



## Respecting the Process

I am proud to say I was able to achieve passing all three AWS associate certifications on my first attempt. For those that are pursuing AWS certifications, this is the goal that most of us have set when it comes to the certification itself. We hold the hope that these challenging certifications will catapult us to a better career or provide better opportunities. That these badges will open doors that were once closed and companies will chase you to fill a position. Well I'm here to tell you that there is no guarantee that this will happen. However, I will say that these certifications aligned with other skills can provide you a path to landing your dream job. Remember AWS like many technologies offers a wide range of career opportunities and it is important not to get caught up in only financial benefit but working on aligning your path with what you will enjoy and what you can already bring to the table.

Before I get into the meat and gravy topics that everyone wants to know about like where did you start? What study material did you use to pass the exam? What certification is the right one for me? How long did it take and so on. I want to provide the foundation of understanding that each of us are different. We all have access to different resources and also have different life obstacles that can get in the way of achieving any goals that we might have. I had to get my family, friends, and employer onboard with the dedication and sacrifice it takes to learn cloud from zero experience.

I have spoken to many people who think that they can walk into these exams with watching a few videos and pass. If you are the very few who have that ability good for you however for the rest of us we need make adjustments in our life to ensure we make enough time to clear these exams. For me I am lucky enough in most cases to have a support structure that allows me to take time to study. So long story short make any adjustments and get those around you on board with the dedication and time that it takes to pass these exams. This will help you understand the timing of when you can take the exam but also if you have the right support they keep you accountable to your progress and goals.

## Where did I start?

I am lucky enough to work for one of the top technology consulting firms in the world. What comes with this is guidance from senior leadership on what areas you should focus on. For me, given the options and seeing my current work environment I went with AWS because at the time there seemed to be a gap that needed to be filled. I recognize an opportunity that I could use to my advantage. I knew that if I was to learn AWS it would springboard me to stand out. The only issue is that at the time I didn't know anyone who was in AWS and didn't know where to start. Like most of you that are reading this I was looking for guidance on navigating these certifications. So over the course of all three exams I gained some foundational

understanding and processes that should be mentioned before I discuss the exams themselves. Think of these as my rules that I used across all exams.

## **Building the foundation:**

1. Get a study partner
  - a. By getting a study partner you hold each other accountable on your progression
  - b. You challenge each other in understanding of the topics
  - c. Provides a 2nd source for when there is confusion
2. **Invest in yourself**
  - a. **Invest in yourself** by making sure that the study material is from a trusted site.
    - i. Paid Trainings directly from AWS
    - ii. ReInvent-Youtube
    - iii. ACloudGuru
    - iv. DigitalCloud
    - v. WhizLabs
    - vi. Udemy
      1. Stephine Maark
      2. Jon Benso
3. **DONT BE A SUCKER!!!**
  - a. Ignore offers from untrusted sources that try to save money through test dumps and study material.
    - i. I have 100% have seen wrong answers on test dumps
    - ii. Only join WhatsApp groups if:
      1. You are 100% sure that you know the person
      2. If you can verify the credibility of the organizer
      3. Have enough foundational knowledge to identify when you are not progressing or that the information is correct or incorrect.
4. **Make Adjustments As Needed**
  - a. For each exam I added another element to stimulate my mind for understanding. What do I mean?:
    - i. Rotated training videos so I wasn't hearing the same voice over and over.
    - ii. If something doesn't seem to be clicking try a different source or take a different approach
    - iii. Know when content requires hands on labs.
5. **Find a Study System That Works For You**
  - a. Bought myself a whiteboard
    - i. For visual learners this is key.
    - ii. Became a place for a brain dump where I knew I had to follow up on something but knew I could possibly forget.



1. I have to admit when using my own AWS account I did incur an undesired cost but it was very little and as an outcome I LEARNED!

Don't create an EIP and not attach/assign it to an instance!

## 7. Keep yourself motivated



- a. It is a known fact this journey to AWS certifications is not an easy one and regardless how you do on the exam or if you feel hopeless, lean on your support for motivation or create it. Feeling hopeless is part of the process at least in my case. In every exam that I have taken I have faced the **Valley of Despair**. Find some motivation and keep going! Understand this is part of the process.

