Nursing School Survival Guide

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A few notes before we get started…

1. Sorry this took so long! Hopefully it is apparent that I put a lot of thought and effort into this so it took me longer than I expected (plus ya know… school).

2. Please note that the following suggestions are mostly how I choose to do things and what I have personally learned during my time in nursing school. I don't expect every bit of advice in this to work for each and every one of you. If nothing else, I hope that my suggestions will help guide you to find your own

method to the madness. But if some of this does apply to you, pick and choose what you will! It is certainly not a one-size-fits-all guide.

3. I hope I covered every major topic! If you have any additional questions or need advice in any particular area that I did not cover, please feel free to PM me. If you want different perspectives, post in the comments so everyone can chime in! I love helping people, especially fellow nursing students, so if you're ever just stuck on something and need some help, PM me. I can't promise I'll always be able to respond in time or that I'll be all that helpful, but I will always try!!

4. Please pay it forward. Pass advice on to someone else that may benefit from your wisdom and knowledge. Whether they're a brand new nursing student struggling to keep up or a kid in middle school with little guidance, take the opportunity to teach them something you learned that helps keep you sane. :)

1. Staying Organized

- Make a nice binder for each class.
    - Get some decent tabs or dividers for the binder and use them to separate class lectures. I also use my binder for clinical if I have room and will put my blank assessment sheets and example forms in the binder for quick reference.
    - Instead of carrying a separate notebook around and having to sort through it to find what you need, put some loose leaf paper in the front of the binder and when you're done taking notes, put those notes in the appropriate section of your binder.
    - Keep a few sheet protectors in your binder for important things that you don't want to get crinkled or torn – like an important form or scantrons
- Take the time to put ALL important dates, due dates, test dates, etc. on a calendar. I put this one on the front of my binder for quick reference and this one in the back pocket for more detailed information. (Front of binder and back of binder).
    - The only difference is that I would typically print all my classes on one calendar and make copies for each binder. That way no matter which class I am in or which binder I'm looking at, I am able to see every single upcoming assignment.
    - Each class has a different color and for classes that have a lot of assignments or major things to keep up with, I actually create two separate calendars – one for just lecture content reminders and less important stuff, and one for assignments. Though this class coming up is not assignment-heavy, I have created the calendars that way to illustrate

this idea. Notice that I have "Peds" and "Peds Assignments" in different colors.
    - I happen to use iCal because I'm used to it and can access it from all my Apple devices and from any computer using icloud.com. If you don't have a Mac you can use a Google calendar. If you prefer not to use an electronic calendar, buy a decent planner and carry it with you everywhere. Use a different color pen or highlighter for each individual class.
    - Set reminders or alerts on your calendar or phone to pop up each day and let you know that something is due either that day or the next. If you tend to forget things easily/often, set up multiple reminders. Putting the extra effort in at the beginning of each semester will save you a lot of stress during the semester.
- Sign up for a Dropbox account – free storage space, you can access files from any computer or device… No need for flash drives or emailing files to yourself. I can never keep up with flash drives so this is so helpful for me! I have my Dropbox folder on my computer so I can easily load stuff into it. It's also great because if my computer ever crashes, all of my important files are safe.
    - A few tips for filing things electronically…
        - Use clean labels and file names – the easier it is to find, the less stressed you will be! This semester I decided to label the Powerpoint files with numbers that represent which week we will be covering that topic. It just makes things a little easier to find and keeps me on track when I am searching for something – it is so easy to get distracted on the computer! This is what my Spring 2014 and Peds folder look like as an example.
        - Keep your final assignments – they will come in handy later! I reference old assignments and paperwork all the time. Here is my entire nursing school folder beginning with A&P I back in freaking 2010… This took me forever to do halfway through school, so the sooner you start organizing, the less time it will take!
- If you want to get really crazy (or if you need a little excitement because you no longer have a social life…) buy those little sticky tabs from any office supply store and mark the assigned chapters in your textbook to prevent you from flipping back and forth.
    - If that's not organized enough for you, color code the chapters on each exam. Make all of exam 1 orange, exam 2 blue, etc. I wish I could say I came up with this brilliant idea, but I must give credit to another classmate/friend.

