

Acing the Certification Exam:

An Introduction to Test-Taking Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Test time. Whether you are preparing for a certification test or a hiring test, the thought of an examination strikes fear in many people's hearts. The fear is so common that psychologists even have a diagnosis called test anxiety. However, testing does not have to be that way. Evaluations are simply an instrument to determine if you were effectively taught the information intended, or if you have the knowledge base necessary to do the job. That's all! If the purpose of testing is so simple, then why do so many people become so anxious when test time comes? Several factors play into test anxiety and why so many people have such fears of testing. However, these can be overcome. With the assistance of this guide, you too can be better prepared and calmer on examination day.

TEST OBSTACLES

Test obstacles are issues that complicate test taking. If we view test taking as simply an avenue to determine the individual's comprehension of the material, then test obstacles are barriers to the process. There are many issues that may create test obstacles. We will discuss a few.

Mental

Mental test obstacles can sometimes be the greatest hurdles to overcome. Mental preparation for a test can be as important as intellectual preparation. So often, many

people have failed an exam before they even begin. Issues that arise out of mental obstacles are:

- feeling unprepared
- feeling incompetent
- fear of taking tests
- fear of failure

Overcoming these obstacles can be your greatest asset when testing. Not allowing yourself to be beaten before entering the testing area can make the difference between success and failure on the exam.

Physical

Improper rest, poor eating habits, and lack of exercise can be some of the physical obstacles to overcome. When preparing for tests, always ensure that you get plenty of rest the night before, have a well-balanced meal before the test, and ensure you have a regiment of proper exercise. Physical obstacles are typically the easiest to overcome; however, they are the most overlooked.

Emotional

The emotional obstacles are often the most vague with which to deal. Much like mental obstacles, emotional obstacles can cause a person to do poorly on an exam well before they enter the room. Stress related issues that can interfere with test taking are:

- family concerns
- work-related concerns
- financial concerns

Emotional issues can cause a person to lose focus, cloud decision-making skills, and become distracted. Overcoming these obstacles requires a conscious effort to ensure that emotions do not interfere with the test.

PREPARING TO TAKE A TEST

Before the Test

1. Start preparing for the examination. For certification exams, start the first day of class. You can do this by reading your syllabus carefully to find out when your exams will be, how many there will be, and how much they are weighed into your grade.
2. For certification classes, plan reviews as part of your regular weekly study schedule; a significant amount of time should be used to review the entire material for the class.
3. Reviews are much more than reading and reviewing class assignments. You need to read over your class notes and ask yourself questions on the material you don't know well. (If your notes are relatively complete and well organized, you may find that very little rereading of the textbook for detail is needed.) You may want to create a study group for these reviews to reinforce your learning.
4. Review for several short periods rather than one long period. You will find that you are able to retain information better and get less fatigued.
5. Turn the main points of each topic or heading into questions and check to see if the answers come to you quickly and correctly. Do not try to guess the types of questions; instead, concentrate on understanding the material.

During the Test

1. Preview the test before you answer anything. This gets you thinking about the material. Make sure to note the point value of each question. This will give you some ideas on how best to allocate your time.
2. Quickly calculate how much time you should allow for each question. A general rule of thumb is that you should be able to answer 50 questions per hour. This averages out to one question every 1.2 seconds. However, make sure you clearly understand the amount of time you have to complete the test.
3. Read the directions CAREFULLY. (Can more than one answer be correct? Are you penalized for guessing?) Never assume that you know what the directions say.
4. Answer the easy questions first. This will give you confidence and a feel for the flow of the test. Only answer the ones for which you are sure of the correct answer.
5. Go back to the difficult questions. The questions you have answered so far may provide some indication of the answers.
6. Answer all questions (unless you are penalized for wrong answers).
7. Generally, once the test begins, the proctor can ONLY reread the question. He/she cannot provide any further information.
8. Circle key words in difficult questions. This will force you to focus on the central point.
9. Narrow your options on the question to two answers. Many times, a question will be worded with two answers that are obviously inaccurate, and two answers that are close. However, only one is correct. If you can narrow your options to two, guessing may be easier. For example, if you have four options on a question, then you have a

25% chance of getting the question correct when guessing. If you can narrow the options to two answers, then you increase to a 50% chance of selecting the correct choice.

10. Use all of the time allotted for the test. If you have extra time, review your answers for accuracy. However, be careful of making changes on questions of which you are not sure. People often change the answers to questions of which they were not sure, when their first guess was correct.

After the Test

Relax. The test has been turned in. You can spend hours second-guessing what you could have done, but the test is complete. For certification tests, follow up to see if you can find out what objectives you did well and what areas you could improve. Review your test if you can; otherwise, try to re-map the areas of question and refocus your studying.

SUMMARY

Test taking does not have to be overwhelming. The obstacles to testing can be overcome and conquered through solid strategies and preparation. Initiating an effective plan, following it, and mentally preparing for a test can be your greatest tools to test success.

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