## 8. Timing

- a. Don't get caught up on timing but do set deadlines
  - i. Understand what works for you in your life.
  - ii. Should I schedule the exam ahead of time?
    1. For me I never did it too far in advance. Would this have been helpful? Yes! However you need to understand yourself and your mental state.
    2. I knew I was ready when I could not fit anymore information in my head and when going through the practice test questions I would breeze right through.
- b. Schedule the test at the very latest when you are starting to do the practice test.
  - i. The worst thing is to be ready and have to wait a week or two to sit the exam.
  - ii. Reschedule if needed
    1. This is a good one but also a dangerous one. **DO NOT RESCHEDULE THE EXAM BASED ON FEAR.** Reschedule the exam if you really are not hitting the mark

on the practice test or feel there is a huge gap in your knowledge/understanding.

## Exam Progression

Now that you have found out what my foundational approach was across all three exams, it's time to share my pathway and thoughts about each exam. Again I want to mention this is only based on what I did and most of it was trial and error. However, I have shared my thoughts with my colleagues that have sat AWS exams and have successfully passed so there is some validity in what I am saying. One important thing to note is that there is some **OVERLAP between the exams**. Think of it as knowledge building blocks. Each exam in my opinion seemed to be easier because I did the work. Where when I started all the answers were possible but based on my last exam I could easily take out 2 wrong answers.

### What Exam Did I Find the Hardest?

**The simple answer for me was the first exam.** I had zero knowledge when I started so I didn't know what to expect, where to begin, and how much I should really know. I have met technology professionals that have years of experience that didn't clear the SAA because they couldn't get out of their head. They relied on what they knew rather than being open to the process. I can't speak for them but you get what you put in. Don't think you know something and skip it. This is important even between exams. I always recommend revisiting what you think you know as a checkpoint to validate if you actually indeed know it. Don't fail an exam because you miss what you consider simple things. The exams are good on finding if the tester really knows the services.

### AWS Practitioner:

**I skipped this exam** and went right for Solutions Architect Associate(SAA). Why? Well because simply I didn't know better but glad I did. When I first started I didn't know where to begin and a friend of mine asked the question what is your goal? Well that was to become certified of course but he was asking was my overall/end goal? Did my path include getting my SAA? Simply the answer was yes. So why not just go right to the SAA? So that's what I did.

I skipped the Practitioner Exam but not completely. What do I mean by this? Well remember when I said "I always recommend revisiting what you think you know as a checkpoint to validate if you actually indeed know it." Well I decided to take a 3-day AWS practitioner training when I had already passed my SAA and was studying to take my AWS Developer exam. What I learned is that the Practitioner Exam did not go nearly as deep enough as you needed to go to pass the SAA but it was a good starting point. It also taught me to be careful about where you learned. I think the instructor thought that the students didn't know enough so I could tell at points he misspoke or skipped some things. There were gaps in services such as VPCs that needed to be filled but again by revisiting the foundational work I was preparing myself for my next exam.

### Final thoughts:

Practitioner is good to have for some people given the right field and track but if you get an associate it becomes reality void at that point. If you are aiming

to get an associate level use it as a stepping stone and be proud of it! So I am not saying not to take the exam but really think to yourself is it necessary in reaching your end goal and is it worth the time and focus. I would recommend Managers/PMs that need to know what the technical experts are talking about in meetings and don't plan on doing.

### **AWS Solutions Architect Associate:**

This by far was the exam that required the most time and dedication as I was navigating Cloud Services/Technologies for the first time. I didn't have the guidance or really anybody to help me figure out what was good enough to pass the exam but I was not alone. I had a great study partner which I worked with daily and dedicated any free time to learning the process. Looking back at this it was an important step in the process. We both didn't know much but we were holding each other responsible and often challenged each other in our understanding of AWS. We passed the SAA in the same week. Shared in the accomplishments however discussed next steps in DVA. So what resources did I use for SAA? Here it is in order:

1. **1AWS Technical Professional** -AWS Training Platform
2. **ACloudGuru** - **Do Not** use this as your only study guide! Very basic level conversations. You need to fill in the gaps using other resources.
  - a. Basic content
3. **AWS Architecture Training** - 3-day class lead- Global Knowledge
4. **\*Stephane Maarek** - Solutions Architect Associate - Udemy- Used this to fill in the many gaps in understanding from ACloudGuru
5. **Tutorialsdojo/Cheat Sheet**
6. **Jon Benso- Practice test**
7. **AWS FAQ/WhitePapers**
8. **Whizlabs- Practice test**

**\*NOTE:** I did not use DigitalCloud at this point but wish I knew about them sooner. I used Digital Cloud only for my SYSOPS exam but would have used it the same way I used Stephane Maarek to get more substance in areas I needed to have better explained or just watch end to end.