    - Word to the wise… the really flimsy kind are rather pokey and can scratch up your arms if you have sensitive skin.
- Come to class, tests, study sessions, etc. prepared. Make an effort to keep a couple extra scantrons in each binder so you aren't rushing to go buy some before a test. Always keep a calculator or two and a few pencils in your backpack. If you switch out bags frequently, buy a bunch of cheap calculators and pencils and put them in every bag!

Studying for Tests

- Here's the thing about studying… everyone does it differently and you have to find what works for you. What works for you this semester may not work next semester. In A&P I, I memorized everything with flashcards. In A&P II, I had to learn how things worked and why they worked the way they did. In Patho, I had to figure out what went wrong and why, building off my previous knowledge of how the body is supposed to work. In Med-Surg I, I had to take my knowledge of all of those things, and then some, and put it all together to understand how to identify and fix the problem. So naturally, I didn't have the same study habits in each class.
- But here are some study habits that have worked for me. Try them out, but if you get a few hours in and realize "Hey, this sucks and I'm not retaining anything" – stop and try something else! If you get your test grade after studying harder than ever and it sucks – try something else! I can give you all the study tips in the world but none of them will help you if you don't learn to adapt.
    - Make your own study guide – I like to use Powerpoint and I use the rubric/blue print they give us before the exam to determine how much information I want to include in each section. I usually start by adding the key points from of my notes and the lecture Powerpoint for each section then add information from the book. Here is an example of a study guide I did a few semesters ago (even though I never actually finished it!)
    - Use whatever practice questions you have available – at the end of the chapter, throughout the chapter, the CD or access code that goes along with the book, Evolve questions, etc. Doing these will not only prepare you for the type of test questions you'll encounter, but it'll also help you determine what areas you feel most comfortable with and which ones you need to study more.
        - One of my favorite methods is to pick a content section on the Saunders CD (discussed below) such as respiratory, and each time I get to a question about a new subject, such as pneumothorax, I read everything there is to know in my textbook and the Saunders

book about that condition, then answer the question. I move on to the next question, which may be about something completely different, like COPD, and repeat the process. After about 10-15 questions in, I've read the entire chapter and can answer most of the questions correctly. **If you have ADD or ADHD and simply cannot sit down and read a chapter in its entirety, this method may be for you!**

  - Make flash cards – you can handwrite them or type them and print them. Most computers/printers will let you customize the print settings to choose 3x5, 4x6, 5x8 paper (the sizes of most index cards)
  - Rewrite or retype your notes. This works for me because repetition helps me to remember, and this gives me a chance to look up anything I don't understand.
  - Just read and highlight. This works for some people, but usually isn't my method unless that's all I really have time for.
- Find a good study spot. Our college has a few "quiet rooms" in the library that I frequent. Many city libraries have them as well. Find a spot that is quiet, has lots of space (you'll need it), and few distractions. Starbucks is not a good place to study. I don't care what you say or how great your headphones are. Get your coffee to go and study somewhere else. Your bed is also not a good place to study. Or your couch. In fact, my house is the worst place for me to study because I will find any reason not to study.
- If studying in groups works for you, great. Personally, it's not my thing. However, if I feel comfortable with the information and am simply reviewing it prior to an exam, I can usually review with other people. I actually benefit from teaching concepts to other people and helping them understand something. But there is bound to be one person in the group, maybe even you, that can't stay on topic and wants to talk about what they had for dinner last night and that's not going to help anyone on the test. Again, just find what works for you.

Test-Taking Tips

- I will discuss this book further in the Essential Books and Resources section, but I highly recommend purchasing the Saunders NCLEX review book. Not only does it have practice questions in each section and a CD full of practice questions, but it also has a fantastic section that discusses test-taking strategies and teaches you how to break down the question. This section also helps you identify common errors you make on tests and gives great examples. Each question on the CD shows the strategy used to answer the question and the rationale for the answer. I find this to be extremely helpful!

