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The Ultimate Guide to Preparing for Tech Certifications

What's Inside

- What to expect with a typical exam.
- Everything you need to know about picking study materials.
- Tips for studying effectively.
- How to know when you're ready for the exam.

The Ultimate Guide To Preparing For Tech Certifications

Contents

Certification can play a crucial role in tech professions, especially for people who work on the IT side. It allows pros to demonstrate their skills and simplifies the recruiting, retaining and developing of staff.

Certifications help IT professionals showcase their skills and stand out from their peers.

For most professionals, earning a certification includes passing one or more exams. Our Ultimate Guide seeks to explain these exams and provide a raft of information, suggestions and advice on how to prepare for them.

Understanding The Basics Of Cert Exams

The biggest and most popular cert programs come from companies such as Cisco Systems, Microsoft and Oracle, and from the Computer Technologies Industry Association, better known as CompTIA. These programs support millions of certified professionals.

Some certification exams are available only through their sponsoring organizations, but the majority of them are administered by the three major testing companies: Pearson VUE, Prometric and Certiport.

Here's the skinny on cert exam content:

- Old, familiar multiple-choice text questions remain a mainstay.
- Multiple-choice questions may take only a single answer, or they may require two or more answers.
- Careful reading of test questions is always a good idea.
- In scenario questions, candidates must read through a scenario, which is sometimes lengthy, then answer one or more questions about what they've read.
- In exhibit-based questions, candidates must examine or operate a set of computer screens or a simulation to perform a task or solve some problem.
- In code-based questions, candidates must examine a snippet of code and answer a question by choosing the correct outcome of the code when run.
- Lab exams (aka performance-based tests) present candidates with real or simulated systems, then ask them to implement specific designs, find and fix various problems, or handle typical setup and configuration tasks. Candidates might also be challenged with modifying code per a specification to resolve an issue or add functionality.

Understanding the scope of coverage, technical content, behavior and operation of tools and systems, and basic technologies and concepts are important to passing any cert exam. Throughout our Ultimate Guide, you will learn how to find and use tools and information to prepare yourself. Ultimately, this begins with exploring the content of the exam(s) you must pass, then developing the knowledge needed to answer questions confidently and correctly.

How To Read Certification Exam Descriptions

To get started, visit the exam sponsor's web page for your cert. On most certification exam pages you'll find these elements (they may have various names or be organized in different ways):

- **Exam ID or Number:** Use this unique identifier to sign up for an exam at a testing center (examples: 70-687 (Microsoft), ADR-001 (CompTIA), or 1Z0-803 (Oracle).
- **Exam Title:** This is the full name of the exam, such as "Configuring Windows 8" (Microsoft 70-687), "CompTIA Mobile App Security+ (ADR-001/Android, IOS-001/iOS), or "Java SE 7 Programmer I" (Oracle 1Z0-803).
- **Exam Facts:** These will include the number of questions, duration of exam, cost of exam and test provider. When the sponsor handles exam delivery, you will also find test location and delivery dates (otherwise, that information comes from the test provider, whom you'll also pay).
- **Overview:** A one-paragraph description of exam contents and coverage.
- **Prerequisites:** A list of prerequisite credentials or certification exams.
- **Associated Certifications:** A list of certification credentials to which the exam applies.
- **Registration:** A link to a testing center or sign-up page where you can register and pay for an exam and schedule the exam date.
- **Training:** Whether required or recommended, sponsors provide links to training classes that cover exam concepts and content in detail.
- **Objectives:** Also called "Exam Topics," "Skills Measured" or "Common Body of Knowledge" this lays out the subject matters on the exam. Objective domains also include percentage values for the related portion of the overall question bank.

Some exam sponsors include recommended reading lists, links to online documents and materials, and sample exam questions (not entire practice exams, but sample questions that convey coverage and level of difficulty). Some even provide links to online certification or community sites where you can find questions from other certification candidates. You'll be able to view answers or ask questions of your own.

As you prepare for any certification exam, you should first look at everything a sponsor provides. See how they describe and explain the exam, especially:

- **What it covers**
- **The intended audience**
- **Exam objectives**
- **Prerequisites or other qualification criteria**

Learning how to understand the exam description is a key first step.

Beyond that, let your interest and familiarity with the subject matter guide what you skim and what you read carefully. Make note of what's available so you can return when you need more details later on. The basic idea is to take some time to look around to see what's available. The better you understand what the exam covers and the kinds of skills and knowledge it seeks to assess, the better you'll be able to prepare to meet its requirements. This is just the beginning, though – there's more to come!

