



Savvy's Study Tip Sheet: ASWB Exam Strategy Essentials

1. Read the Entire Scenario First

One of the most common reasons candidates miss questions is because they begin evaluating answer choices before fully understanding the client's situation. The ASWB exam intentionally places important details throughout the vignette, and the final sentence often reveals what the question is actually asking. As you read, pay attention to:

- The client's presenting concern
- The stage of the helping process
- Any safety concerns
- Recent changes or new information
- The specific task the social worker must complete

Savvy Tip: Read first. Think second. Answer last.

Example: A client discusses relationship stress for several paragraphs. In the final sentence, the client states, *"I've been thinking about ending my life."*

Although the scenario focused on relationships, the priority immediately shifts to **suicide risk assessment and safety planning**.

2. Read ALL Answer Choices

Many ASWB questions contain **two or more reasonable answers**. Your job is not simply to identify a correct intervention—it's to identify the **BEST** intervention based on the client's needs and the stage of practice.

Avoid selecting the first answer that "sounds good." Read every option before making your decision. Often you'll find:

- One answer is appropriate but premature.
- One is correct but incomplete.
- One is the best response based on the qualifier.

Savvy Tip: Reasonable doesn't always mean right.

Example: A client reports symptoms of anxiety.

- A. Teach deep breathing techniques.
- B. Assess the onset, severity, and frequency of symptoms.

Both are appropriate—but **assessment should occur before intervention**, making **B** the stronger answer.



3. Read the Qualifier Carefully

Qualifiers tell you **exactly what the exam wants you to do**. Missing one word can completely change the correct answer. Common qualifiers include:

- FIRST
- NEXT
- BEST
- MOST
- PRIMARY
- LEAST
- SHOULD

These words determine whether you're assessing, intervening, evaluating, or planning.

Savvy Tip: The qualifier is your roadmap.

Example: If the question asks: **"What should the social worker do FIRST?"**

The answer will usually involve: gathering information, assessing, clarifying, or ensuring safety.

If it asks: **"What should the social worker do NEXT?"**

Assessment may already be complete, meaning intervention is now appropriate.

4. Remember the Social Work Helping Process

The ASWB exam is built around the helping process. Before answering any question, ask yourself: **"Where is the social worker in the process?"**

The general sequence is:

- Engage
- Assess
- Plan
- Intervene
- Evaluate
- Terminate/Follow-up

Most incorrect answers occur because they skip steps.

Savvy Tip: Don't jump ahead in the helping process.

Example: A client says they want help managing depression during an intake appointment.

Providing CBT worksheets immediately may sound helpful—but first the social worker needs to **complete a thorough assessment** before planning treatment.



5. Assessment Before Intervention

One of the biggest themes on the ASWB exam is: **Assess before you act.**

Unless someone is in immediate danger, social workers should gather enough information to fully understand the problem before implementing interventions. Assessment may include:

- Exploring feelings
- Clarifying concerns
- Identifying strengths
- Assessing risk
- Gathering history
- Determining client goals

Savvy Tip: Explore before you educate. Assess before you advise.

Example: A parent says their teenager has become withdrawn.

Instead of immediately referring the teen for psychiatric treatment, the social worker should first **explore recent stressors, family dynamics, school functioning, and symptom history.**

6. Remove Assumptions

Answer questions using **only the information provided**. Do not assume:

- diagnoses
- abuse
- substance use
- motivation
- personality traits
- family history
- facts that were never stated

The ASWB exam gives you everything needed to answer the question.

Savvy Tip: If it isn't written, don't use it.

Example: A client appears tired and has difficulty concentrating.

You cannot assume:

- depression,
- substance use,
- insomnia,
- or a medical illness.

The correct answer would likely involve **further assessment** rather than making conclusions.



7. Safety Comes First

Whenever there is **imminent risk of harm**, safety overrides the normal helping process.

Safety concerns include:

- suicidal intent
- homicidal intent
- child abuse or neglect
- elder or vulnerable adult abuse
- domestic violence with immediate danger
- overdose
- severe intoxication
- psychosis causing imminent risk
- medical emergencies

When safety is threatened, stabilize the situation before providing counseling, education, referrals, or long-term treatment planning.

Savvy Tip: Protect life first—everything else comes second.

Example: A client begins discussing anxiety but suddenly says,

"I have a gun in my car and I'm going to end my life after I leave here."

Although the client originally presented for anxiety treatment, the priority immediately becomes:

- conducting a suicide risk assessment,
- maintaining the client's safety,
- following agency protocols,
- and arranging emergency intervention if needed.

Final Savvy Reminder

Before choosing an answer, pause and ask yourself:

- ✓ Did I read the entire scenario?
- ✓ Did I read every answer choice?
- ✓ What is the qualifier asking?
- ✓ Where am I in the helping process?
- ✓ Do I need more assessment before acting?
- ✓ Am I making assumptions?
- ✓ Is there an immediate safety concern?

Think the Savvy Way! Master the process—not just the content—and you'll dramatically improve your ASWB decision-making.