- In addition to remembering ABCs (Airway, Breathing, Circulation – in that order), think about what will kill your patient and what will save your patient. Ask yourself "Of the available options, which would be detrimental to my patient if I skipped it? Which will save his life?"
- Also think about what you have the ability to do as a nurse within your scope of practice. If the question is about informed consent and one of the answers is "Explain the procedure to the patient and obtain informed consent", that is not the correct answer because you do not have the authority to inform the patient of the risks, benefits, and alternatives of a procedure for the purpose of informed consent. Know what you can and cannot do as a nurse, what requires a physician's order, etc.
- For all tests, whether they are unit examinations or competency tests like ATI and HESI, the following tips apply:
    - READ the question thoroughly. If it is a written exam (not computerized) bring a highlighter or red pen and underline key words in the question. Pay close attention to whether it says "what indicates the patient needs **further teaching"** or if it says "what indicates the patient **understands the teaching".** It absolutely SUCKS getting a test back and realizing you knew your stuff but would have gotten a much better grade if you just slowed down and read the question correctly.
    - If it's a complicated concept to you, maybe something like right-sided heart failure vs. left-sided, draw a little diagram right there on the test. Map the blood flow through the heart and body and lungs. Remind yourself how it all is supposed to work and what is going wrong. And don't worry too much about your instructor judging your artistic skills – ~~some~~ all of mine have been downright laughable.
    - There will likely be dosage questions on every test and questions that are about stuff you covered previously in another class. I just finished Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing and we had test questions about fundamental skills and insulin peak times. Don't forget your knowledge from other classes, and don't freak out when you see these questions! Answer to the best of your ability.
    - I go to a private religious school, so we pray before each exam. I am not a very religious person, but I have found that taking this moment before the exam to just breathe deeply and calm down helps so much. So if you're religious, take a moment to say a prayer for yourself and your classmates. If you're not religious, take a moment to just clear your mind and breathe.
    - If you don't know the answer to a question, put little tick marks by the answers you have not eliminated, put a little line through those circles on

the scantron and a tick mark by the # on it (so you know to go back and look at it and don't accidentally get off by 1 question), and come back tot hat question later. Sometimes another question will jog your memory or you'll have a sudden epiphany halfway through the test.
    - When you are through with all the questions, start back at #1 and check your scantron to make sure your answers match the test. I have a classmate and friend who failed a very difficult test because she didn't check her scantron. She would have otherwise made an A. Always double check your scantron!
- If your school uses ATI, I am of no help but maybe someone else here can be!
- If your school uses HESI, I may be able to help! I've done well on all of mine thus far.
    - Read the question really well. I mean *really well.* Chances are, you have an idea of what the correct answer should be. Chances are, that answer isn't an option and you're going to sit there staring at the screen thinking "None of these are right!" Don't panic… re-read the question and really think about what it is asking. Realize that HESI questions assume that you are in a perfect clinical setting and not the real world (The HESI book actually says something similar to this). If your gut answer isn't on there, pick the next best one. Pick the one that makes the most sense given what information is provided and what you are being asked.
    - If you simply have NO idea what the answer is – that's ok! Process of elimination, baby! You can probably eliminate two right off the bat because, well, they're obviously terrible answers. For example, the patient's problem appears to be an MI, so the answer is not obtain a urine sample or blood glucose reading, right? Just stop and put yourself in the nurse's shoes the best you can. Ask yourself what would IDEALLY be done first. What is the PRIORITY?

Writing Papers

- Try to pick a topic that you are interested in learning more about. Otherwise, it'll be the most boring paper you've ever written! Pick something applicable to what you're currently learning or will be learning soon. If you can kill 2 birds with 1 stone, do it! When the time comes to take a test over that topic, you will only need to refresh your memory rather than learn all new material. When you have a patient with that issue, you will already know a good chunk of the disease process, diagnostic tests, symptoms, treatment, etc.
- Rule of thumb: If you write something you didn't already know or wasn't common knowledge, cite your source. Even if you didn't use the source's exact

words, cite it. Ex: "98% of students in nursing school state they are stressed beyond belief" requires a citation vs. "College can be a source of stress for many students" does not require a citation because it is pretty much common knowledge.