Preview The Types Of Questions Asked

As you begin digging into exam materials, you'll find sample questions, sometimes in vendor or sponsor materials, and often in study guides. Practice tests that seek to prepare candidates to tackle the real thing are particularly useful. It's helpful to look for exam reviews from reliable sources. These provide intelligence above and beyond what exam sponsors are willing to disclose about their exams, particularly when it comes to trick questions or complex subjects.

Get a sense of what kinds of questions the exam includes. Where scenario or exhibit-based questions appear (as they do on many Microsoft exams), make sure you identify the tools, consoles and utilities they include, and make sure you know how to use them wisely. When taking performance-based or lab exams, it's essential to acquire hands-on experience with systems and software featured in the exam.

The idea is to master the mechanics involved in dealing with questions and producing answers quickly. One important aspect of exam preparation is about learning and skills, but it's **equally important to develop enough speed and efficiency to get through 100 questions in 90 minutes** (an all-too-typical task that means grinding through lots of material in a short time).

Nail Down The Details Before You Start To Study!

Once you complete a survey of sponsor materials and obtain some study materials (and perhaps take a class), you must dig into the exam objectives (or "skills measures" or whatever a sponsor calls them) more deeply. This is when you start to decide what you should study and start lining up materials to meet those study needs. This is how you will build the skills and obtain the knowledge you need to take – and pass the exam.

It's smart to print out and take notes on the sponsor's objectives to guide you toward specific information and study materials. Many study guides make explicit reference to objectives to help you find and review relevant material, and keep track of areas where additional study or practice might be warranted.

Balance what you learn from the exam sponsor against what third parties (like GoCertify.com, ITCertificationMaster.com and Pluralsight's blog) have to say: Nobody can tell you everything. The more viewpoints and reports you read, the better you'll understand the exam and be able to prioritize your studying.

Knowing what the exam covers will help you prioritize your studies.

Defining The Different Study Methods

Remember, you must pass the exam(s) to earn the cert. There are many ways to acquire the skills and knowledge, but candidates follow (or jump between) two or three paths to IT certification:

- Self-Study: Using a combination of online materials, practice tests, books and other materials, candidates prepare themselves for an exam more or less on their own. This is the most common path to certifications that lack explicit, mandatory training requirements. Typical self-study elements include longer study guides, shorter Exam Cram summary books, practice tests, flashcards and online materials.

Self-study is an important part of any of the paths you'll take toward certification.

- Instructor-Led Training (ILT): Numerous outlets for ILT for IT certifications are available (the more popular a credential is, the more outlets you'll find). These involve live or virtual classroom attendance, plus interaction with a knowledgeable instructor. ILT is the most expensive of the certification paths, but also offers the best expectations of a successful exam experience.
- Online or video-based training: This approach strikes a balance between self-study's low cost and ILT's instructor interaction. Lower-cost offerings involve little or no instructor interaction; higher-cost offerings often include online office hours, mentoring services, or instructor interaction outside a physical classroom.

No matter which of these paths you take toward certification, some elements of self- study will figure into your prep activities. Thus, many ILT and video-based classes provide students with books and practice exams, in addition to live or recorded lecture materials (and hands-on labs, where applicable).

Study Materials: What You'll Need And How To Pick The Best

Seek Out The Best Learning Tools And Technical Info

Self-study is an important part of any of the paths you'll take toward certification.

Most exam sponsors offer vast collections of information to prospective cert candidates. This includes product documentation, how-to's, technical briefings, instructional videos, simulation and other resources designed to shed light on their products, platforms or services. You will also find study guides, technical books, Exam Crams, flash cards, practice tests, training materials (which may be online, video or instructor-led in a physical classroom), and various other tools to help you learn what you must know to pass.

