

How to Approach Single Best Answer (SBA) Questions

- Single Best Answer (SBA) format tests not only a candidate's clinical knowledge, but most importantly application of that knowledge.
- The questions tend to cover the entire breadth of the curriculum and comprise of three components: the question stem (scenario), the lead-in question statement (tells you clearly what to do), and the answer options (a list of five options labelled A-E).
- Unlike true/false or extended matching questions, SBAs require you to select the single more appropriate answer from five options – even when multiple answers appear plausible.
- SBA questions require careful judgment. They ask whether you can take a realistic case, weigh the available options and pick the one that best fits the clinical and professional context.
- Never leave a question unanswered. There is no negative marking.
- If there is something you do not understand when trying to answer an SBA question in an exam, or you find a possible mistake or misspelling, invigilators will not be able to clarify this for you. Answer the question as best you can and inform an invigilator at the end of the exam; they will notify the Dental Examinations Executive who will review the question.
- If you are uncertain what the correct answer is, eliminate as many distractors as possible and make an educated guess from the remaining options. Do not spend more than 90 seconds on any single question – flag it and return at the end of the exam if time permits.
- The most common SBA trap is selecting the “textbook” answer rather than the answer that fits the specific scenario. Read the stem and lead in carefully to collect all the information you need.

- Another common trap is selecting a management option that is correct in general but inappropriate for the specific patient described (e.g. a drug that is contraindicated in pregnancy or has an interaction with other medications).
- If you are unsure, go with your gut. Your first initial answer is often the correct one.

Read the Question Stem Carefully

- The question stem contains all the information you need to answer correctly. Read it in full before looking at the answer options. Pay close attention to the patient's age, presenting complaint, examination findings, and investigation results – each detail is there for a reason. The final sentence (the “lead-in”) tells you exactly what is being asked.
- A common mistake is reading the stem only to identify the topic. That is not enough.
- You also need to notice what decision the question is really asking you to make. For example, most likely diagnosis, most appropriate next investigation, more appropriate management, etc.
 - Is it asking for the safest action?
 - Is it asking for the most appropriate next step?
 - Is it asking for the best explanation of what is happening?
 - Is it asking you to prioritise one issue over others?
- If you do not identify the decision properly, even strong topic knowledge can still lead to the wrong choice.

Make the Option List Compete Properly

- Do not read one option, choose it, and stop thinking. SBA performance improves when you force the options to compete against each other. Ask:
 - Which option fits the stem most closely?
 - Which option is safe but not actually the best answer here?
 - Which option sounds familiar but ignores a key detail?
 - Which option would I defend if I had to justify the decision aloud?

Eliminate Distractors Systematically

- Elimination is useful, but only if it is done thoughtfully.
- SBA questions are designed with four distractors – plausible, but incorrect options.
- Remove options that are clearly unsafe, irrelevant or weaker than the strongest alternative.
- A systematic elimination approach is more reliable than trying to identify the correct answer directly. First, eliminate options that are clearly wrong. Then, from the remaining options, identify the one that is most appropriate given the specific clinical scenario described.
- “Most appropriate” often means the safest, most evidence-based, or most immediately actionable option.
- The point is not just to cross things out. It is to understand why an option fails the specific case in front of you.
- That kind of reasoning also improves future performance.

Look for the Detail that Changes the Ranking

- Often the difference between a merely correct answer and the best answer sits in one important detail:
 - A safety issue
 - A contraindication
 - The urgency of the situation
 - The patient’s specific background
 - What action comes first rather than what might happen eventually
- Good SBA technique depends on spotting that ranking detail.

Review SBA Mistakes at the Right Level

- After practice, do not stop at “I got that wrong because I did not know the topic.” That is sometimes true, but not always.
- You might have lost the mark because you:
 - Read too quickly



- Chose the first plausible option
- Missed the key safety factor
- Failed to compare the top two options properly
- Understood the topic but not the exact demand of the question
- This diagnosis matters because the fix is different in each case.

How to Practice SBA Questions

- Useful SBA practice usually includes:
 - Timed mixed sets to improve discrimination under pressure
 - Full review of why wrong options are weaker
 - Deliberate attention to patient safety and appropriateness
 - Error tracking for repeated reading or judgment mistakes
- The aim is not just to know more. It is to choose better.

Quick FAQs

- Can more than one SBA option be technically correct?
 - Sometimes more than one option may look plausible or partly true, but only one is the best answer for the scenario asked.
- What is the biggest SBA mistake?
 - Usually it is choosing the first answer that seems acceptable without comparing it properly against the other options.
- How should I review SBA errors when practicing?
 - Look at both the topic gap and the decision-making gap. Ask yourself why your chosen option lost to the best option.

References

1. Case SM, Swanson DB. Constructing written test questions for the basic and clinical sciences. 3rd edn. Philadelphia: National Board of Medical Examiners, 2001.
2. Walsh JL, Harris BH, Smith PE. Single best answer question-writing tips for clinicians. Postgraduate Medical Journal 2017; 93 (1096): 76-81.