- LEARN APA FORMAT. Learn it backwards and forwards. This may be obvious to some, but it never fails to surprise me how many of my classmates do not know how to write a research paper, properly cite sources, format the paper, etc. Some instructors care less than others, but you have got to learn how to do these things!
- Here are a few basic tips to get you started:
    - 12-point font, Times New Roman, 1" borders all around, double-spaced (this applies to the entire paper!)
    - 2 spaces between sentences
    - No extra space between paragraphs or sections
    - Title page should include your paper title, your name, and your school's name – all centered and in the top half of the first page. There should be no page number and in the top left corner (header) you should have "Running head: TITLE OF PAPER" – if the title is kinda long, summarize it into a few words (there's a character limit but I don't know it off the top of my head)
    - The rest of your paper should have page numbers in the top right corner and in the top left corner of the header, you'll have just the title in all caps (basically like the title page but remove the words "Running head:")
    - Make sure your header and page numbers are also in 12-pt Times New Roman font
    - For citations, I am lazy and use References feature under the Document Elements tab on my Microsoft Word for Mac program (I have no idea where it is located on the PC version). I just input the source information and it spits out the references and citations for me. If you don't have access to this or prefer to do it the old fashioned way, follow the instructions in the APA manual.
    - Get the APA manual or use this site.
    - If you have trouble with APA formatting or writing the paper itself, your school likely has a tutor or writing lab – take advantage of it!
    - There are probably some great video tutorials on Youtube that you can use for learning how to format a paper in APA style!
    - And because I'm a total overachiever, here is a sample paper of sorts that you can use as a guide!

Time Management

- You know that saying "Work smart, not hard" – that's basically this entire section in a nutshell! You still have to work hard, don't get me wrong… but don't burn yourself out by working harder than necessary. Find efficient ways to do things and you won't burn out as quickly.
- A lot of this has already been covered in other sections, such as study tips and organization. If you are the type of person to just throw all your notes and assignments in a random folder with absolutely no organization, then freak out as you rustle through it trying to find where you wrote that one sentence about that one topic that one day in class but you have no idea where you wrote it… yeah, please stop that! Get organized! It's not that you'll save yourself *that* much time in the long run by being organized – in fact, you may even spend more time getting organized than you would looking for stuff in a mess… but what matters is WHEN you save time. Saving 5 minutes while you're cramming for a test? Priceless. Saving 15 minutes when you're furiously typing out your paperwork the night before clinicals? So very priceless.
- Each semester will likely be more overwhelming than the last… at first. Don't freak out. Or if you need to freak out, keep it brief. Take a few minutes to cry, panic, pull your hair out, whatever you need to do… then get it together. Come up with a game plan. Get organized, make a to-do list, make a schedule… Take a step back from the big picture and just figure out what needs to be done TODAY. Make a plan, make a list, whatever you need to do but just break the massive list into a bunch of little to-do lists that are less overwhelming.
    - Make a list of everything you need to get done by a certain date
    - Break that list up into days or weeks or hours – whatever works for your list/situation
    - Strategically schedule your time so that you can get it all done in a reasonable amount of time without depriving yourself of food, water, sleep, and potty breaks.
    - If you're studying for a test and you know that the majority of it covers 2 particular topics, and the rest is divided amongst 5 other topics, schedule accordingly.
    - Ask yourself "What do I need to do TODAY?" and get that done. When you're finished, you can figure out what needs to get done tomorrow. But try to stay ahead of the game and don't always ask yourself what needs to be done today – most of the time you should already know what you need to do tomorrow.
- If you find yourself procrastinating because you're too overwhelmed to even know where to start, type out your entire list and ask a friend or family member to help you figure out where to start and how to work your way through the list. I

do this with a friend of mine via email because she lives 2 states away. Whether it's housework, schoolwork, etc. we are able to help each other organize our to-do lists because having someone else's fresh perspective just plain helps sometimes.

- I'm the pot calling the kettle black here, but don't procrastinate! Try to stay on top of your work the best you can because falling behind sucks, stresses you out, stresses everyone around you out, and your grades will suffer. If you're like me, you'll do all the most interesting stuff first leaving the boring stuff for last, which you'll continue to put off until the last minute. *Don't do this.* It just prolongs the inevitable. Try to alternate boring with interesting or start with the quickest tasks first so you can feel productive as you cross things off your list. Whatever works for you!
- If you have an instructor who posts assignments online all at once for the entire semester, knock out as many as you can in your downtime (if such a thing exists in your world anymore!)
- Try your best to skim through the chapters that will be covered in lecture ahead of time so you can get more out of class. A lot of this subject material is interesting, but it can seem incredibly boring when no one participates in class discussion because they have no idea what's going on. It will also help you remember things for tests and in clinical because you may remember that so & so said this and the instructor explained that and you were going to chime in and say "blah blah" but so & so beat you to it. You get my point.
- Make the most of your time in class! Use this time wisely! You are paying for every minute that you are in class, so get your money's worth. That can be difficult to do when your instructor reads the Powerpoint slides to you verbatim as if you're in kindergarten. When I encounter instructors like this, I spend the entire class working on assignments, doing practice questions, or making my own notes. Unless the instructor is going into detail and explaining the concepts, I don't see a point in listening to them read the slides word for word, so I take advantage of the fact that I'm forced to sit still for 3 hours with my books and computer in front of me. I've had instructors get on to me for "not paying attention" so I've since bought a privacy screen for my laptop and make sure to work on something related to that class if possible.