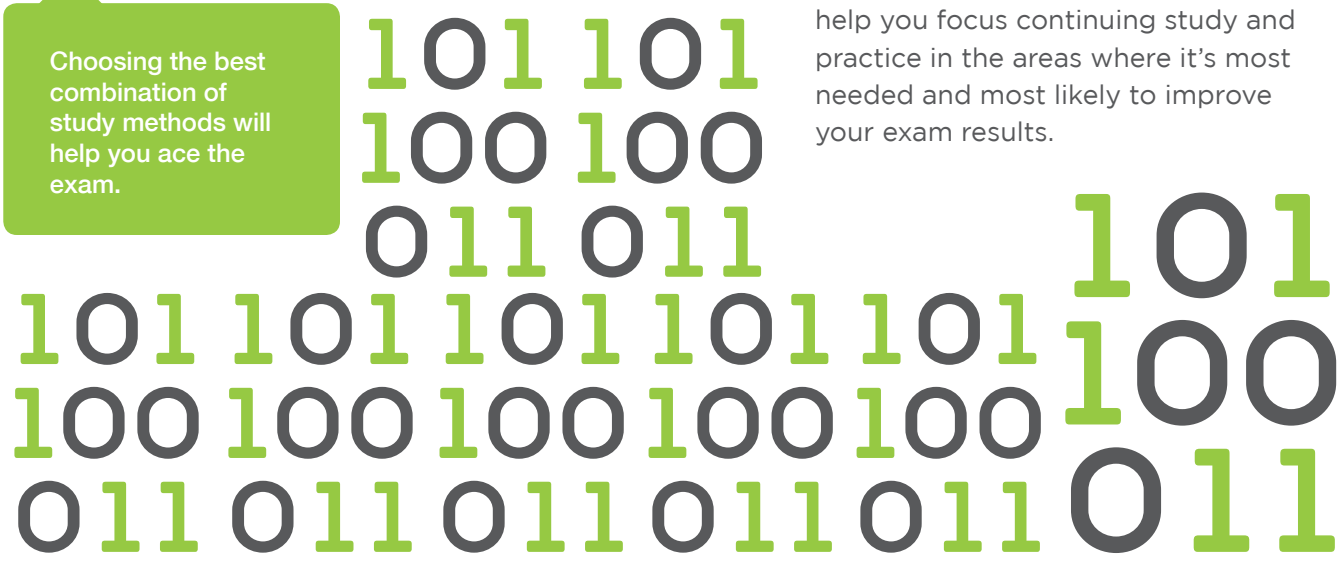
It's essential to do your homework when selecting study materials. Read exam and book reviews and search online forum postings to find the best materials. After identifying the cream of this crop, create a budget and buy what you can afford. The bare minimum consists of a study guide, an Exam Cram and one or more sets of practice tests. The cost for such a bare-bones buy is seldom more than $150, often less than that.

Practice Makes Perfect: Learn By Doing

You can't meet all the learning requirements for most modern certifications with only reading, studying and pencil-and-paper (or computer-based) problem solving. Many certs require hands-on interaction with specific tools, utilities, consoles, systems or applications.

As you research your exam requirements, it's essential to nail down the hands-on components for the skills and knowledge you must acquire. You may need to find a way to sit down in front of certain systems and software to make this happen. This often involves writing and testing code (for developer certifications), or installing, setting up, configuring, troubleshooting and maintaining key systems and services (for other IT certifications).

Choosing the best combination of study methods will help you ace the exam.



Modern virtualization technology makes it relatively easy to set up a home lab on a capable notebook or desktop PC, where you can host the various clients, servers and infrastructure components you might need. Other options include taking classes that include computer or networking labs, or finding simulators and virtual labs online.

Craft Custom Topic Trees

A topic tree takes a structured list or outline of topics for an exam, along with tasks or activities that cert candidates must be able to perform, and strings them together in order. Some exam sponsors include these things as part of their exam info. Others imply them in their exam objectives or requirements. It may take some time and effort to organize information for your exam this way, but it's worthwhile to work through this process. You wind up with an ordered list of what you need to know and are able to check things off as you learn them. It's also a good idea to keep track of how your studies and practice test questions map into this topic tree. Over time, this will help you focus continuing study and practice in the areas where it's most needed and most likely to improve your exam results.

Less Obvious Study Help: Official Curriculum, Courses, Syllabi And More

Other great sources of insight into certification exams might not be so obvious. Even though you usually have to pay to take so-called official curriculum classes from certification sponsors or their training partners, you can usually get detailed course outlines from those same sources for free. Also, though it's not always true, many certifications may be the declared focus for some college classes, and other classes might be "close enough" that they might as well be focused on a specific exam or credential.

There are a variety of online and offline resources, so you can pick the ones that are right for you.

