that shows what the patient got wrong. In this case, a humid environment would increase bacterial growth and cause clothing to rub and irritate the child's skin.

The stem of an answer that holds positive or correct information might be worded like this: "*the patient demonstrates knowledge and understanding*." For example:

*When a nurse is providing education to a patient newly diagnosed with diabetes, which action demonstrates learning has occurred?*

- The nurse presented information to the patient about diabetes.
- The patient demonstrates how to inject insulin.
- The patient watches a film on diabetes.
- A primary care provider gives the patient a pamphlet on diabetes.

The correct answer is "b." "*Learning has occurred*" is a positive statement, so you're looking for a statement that demonstrates a learned action. "B" is the only answer where the patient demon-



strates a learned behavior that's related to what has been taught.

Choosing the correct answer may mean choosing among several answers that have some degree of correct information. This is where critical thinking especially comes into play. Go back to your interpretation of what the question was *really* asking, and the correct answer should be apparent.

### Answer the question first

Try answering the question before looking at the choices. Decide what the question is asking, what you believe the answer is, and then go to the choices and look for it. If your answer is there, you can choose it and move on. If not, either reword the question or look for patterns and relationships in the answers. Do you see information in the choices related to what you thought was the correct answer? If not, go back to the question, reread it, and be sure you understand what's being asked.

If you have an idea what the answer is, use that to eliminate incorrect answers. Read remaining choices to obtain clues. Reread the question and try to narrow down the answers by applying knowledge. Is the question asking for a course of action or a demonstration

## Don't panic, strategize

What do you do if you come across a question you don't understand? Some students spend their time rereading the question and answers, hoping that something will spark a memory for them. Others will simply shut down and panic.

Rather than do either of those things, take a deep breath and calm down. Read the question once, asking yourself, "What is the topic of this question?" If you don't know, it may not be stated, so don't waste time on it. Move to reading the answer choices, not to look for the answers, but to look for clues about what the question is asking. After you read the answers, reword the question using the clues you've gathered and use the tools you've practiced to answer your reworded question. This reverse strategy helps to clarify the information the question is seeking.

of knowledge? Look for clues in the question and in the remaining answers. Remember not to assume information. Nursing questions give you all the information you need to know. Don't read into them, wondering, for example, whether the patient is or isn't febrile. If it isn't

mentioned in the stem, then it isn't relevant to the answer.

### Eliminate wrong answers

After reading and rewording the question, read only the first answer choice. Does it answer your reworded question? If it doesn't, eliminate it from consideration. If it does or if you're not sure, keep it as a possibility. Follow this method with each of the remaining three choices, eliminating those that don't answer the question. This technique eventually will leave you with only one choice.

### Time is of the essence

You may be wondering if you'll have time to follow these steps with each question. The answer is almost always yes. Most students waste time staring at and rereading questions they don't understand rather than following these simple steps and using their critical-thinking skills. (See *Don't panic, strategize*.)

If you have concerns about any questions and you're taking a paper exam, mark them to come back to after completing everything else. However, keep these caveats in mind: If you're filling out a form where you fill in circles with your answers, you may forget to leave a circle blank for the skipped question you want to revisit. The grading of your entire test may be thrown off, resulting in failure. Also, skipping a question on a computerized test to return to later may not be an option.

### NCLEX-RN® preparation

The computerized National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN), the entry-to-practice examination for RNs in the United States, is organized into four categories of patient need to define nursing actions and competencies: safe and effective care environment, health promotion and maintenance, psychosocial integrity, and physiological integrity. (See *NCLEX-RN categories*.)

Most of the questions on the

## NCLEX-RN® categories

The National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) is divided into four categories.

**Safe and effective care of the environment**—In this section, you'll answer questions about maintaining hygiene (as a caregiver, for your patient, and in the environment) and infection control by managing care delivery and safety issues in the environment.

**Health promotion and maintenance**—The questions in this section focus on preventive healthcare, immunizations, comprehensive health assessment, health screening, and patient education.

**Psychosocial integrity**—Questions in this section focus on your ability to deliver mental health care to your patients and to view the whole patient—physically, mentally, and emotionally. You'll need to assess all aspects of well-being, including your ability to cope with the stress of being a nurse.

**Physiological integrity**—This section accounts for most of the questions in the exam. You'll be asked about proper nursing care delivery, priority-setting, disease knowledge, delegation, and leadership.

NCLEX-RN exam are multiple choice. You'll also encounter alternative-format questions such as multiple response, fill-in-the-blank, ordered response, and hot spots (which require you to identify and click on a specific area of the body [hot spot] on a graphic with your mouse). Questions may include charts, tables, graphics, sound, or video. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) website ([www.ncsbn.org](http://www.ncsbn.org)) has information about item formats with examples.

Every nursing class and every exam you take in school helps prepare you for taking your NCLEX-RN. And studies show that nursing students who complete between 400 to 500 NCLEX-style review questions for each class they take are better prepared for nursing class exams and are more likely to pass their NCLEX-RN examination.

The more you practice taking NCLEX-type exams, the better you do on them and the less anxious you'll feel while taking them. You

## Strategies for success

Use these critical-thinking strategies for test-taking success.

- Read each question thoroughly and reword it to be sure you understand what's being asked. Don't stop reading halfway through because you assume you understand.
- Answer the question before reviewing the choices. This may lead you to the correct answer.
- Identify key words and phrases in the stem of the question to find clues about what's expected in the answer.
- Look for patterns and relationships when identifying the problem and applying knowledge. Use this information to eliminate incorrect answers and narrow down correct ones.

can find practice questions relevant to all areas of nursing in NCLEX-RN

preparation books and online. You also can use smartphone, computer, and tablet apps. Check with faculty and local and school libraries for additional resources and recommendations. Some students share preparation books, trading them from class to class.

### Ace your next test

Whether you're a practicing nurse or a student, use your critical-thinking skills and these tips to ace your next test. (See *Strategies for success*.) ★

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