Balancing Social Life/Relationships

- Let me start by saying that you are going to let people down and you will likely lose touch with many of your friends. The people around you may have a difficulty understanding *why* you can't hang out every Friday night or drop what you're doing to go to the movies. Unless they've been through nursing school or are very, very close to someone who has been through nursing school, chances

are they're simply not going to understand. A lot of people think it's just like any undergrad program. It's not. Not even close. People wonder what could possibly be so time consuming when you're only taking 12 credit hours. People think you should devote the same amount of time to studying as they do/did in college. Seriously, most people just don't get it. So how the heck do you deal with this?

- First, you have to make the conscious decision to make nursing school your priority the majority of the time. If your heart isn't in it, how can you expect other people to support you and understand when you're "too busy"? This doesn't mean you can never have any fun ever or you have to always put school first… just realize that nursing school is no joke and is a major commitment that comes with certain sacrifices, as all major commitments do.
- Learn to say no. Don't flake on people at the last minute or blow them off after agreeing to do something. When someone asks you to hang out and you know you can't, say so. "I would really love to <insert activity here> with you this weekend, but I have too much schoolwork to do. However, I have a break coming up soon and would love to grab lunch with you then. In fact, we should probably go ahead and schedule it now because I really want to see you and don't want to put it off." Let them know they're important to you and you want to spend time with them, but you have other priorities. Simple as that.
- Hopefully, most people will try to understand and will be supportive. At the very least, hopefully the people closest to you will. If they aren't, that's their problem. I don't know how else to say it. You are doing something to increase your self worth, to improve your life, to further your education, to provide for your family… If you have quality people in your life who understand the importance and value of doing those things, they will likely be supportive. You will probably find out which friends are fair-weather friends and which are here to stay.
- I have no advice for those who have kids because I just have a lot of animals and it's not quite the same, no matter how much I try to convince myself that having dogs is the same as having a toddler. But I am in a serious relationship and all I can really advise you to do is choose someone who is supportive and has similar goals. It doesn't matter what field they are studying or work in, but it matters how far they want to go in life and what they consider to be important. In fact, surround yourself with people who are successful or strive to be successful.
- You may end up making a few good friends in nursing school. After all, they are some of the few people who can understand why you're so

scatterbrained and overwhelmed. They have similar interests and are the perfect people to vent to.

Saving Money on Textbooks

- Every semester, I put the information for the required textbooks into a spreadsheet so that I can shop around and compare prices. I'll actually share it with you all so you can use it :) It also helps me budget my money so I can actually afford the textbooks.
- It never hurts to ask your instructor if you can buy an older version of the books. Some have relatively recent editions for much less – all the information is the same but the newest one has a pretty new cover that somehow increases its value.
- You should hopefully know this by now but in case you don't, don't sell your textbooks back to the bookstore. You're just throwing your money away if you do. For the books you don't need to keep, sell them on amazon, textbooks.com, ebay, craigslist, to other students, etc.
- The textbooks you'll want to keep throughout the rest of nursing school are probably your pathophysiology book, your med-surg textbooks, lab value/diagnostic test book, and your HESI book (if you take HESI). The rest can be sold!
- Check with your school's library before purchasing any books, especially if they're really expensive, to see if they are available to students online. I didn't know until I worked in our school library briefly that some crappy books I spent about $100 on and used one time were available to us for FREE! We also have access to all of those "Straight A's" books, which I didn't know until I stopped needing them.
- Speaking of those "Straight A's" books and similar ones like Pathophysiology Made Easy – unless you are REALLY struggling in a class, don't waste your money on them. First, get the Saunders NCLEX book I mention all throughout this guide and if it doesn't break it down enough for you, then you may want to invest in those books.
- Our nursing courses are sometimes only half a semester long, so our cohort is split into opposite classes. When this happens, we buddy up and share the cost of books. If your school does this, find someone to share your books with!
- If you want to carry less stuff around and like using e-books, I highly recommend Vital Source Book Shelf. Not every textbook you need will be on there, but many are and they have apps for some devices. You can also access the book online and it doesn't expire like Chegg and other sites.