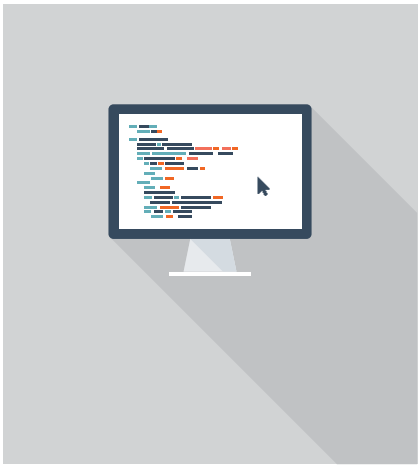
In fact, you'll find that community colleges and undergraduate schools, and even graduate programs, routinely post course outlines, syllabi and reading lists for all courses offered. This means if you can find a course that covers at least some of the entries in your topic tree, you can use the outline or syllabus entries, and possibly also reading assignments, to provide useful information(,) certification topics and concepts.

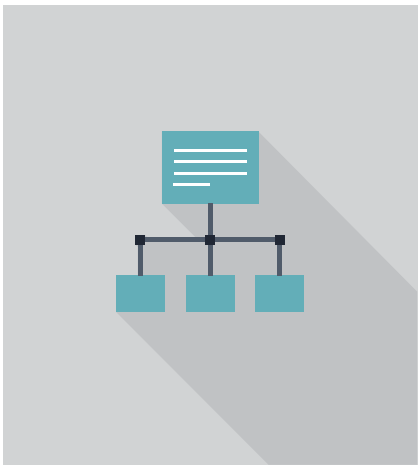
Build An Arsenal Of Information Resources

In searching for information online, don't overlook recommendations and must-have items that appear in user forums, user groups or study groups aimed at your chosen certification. If you can find a real or virtual study group of people preparing for the same exam, you can't help but benefit from their collective wisdom and experience. The same goes for mailing lists or user forums focused on certification preparation, and any lists of frequently asked questions they might maintain.

You should also look for ratings, reviews and reactions to the following kinds of cert prep materials to help you identify (and possibly, acquire) the best ones:

- **Study Guides:** Full-length, comprehensive coverage of IT certification exams. Numerous book series focus on such content, such as McGraw-Hill's *All-in-One* series, *Wiley's Bible* series, the *Sybex Study Guide and Mastering Series,* and *Pearson's Cert Guide* series. Also look for official presses for cert programs, such as Microsoft Press and Oracle Press.





- **Exam Crams:** A series of books from Pearson that provide direct, detailed coverage of key exam topics and concepts, *Exam Crams* forgo background and general teaching in exchange for focused coverage.

- **Practice Tests:** A collection of exam questions designed to cover the same ground and interrogation approaches as the real thing. Because there are some shady operators out there, you should stick

to practice exam offerings from well-known and reputable providers only. This includes companies such as Transcender, Boson, MeasureUp and other authorized sponsor practice test providers. See the "Brain Dumps" section for vendors to avoid.

- **Flash Cards:** A set of practice exam questions with the questions on one side, and the answers on the other. These are a great way to drill for speed and accuracy, and you can find commercial flash card decks for the most popular exams or make your own. Numerous apps for both iOS and Android are available for flash cards, and many have card decks for specific cert exams already.
- **Hands-On Experience And Skills:** Look for articles or advice on what to buy for and how to build a home test lab to prep for the hands-on portion of your learning experience. Or look for reputable providers of virtual lab time or simulators. This may involve buying software to run on your own machine, or gaining online access to somebody else's. For developers, you'll need access to the usual programming tools – editors, compilers, interpreters, and/or an integrated development environment (IDE).
- **Classroom Or Online Training:** As already indicated, there are situations where it makes sense to include instructor-led or video-based training to your cert preparation. First and foremost, it is imperative to factor in training whenever a certification sponsor requires it, and when you're venturing into a new area of technical learning. In such circumstances, access to a well-qualified instructor is a benefit that almost can't be over- stated. And for those whose budgets might be strained by the $400-plus daily fee that ILT offerings commonly cost, video-based training makes a great alternative.
- **Magnificent Miscellany:** Various exams may generate special tools, specific training materials, and special study aids or prep regimes. Find a good study group or cert-focused website, and you'll learn about this quickly and easily.

Stay Away From Brain Dumps!

By definition, a brain dump is a website or collection of information that seeks to provide verbatim access to actual exam content. Because using such material violates the exam contract to which all test-takers must agree, these materials are dangerous and risky. Companies that sell such materials are inherently fly-by-night and offer little or no quality control, so you can't know how good or bad the info may be. Exam sponsors can strip you of any and all of their certifications and block you from future participation in their cert programs if they find you using these materials. This can be professional suicide for IT professionals whose jobs require certification, and can shut off career growth for those who might need certification in order to advance professionally.