### **Final thoughts:**

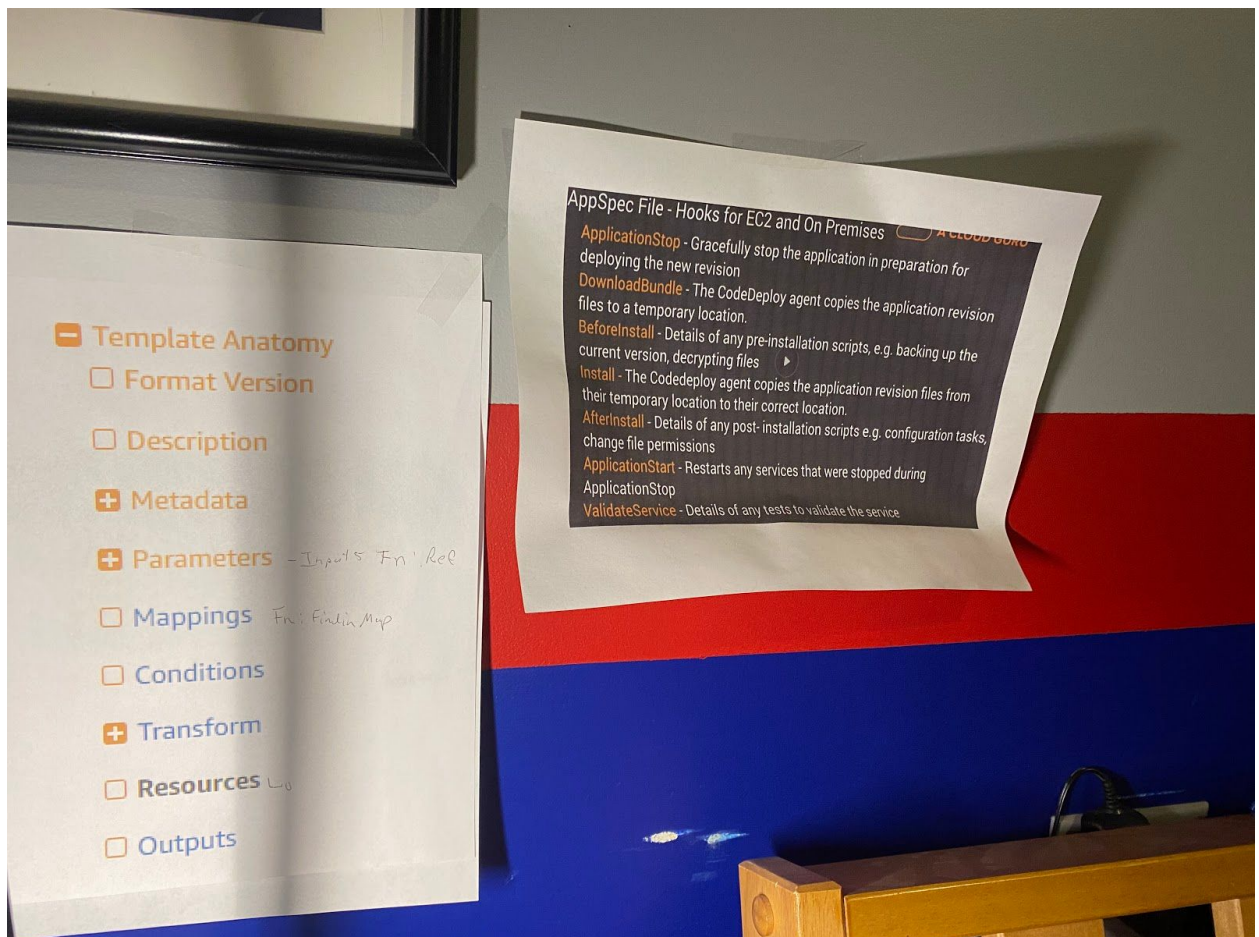
Spend the time to gain the foundational understanding in SAA. This exam has been called the starting place in the associate level and I 100% agree if you are planning on taking on multiple exams. SAA offers the most broad scope of AWS services and focuses on understanding that will carry you through other exams. Introduces you to the basics/main services such as VPC, S3, High Availability, EBS, RDS, Lambda, ect... If you do the work you will be able not only pass but start your cloud journey on the right foot.