- Advantages of e-Books: Less stuff to carry around and keep track of, easy to search for words, pages, chapters, etc., can highlight and make notes
- Disadvantages of e-Books: It can be easy for some (*ahem* ME) to get distracted while on the computer or a mobile device, and some instructors may not allow the use of tablets or laptops in their classrooms. Also, you probably won't want to take your tablet or laptop to clinical with you (or may not be allowed to) so if you need the book while in clinical, you won't have access to it.

Essential Books and Resources

- Drug Cards – Pharm Phlash are the best I've found thus far. I wish I had these during my first semester of clinicals. Instead, I wasted time making my own thinking that it would help me remember the meds better. All it did was keep me up all night before clinicals, ensuring I was sufficiently exhausted the next day. I finally bought a set of drug cards (Barron's I think) that I really don't care for at all. I ended up buying these before my second Med-Surg class and holy moly they are a lifesaver! They are well organized, have multiple drugs in the same class on one card, there is an index to help you quickly locate the card you need, they contain all the pertinent information you'll need, and I rarely had to administer a drug that wasn't contained in this set.
- Micromedex app – I know it is on the iPhone, not sure about other devices. This is great for looking up medications whenever the drug cards fail you.
- Saunders Book – I have the yellow one (5th edition) but there is a brand new edition that just came out. I have no idea if it is worth the extra money or not, but everything I am about to tell you is based off the yellow 5th edition. This book is essentially your nursing school bible for the following reasons:
  - Test-taking strategies and tips in the beginning (as aforementioned)
  - Accompanying CD full of thousands of practice questions
  - Content areas that cover every body system and aspect of adult health, pediatrics, obstetrics, mental health, fundamental skills, legal/ethical/cultural/stuff, etc. Nearly each content section is followed by a section for relevant medications.
  - It is also a great reference for lab values, fluid & electrolyte/acid base stuff… There is very little that this book doesn't cover!
  - The book breaks everything down into key points and gives you a rather broad overview of a disease or disorder. It covers the majority of the content you will learn in nursing school. This is my go-to book when the

textbook for the class is overwhelming because it's a boring wall of text, or when I just need a big picture view of something. Here is an example – notice the page includes patient teaching points, a description of the illness, the signs/symptoms (assessment), and nursing interventions.
    - I can't say enough good things about this book. It is by far some of the best money I have spent in nursing school. If you're still taking Gen Ed classes – buy it! I wish I bought it sooner! It's saved me more times than I can count.
- Instructors will insist you need a medical dictionary… you don't. Your textbooks and google will have all the answers. Just know how to differentiate between reliable sources and unreliable sources. For example, Wikipedia is not a reliable source even though the information you find is usually correct and helpful. NIH is reliable, however.
- http://www.labtestsonline.org is a great source for interpreting lab values
- If you take the HESI, I would highly recommend getting the "Success" books – i.e. Fundamentals Success. They have one for nearly every subject (Med Surg, Psych, Maternity, etc.) and they are pretty helpful for preparing for the HESI. More so than the actual HESI book, which I don't particularly care for (possibly because it is 100% black and white and I apparently only retain things if they are in color). These "Success" books usually come with either a CD or access code so you can download a program that has HESI practice questions. The books themselves have test-taking strategies and practice questions as well.
- Evolve - You can browse their catalog and add the free resources associated with whatever Elsevier textbook you have to your account. Most of these contain quizzes and case studies that can help you prepare for tests. Even if you don't have an Elsevier textbook or the textbook you're using doesn't have free resources on this website, you can browse the catalog for whatever resources they have on that subject, i.e. maternity, med-surg, community health, nursing research… some of these may come in handy! If you take HESI tests, this is also the website you'll use to do your practice HESI and case studies that will help you prepare for the HESI.

Clinicals

Oh boy… clinicals. So daunting! A few of these go without saying, but I'm saying them anyway.