How do you know a brain dump when you see one? Beware of offers that claim to be 100 percent accurate, those that represent actual exam content, or that offer a 100 percent money-back guarantee if you don't pass an exam after using the material. As the old saying goes, "If something is too good to be true, it's probably neither terribly good nor even close to true." Steer clear!

Avoid brain dumps.
They are risky and not reliable.

How To Study And Practice

Once you've deciphered what you need to cover and have built a topic tree, it's time to start the study and practice phase.

Start With An Honest Self-Assessment To Establish Priorities

When you've researched exam objectives and constructed the topic tree, sit down and work through that tree to assess your knowledge, skills and experience. While you're at it, think carefully about how well you understand related subjects, tools and so forth. For example, if an exam requires you to know when to use a message digest and when to use a hash value, you not only need to understand what those things are and how they work, but why one might be better than the other in certain circumstances. Sometimes, to make yourself comfortable with subject details, you must begin by familiarizing yourself with the general background and then working down to the detail level.

This helps you decide which areas you already know and understand and which ones still need work before your exam. If you work with something on a regular basis, or have done so in the past year or two, you may even be able to skip certain topics. Before diving into the details, you'll mostly be deciding which areas you can jump into directly, and which ones you'll need to do some background study on first.

Practice tests and self-assessments are critical throughout the study process.

If you're not comfortable with the idea of an informal self-assessment, look for assessment tools from exam sponsors, study guides or practice tests. These offer skills and tools that will tell you where you should focus your preparation effort. They may even be more objective than a self-assessment. But if no such tools are available, **take a practice test early and look very carefully at your results.** This nearly always helps identify the topics, tools and areas where you must acquire further learning or develop more skills before trying again.

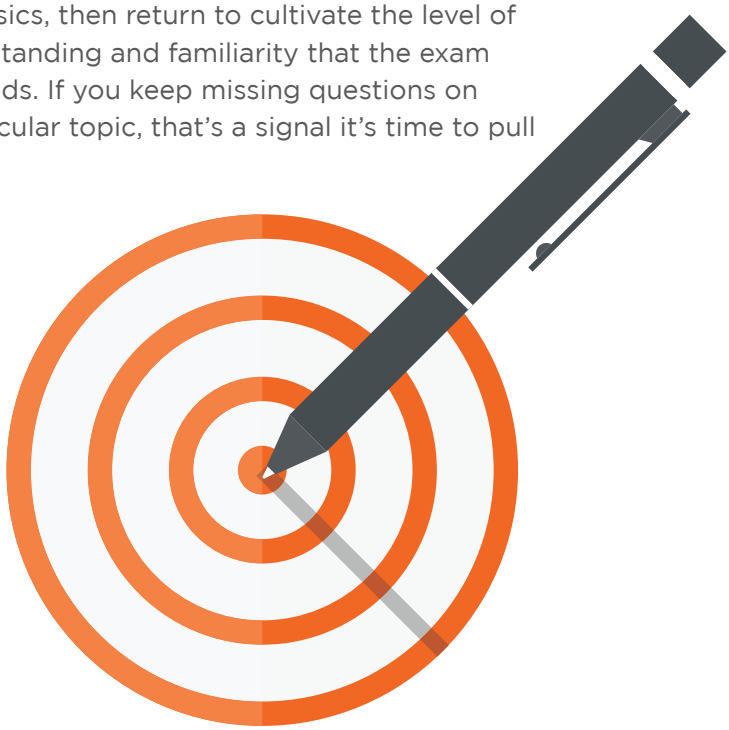
If you can identify those areas in most need of attention, you'll be able to focus your efforts where they'll do the most good. That doesn't mean you can ignore everything else on the exam, however. It just means you will devote most of your time and expend greater effort on areas where you've got the most work to do. As you prepare for another self-assessment you should also plan to take a day or two to brush up on those areas where you already feel prepared to tackle the exam.

You Should Reassess Yourself On A Monthly Basis

Study guides and Exam Crams often provide end-of-chapter review questions you can use for interim assessments, along with one or two complete practice exams at the end of each book. If your exam tools let you focus questions on specific exam topics or objectives, use that to assess your progress in these areas before moving from one area to another. If you can answer most related questions correctly, you can then move on to your next priority with some confidence.

