



Reading the Ruling

Test-Taking Strategies for the Rating Exam — based on 2025 & 2026 statewide results

The biggest score gap isn't about rules knowledge in general or about running out of time. It's about how officials read a scenario's stated "Ruling." Weaker scores tracked closely with a tendency to accept a plausible-sounding ruling as correct without checking every detail against the rule. These eight habits directly target that pattern.

70.4%	0	-0.63	1-in-3
2026 average score	correlation between time spent and score	correlation between "True"-leaning and score	correct rate on the hardest question type

1 Form your own ruling before reading theirs

Read the scenario, decide what you believe the correct ruling is, then compare it to the stated ruling. Don't let a confident "Ruling:" sentence become your first read of the situation.

2 Check every element, not just the general shape

A ruling can get the concept right and one detail wrong — the wrong yardage, the wrong spot, an exception that doesn't actually apply. Go phrase by phrase instead of accepting the overall gist.

Example: *"Helping the runner penalty, five yards from the spot of the foul (B's 22)." The concept (illegal help) may be right while the enforcement spot is wrong — catching that requires checking the enforcement rule specifically, not just the foul itself.*

3 Treat absolute words as a red flag

"Always," "cannot," "any," "all," "only," and "never" are disproportionately false in rule statements, because real rules almost always carry an exception. This includes "All of the following are..." list-style questions — if even one item on the list doesn't fit, the whole statement is false.

Example: *"Team A cannot be guilty of a false start until the snapper places their hand(s) on the ball" and "Player number 51 cannot legally catch a pass" were both among the lowest-scoring items — both built on an absolute word hiding an exception.*

Trap Words to Watch For

Always · Cannot · Any · All · Only · Never · "All of the following are..." — when a ruling uses one of these, stop and look specifically for the exception before answering.

4 Don't let "sounds like normal officiating" stand in for "matches the rule"

The hardest questions were the ones that sounded like an everyday, reasonable call. Confirm it against the book rather than your gut sense of "that sounds about right."

5 Watch for rulings on high-stakes or emotional plays



Scenarios involving fumbles, muffs, and end-zone plays were consistently among the hardest — they involve the most rule branches (momentum, possession changes, scoring). Slow down specifically on multi-event sequences and trace possession/points step by step.

Example: A 2-point try where the ball is fumbled, muffed, and recovered by the defense in the end zone had only a 1-in-3 correct rate — each event in the chain changes the ruling.

6 Practice in the same format you'll be tested in

Since the exam is entirely True/False scenario rulings, the most useful drill is reading mock rulings and specifically hunting for what might be wrong with them — not just general rulebook review.

7 Use the audio replay — listen twice, for two different things

Listen once for the overall picture, then again specifically for qualifying words, exact numbers, and the order of events. A single listen makes it easy to miss the one detail that changes the ruling — and since time isn't the constraint here, there's no cost to replaying before answering.

8 Give extra attention to blocking technique and helping-the-runner scenarios

Across two years of exam data, rulings on legal blocking technique/contact restrictions and on illegal participation or helping the runner were the most consistently missed content area — more so than kicking plays, scoring, or enforcement mechanics. Review hand placement/"frame" rules for blocking, below-the-waist restrictions, illegal helmet contact, and what does or doesn't count as illegal participation or helping the runner.

Pre-Test Checklist

- ☐ Read (or listen to) the full scenario before reading the stated ruling — form your own call first
- ☐ Second pass: hunt for absolute words and "all of the following" lists
- ☐ Second pass: check every number, spot, and enforcement detail — not just the general concept
- ☐ Extra care on fumbles/muffs/multi-event plays — trace each event in the chain
- ☐ Extra care on blocking-technique and helping-the-runner rulings
- ☐ Don't rush — but don't assume slowing down alone will fix a wrong answer either

Remember

Speed is not the issue — average completion time was well under the limit and had no effect on scores at any level. The issue is trusting a well-worded ruling instead of checking it against the rule. Slowing down alone will not fix this; reading more skeptically will.