- Show up on time.
- Get some sleep the night before.
- Eat a decent breakfast and bring a snack or two.

- Carpool if you can – it makes it less dreadful, especially if it's wintertime and your carpool buddy has heated seats.
- Be polite and respectful to the staff – all of them. PCAs, CNAs, MDs, NPs, RNs, LPNs, transporters, unit secretaries, etc. If they work there – you respect them. If you ask a question nicely, they're usually more than happy to answer or help, but if you bombard them with questions without even trying to look up the information for yourself, that doesn't usually go over so well.
- Be confident in front of your patients and their visitors. Even if you're not! When they say "fake it till you make it" that means exuding confidence even when you're scared to death to make a mistake – but it doesn't mean lying and saying you've done this before or that you don't need someone's help when you really do… Basically, don't do what I did and walk into your first patient's room and say "I'm sorry, it's a little nerve-wracking with my instructor watching me."
- If a nurse asks you to do something that is out of YOUR scope of practice, refer to your instructor. Maybe it's something you can do with your instructor's direct supervision, or maybe it's something you can't do until you are an RN. Find out.
- Your instructor *should* be your safe spot… where you can ask a bunch of questions without getting annoyed eye rolls from nurses and the like. If you don't get that kind of clinical instructor, answer those questions the best you can on your own and save only the really important/pertinent ones for your instructor.
- You'll see/hear/smell lots of gross things and if you have a sensitive gag reflex like mine, you'll have to learn how to gag strategically and silently. The only advice I have is to turn your head away from the patient (maybe as you walk to the trash can or to grab a supply), make as little of an "omg I'm gonna barf" face as possible, gag silently, and turn back around with a happy smile on your face and keep on going.
- If your patient is lonely, can't speak legibly because he's had a stroke, and needs help eating his meals and you have the time to feed him, do it. This is not beneath you. This is an incredible experience. Talk to him the whole time you're feeding him. Make observations about him, something that is in his room, share a little about yourself, ask yes or no questions that he can likely respond to… just interact! Give him plenty of time between each bite and let him tell you when he's ready for more. Showing this type of compassion and care for a patient who has lost his dignity and is likely suffering from depression can give them more joy than we can possibly imagine.
- As for paperwork, so much of this depends on your school, class, and instructor. I happened to have a couple of really difficult instructors who expected page-long interpretations of abnormal lab values down to the most basic details. Many of you may not encounter things like this, but if you do… when you

are slaving away over paperwork and hating your life and possibly thinking of dropping out… realize that knowing this extra stuff puts you light years ahead of your classmates. You may hate your instructor, but damn you're one smart cookie now!

- Always bring your drug cards, a calculator, several pens, your stethoscope, scissors, penlight, drug cards, an extra blank copy of whatever assessment forms you use, and an extra copy of the paperwork you submit to your instructor. I am one of those people that can't stand to be underprepared (if you can't tell) so I also have deodorant, breath spray/mints (we can't chew gum), tampons, chapstick, bobby pins, an extra hair tie, etc.
- When you sit down for preconference to tell your instructor all about your patient this week, start with the demographics, move to the admitting diagnosis, and pertinent medical history, the patient's current state, your assessment beginning with vitals and working head-to-toe unless something is rather abnormal and worth mentioning sooner.
    - Example: My patient is a 29 y/o white female admitted on 11/9/13 with sharp stomach pains and was diagnosed with appendicitis. She had an appendectomy on 11/10 and according to her chart, she has steadily improved since then AEB her WBC, temp, etc. Currently, her vitals are in normal range, she is AAOx3, talkative and cooperative. Her lung sounds are clear in all fields, but her bowel sounds are hypoactive and she states she hasn't had a bowel movement since 11/8, which was 4 days ago." That's probably all your instructor will want to know right off the bat, but your paperwork will contain more information. I just wanted to give you all a brief idea of how to do a case presentation. I'm sure I'm forgetting something important though…
- After this, our instructors always asked "So what is your plan for today?" The plan is usually the goals from your care plan and how you plan to accomplish them. For the aforementioned patient, it's probably something like "I will administer Colace and Lactulose, teach the patient to consume additional water with the meds and why, and help her walk up and down the hallway to hopefully increase her GI motility and help her have a bowel movement by the end of my shift today."
- I would like to give advice on care plans and paperwork, but it's going to vary so much that I may not be of any help at all, so I will skip that but if anyone has specific questions, again, PM me or post in comments or another thread for help!
- When learning meds for verbalizing, don't go off memory alone. Learn how the med works, what it is supposed to accomplish, and figure out WHY certain side effects occur. Insulin, for example, lowers the amount of glucose in the blood,