Bounce Between Questions To Study Materials

After you've surveyed everything at least once and have gained at least modest proficiency in all exam areas, you can use questions to guide further study. Though it's tempting to correct mistakes by memorizing correct answers then moving to the next topic, the right thing to do is figure what's behind them. If you're suffering from a lack of background or familiarity, you can fix that by studying the subject matter to master the basics, then return to cultivate the level of understanding and familiarity that the exam demands. If you keep missing questions on a particular topic, that's a signal it's time to pull back and do some background reading and studying, then recover the topic area, before using another set of practice questions to once again see where you stand.



In practice, this means you bounce from questions to study materials, then back to questions again (and repeat as many times as necessary). Sooner or later, you'll get things straightened out enough to truly understand what's going on, and how to put your skills and knowledge to proper use.

Build And Use A Home Practice Lab

When there's a hands-on component to a certification exam, nothing beats access to a properly equipped lab. This is probably when it's most important to find and follow recommendations from others who've earned the credential you're seeking.

Time and money involved in assembling a test lab can be significant. For example, the Cisco Certified Internetwork (CCIE) Lab Exam currently costs $1,500. It also requires most test-takers to travel to one of only six locations in the world to take it, so it's not unusual for candidates to spend $5-10K putting a CCIE test lab together, with many also having to pay for a flight, meals and lodging as they travel to take the test.

On the other hand, most Microsoft lab requirements are more modest. One or two computers usually suffice to host all of the client, server and infrastructure bits and pieces. Microsoft also makes enough 60-day evaluation versions of its software freely available that out-of-pocket expenses aren't too high. It seldom costs more than $2,000 to assemble a well-provisioned MCSA or MCSE practice lab, even if you must buy a computer and pay for some software tools. You can also rent a lab from Rackspace, although with your own lab, you have the advantage of breaking it and then trying to fix it, which is another great way to learn.

Whatever expenses are involved, be sure to ask around about how best to put your test lab together. You can control expenses and make sure you have everything you need, as long as do your homework!

Weigh the costs of building different practice labs.

Get Some Study Support

Most IT certifications – especially the popular ones – spawn various user and study organizations. They exist to help cert candidates get ready for exams and provide each other with mutual support, and they enable recent cert achievers to share their knowledge. These resources are invaluable and very much worth seeking out.

User groups (such as the Windows Users Group Network or WUGNet and Java User Groups, or JUGs) almost always operate live chapters in major metro areas and feature ongoing online and offline study groups. The same goes for local chapters of professional associations and societies (such as the International Systems Security Association, or ISSA, for information security topics). And even if you live too far from a physical chapter to attend meetings or join a group, you can still find ways to interact with peers and colleagues online. This can be the best way to learn about study materials, information resources and other good stuff to help you get certified. Please don't overlook this avenue to learning and skills development.

How To Know If You're Ready To Take The Exam

There are various tools to identify what you know and where you fall short. Repeat the assessment process as often as you must until your typical score means passing the exam.

Look For A Sponsor's Assessment Tools

Because only a few exam sponsors offer assessment tools, you'll most often have to improvise your own. Even when they are available, you'll be lucky to find more than one you can use and we recommend you access at least three or four. When you do find them, though, be sure to make the most of them!

Find And Use Practice Exams

In the absence of a sponsor's assessment tool, a complete practice test makes a good substitute. Three or four complete exams for practice should be enough to get most cert candidates ready to take their exams. Most study guides include one or two complete practice tests, and most commercial practice tests include two or three complete question banks. For most people, two books and one commercial practice test will be enough. This is particularly true because most cert prep books provide end-of- chapter materials that allow you to assess your readiness on a per-topic basis.

It's possible that you might need to buy a second set of practice tests from a different vendor, should your books and first set prove insufficient to get your scores to the right level. Don't stress if this proves necessary; the additional $50 - $150 this will cost is well worth it. It's cheaper and easier than having to retake a cert exam.

The Changing Role Of Assessment Over Time

At the beginning of the cert prep process the primary purpose of assessment is to identify major topics or subject areas where you need to invest significant time and effort to make yourself exam-ready. As you fill in those gaps, one or two additional assessments will help you zero in on areas where more practice is needed. Normally, by the fourth or fifth time you take a complete practice test, you'll find yourself ready to head to the test center. Only when certain areas still show significant weakness will you need to continue to hit the books and the practice lab.

When Is It Time To Sign Up For An Exam?

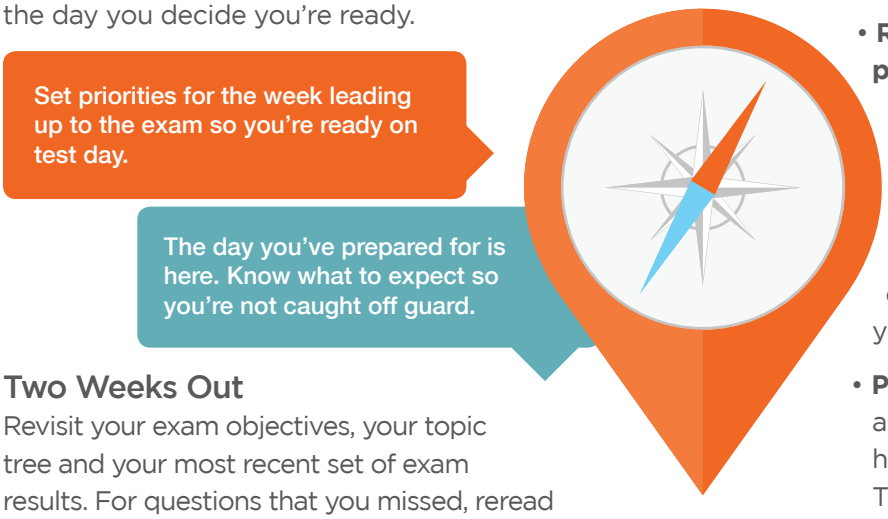
When you take a practice exam and beat the passing score by 5 - 10 percent, you're ready to go after the real thing. This extra cushion gives

Assessments help you evaluate your strengths and weaknesses.

you room to cover the typical mistakes and errors of strategy and judgment that sometimes occur in the testing center. Because these can have a measurable negative impact on exam scores, you're simply taking out a bit of insurance to make sure that you will pass, even when you're impacted by nerves and adrenaline. Don't stop studying or practicing once you've booked the exam, though. You need to keep your hand in to stay sharp for your rendezvous with destiny. In the final section of this Ultimate Guide, you'll learn how to finish your exam prep, right until you sit down in your seat at the testing center.

Countdown To Exam Day

The following reminders and activities for the two weeks before your exam will help you feel and test your best. This means you should schedule your cert exams no sooner than two weeks out from the day you decide you're ready.



Two Weeks Out

Revisit your exam objectives, your topic tree and your most recent set of exam results. For questions that you missed, reread relevant materials to improve your understanding, or hit the practice lab to sharpen your skills. Spend half an hour to an hour each day working through materials, reading and practicing as necessary.

One Week Out

Here's a checklist of tasks to complete during this week. Some may require prime-time action, so be prepared to shift work schedules around to give yourself the time you'll need:

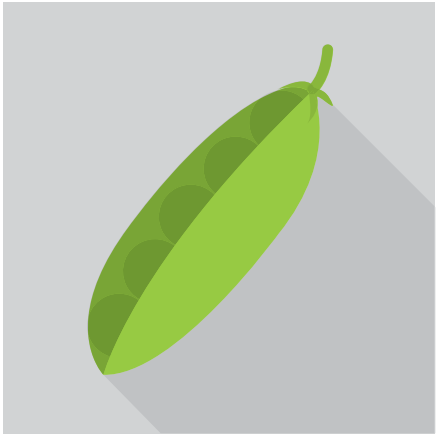
- **Locate the test center:** Go online and get directions to the test center. Use a mapping tool to get typical travel times to your destination. Plop the location or address info into your smartphone or GPS. Add 15 - 30 minutes to the time estimate to make sure you're not late (more if you have to drive during rush hour).
- **Double-check your test appointment:** Log onto the test center website to check your appointment or call to confirm the date and time when you'll be taking the exam. If something is wonky, finding out a week in advance should give you time to adjust or even reschedule.
- **Round up necessary ID and paperwork:** Most test centers want you to provide one or two photo IDs, along with a credit card or other form of identification. You'll want to print out a copy of your test reservation or a confirmation form to take with you as well.
- **Practice time management:** Take another complete practice test to help you prepare for the exam. This time, you're testing against the clock, and want to make sure you can get through enough questions in the allotted time to achieve a passing score. Skip questions you can return to later and mark questions you'd like to review or rethink.