correct? So what is a potential side effect to watch out for? Hypoglycemia. Morphine is an opioid, which is a CNS depressant, so what do you want to monitor? Respiratory rate. Always! Things like that… don't just memorize the back of the card because that will get you nowhere!

- For med verbalization and administration, please know why your patient is getting a certain medication. Are they getting gabapentin because they have neuropathy or to prevent seizures? Many medications have multiple uses outside of their intended drug class or indication, so don't verbalize gabapentin as a medication to prevent seizures in a patient who has no history of seizures, is not on seizure precautions, or in alcohol detox, but has diabetes. Chances are, the patient is taking it for diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Do some digging and figure it out, but if you simply do not know or can't figure it out, ask!
- If you make a mistake, even if you can get in trouble for it, own up to it and go directly to your instructor to inform him/her of your mistake.
- At the end of your rotation on a floor, bring the staff a treat. A card, a cake, some donuts, some nice coffee, flowers, balloons, whatever. Something everyone can enjoy and something that conveys your appreciation for their help and guidance. Your clinical group should also chip in to get a gift for the instructor as well. No matter how much you didn't like her (I'm still annoyed we had to buy ours one, and that only 2 people paid me back).
- If you encounter a particularly awesome instructor or staff member, the best gift you can give them is a professional, well-written letter to the dean or their supervisor for their permanent personnel file!

Miscellaneous Random Advice

- I think one reason I have succeeded in nursing school when others haven't is because I am quick to adapt. I don't think I'm smarter or better or study harder… in fact, sometimes I study less than others and still do well (and some people hate me for it!). My strength is that I adapt. When a study technique isn't working for me, I quickly recognize that and change it. If I am weak in one area, I am quick to recognize it and fix it or compensate somehow. As a nurse, you have to do this for your patients every day. You have to anticipate what issues will occur and have a plan going forward. When things don't go according to plan, you have to adapt to the situation and formulate a new plan. I can't guarantee it and I may be completely wrong, but it stands to reason that having this ability will help us be better nurses.
- Find someone you identify with in your classes and become friends. If you can find someone you look up to, even better.
- Don't get dragged into the drama in nursing school.

- Don't beat yourself up too much when you make a mistake. Especially if no one got hurt. We all screw up sometimes. Learn from it and find a way to improve yourself or your skills. Make the experience worthwhile.
- Don't compare your worst to someone else's best. So you had a horrible week and failed a really difficult test that you didn't have much time to prepare for because you work two jobs and have a family to take care of, but the hot shot in the class who doesn't work, lives with their parents, and have no other obligations got an A… don't compare yourself to them. Simply try harder next time and set realistic expectations for yourself.
- Pick your battles. Not every one is worth fighting. Whether it's an issue at home or work or with an instructor or classmate… think about the energy you'll expend trying to prove your point, or what the ideal outcome would be, and make a conscious decision to fight the battle or to let it go. It's not always worth it to prove your point, but if doing so makes the difference between a passing grade and a failing grade, it's probably worth it.
- I know we all love seeing that "A" on a paper or test, but the farther along you get in nursing school, the more you will come to terms with the idea that "C" means "continue". By all means, strive for that A! But if you pass the class with a C, be grateful you did and try harder next time.
- Be respectful to your instructors. Even those who aren't so nice to you. Being disrespectful toward them doesn't really accomplish anything. Easier said than done, I know. You can argue with them or prove your point without ever being impolite.
- Don't forget to save your work periodically. Whether you're writing a paper, making a study guide, or doing clinical paperwork, make an effort to hit that Save button every 10-15 minutes or so.
- You never know what will come up right during midterms or finals, like a bad stomach virus or a death in the family or a sick kid… so try not to slack off at the start of the semester just in case. I was hospitalized for an entire month halfway through Pathophysiology and managed to finish with a B despite a few failing test grades because I had worked so hard from the beginning of the semester.