- **Build yourself a cram sheet:** Ideally, you'll do this two days before the exam. This is when you write down all the stuff you'll need to recall, and repeat the exercise until you can put the whole thing on paper in 15 - 30 minutes.

The Night Before Testing

We have numerous suggestions on how you should spend the night before your exam. Some activities can be put off until the next morning if your exam is scheduled for the afternoon. Here's what's on your agenda for that time period:

- **Take a last long look at prep materials** and one final bone-up (read materials, run hands-on exercises) for any problem areas.
- **Write out your cram sheet,** and be sure you can get everything down on paper in 30 minutes or less. Save this cram sheet (or your master copy) to review tomorrow morning.
- **Double-check your exam confirmation.** Make sure you know when you're leaving, where you're going, and what time you need to be there (aim to arrive at least 15 minutes early).
- **Get a good night's sleep.** The best way to take any exam is well-rested. Be sure to schedule eight or nine hours in bed the night before, even if you normally sleep less than that. Be sure to set your alarm correctly if you need to alter your usual wake-up routine to get to the testing center.



Testing Day: How To Schedule Your Day, What To Bring, etc.

On test day, you'll want to:

- **Plan a meal or a snack before you hit the testing center.** On most days, breakfast may be your most important meal, but making sure to put something in your stomach an hour or two ahead of leaving for the testing center is equally important today.
- **Review your cram sheet before you leave.** One final chance to commit things to memory lets you make sure you can emit your cram sheet at the testing center with perfect accuracy.
- **Leave a little early. You've planned to get there 15 minutes early.** See if you can beat your goal by 10 minutes, and make sure you've got your paperwork ready (IDs assembled and a printed copy of your exam confirmation to take along).
- **While you're waiting for your time slot, review the cram sheet.** It's too late to learn anything new, but this will give you something to think about while you're waiting.
- **During practice minutes, write down your cram sheet.** When you sit down at your test station, you have half an hour to practice using the test engine before instructing the software to begin your actual exam. Use as much of this time as you need to output your cram sheet. You're allowed to take a pencil and a single sheet of paper with you to your test station.

Use this practice time to write everything down on your cram sheet. You can start the actual test as soon as you're done, or you can take a few minutes to calm your nerves before you begin. Good luck!

- **Bring a notebook and a pen or pencil along with you.** You can leave these items in your car, or in a travel bag you take along with you (you'll probably need one for your phone). You may need these items later.

After The Exam Ends

You should receive test results for most exams pretty soon after you finish. If you pass, congratulations! You'll soon be able to start work on your next exam. If you've failed, review any materials the test engine shows you about your trouble areas on the exam. If you can get a print-out of that information, be sure to take it home with you. If not, commit as much of the information to memory as possible, then write it down in the notebook you've brought along with you in the test center lobby before you leave. You'll need this information to guide your next round of study as you prepare to retake your exam. You'll probably need to buy another set of practice exams as well, unless you've already got two or more such exams ready for upcoming rounds of self-assessment. Ideally, don't wait too long (no more than a month) to schedule your next exam, especially if you nearly passed. You don't want to start forgetting what you've already learned.

If you don't pass on the first try, know your retake options and don't get discouraged!

CLOSING REMARKS

If you've prepped as we suggested, your odds of passing the exam are pretty high. If you don't pass, some training providers offer exam guarantees to their students. This means if you take one of their cert courses, but fail an exam for the related credential, they may pay for a retake. Be sure you understand how to request such payment before you make a claim. In the same vein, some exam sponsors work with test center operators to permit candidates to request and use a retake on exams (or exam vouchers). You must usually request a special code when you pay for the initial exam (or voucher). For example, Microsoft occasionally offers what it calls a "Second Shot" program. Candidates who sign up obtain a code they can use with the test center company to request a free retake. Other sponsors occasionally do this too.

Prepping for a cert exam takes time and involves real effort. No matter what happens, don't get discouraged! If you fully engage in the process, and follow as many of our recommendations as possible, you can – and ultimately will – succeed in your quest for IT certification.

Ed Tittel is a 30-plus-year veteran of the IT industry who's worked as a software developer, a project manager, a networking consultant and a technical trainer. He's also the author of more than 100 computing books, and is perhaps best known for creating the Exam Cram series in 1997. Today, Ed still writes the occasional book, blogs regularly for TechTarget (Windows Enterprise Desktop), Tom's IT Pro, and Pearson IT Certification, and writes articles for a variety of websites. Visit his website at www.edtittel.com for more information.