### **AWS Developer Associate:**



This exam was one that I had the most fun with as serverless and developer services is the focus here. Also, by already passing the SAA I didn't have the stress of knowing what to expect or where to go for the right content. However one important note to make is to make sure that you don't get overly confident that you feel like you can skip sections. Often these trainings such as ACloudGuru recycle their content between courses but there may be some training providers that edit additional slides/points. For example, The content will start off explaining what S3 is but move into serverless functionality that wasn't included in SAA and provide DVA exam review. Small tip here is that I would often speed up the video to 1.2x or x1.5 with the mindset that if I heard anything new or forgot about a service function/feature I would slow it back down and review as needed.

The Developer exam required more hands on during the training sections especially around CloudFormation, Lambda, CodeCommit, CodeBuild, CodeDeploy, and CodePipeline. There is a lot of trial and error that can be learned especially around API gateway and Lambda. Spend the time getting it wrong until you get it right. In my study space I would cover the walls with important information such as CloudFormation Template breakdown including AppSpec File information(See image below). Also, for those that have Amazon Alexa create a skill and see where it goes wrong or right. I created a holiday game to share with the family and learned where I made mistakes and how to fix them as most of the skills have to interact with Lambda.



So what resources did I use for DVA? Here it is in order:

1. **ACloudGuru** - **Do Not** use this as your only study guide! Very basic level conversations. You need to fill in the gaps using other resources.
  - i. LABS/Sandbox provided by ACloudGuru
2. **AWS Developer Training** - 3-day class lead- Global Knowledge
3. **\*Stephane Maarek** - Solutions Architect Associate - Udemy- Used this to fill in the many gaps in understanding from ACloudGuru
4. **Tutorialsdojo/Cheat Sheet**
5. **Built an Alexa Skill** - Youtube
6. **Jon Benso- Practice test**
7. **AWS FAQ/WhitePapers**
8. **Whizlabs**- Practice test

**\*NOTE:** I did not use DigitalCloud at this point but wish I knew about them sooner. I used Digital Cloud only for my SYSOPS exam but would have used it the same way I used Stephane Maarek to get more substance in areas I needed to have better explained or just watch end to end.

#### **AWS Sysops Administrator Associate:**

The SOA was the third exam but was the one that I felt I needed to prepare for the most. Think of this as SAA on a way more granular level focusing on setting up the actual infrastructure. It required me to go back to what I learned in SAA but dig deeper in IAM, Monitoring/Compliance,VPC, Management tools, Billing, ect... Because I decided to take DVA before SOA this made me have to go back to more tools that overlapped in SAA that I had not visited in a while. Cloudwatch, CloudTrail, and IAM for example were not mentioned that much during DVA.

There seemed to be a lot of mixed reviews with this exam. Leading up to sitting the exam some stated this was the toughest where others mentioned this being easiest or at level with the others. I have to say that I found this exam to be less challenging than others only due to the fact that I had gained a lot of knowledge clearing the previous exams. If this was my first exam it would have not been a good outcome. I would not start with this exam unless you 100% work as AWS/Cloud Sysops Administrator already.Because again I did the work it paid off with this exam.

I will discuss steps I would have done differently later on but the one regret that I do have with this exam is that I should have taken SOA before DVA as my 2nd exam. For me the overlap between SAA and SOA was greater than DVA. I feel like the services tied together better with much more overlap. It seemed like SAA was about what a service is and SOA was about what a service does within the infrastructure and how to troubleshoot if you face an issue. So what resources did I use for SOA? Here it is in order:

1. **ACloudGuru** - **Do Not** use this as your only study guide! Very basic level conversations. You need to fill in the gaps using other resources.



- a. LABS/Sandbox provided by ACloudGuru
2. **DigitalCloud**-Neal Davis- Watched End to End
3. **Stephane Maarek** - Solutions Architect Associate - Udemy- Used this to fill in the many gaps in understanding from ACloudGuru
4. **Tutorialsdojo/Cheat Sheet**
5. **AWSBoy**- Practice Test
6. **Jon Benso**- Practice test
7. **AWS FAQ/WhitePapers**
8. **Whizlabs**- Practice test

## Test Tips/Experience

When it comes to testing I took both SAA and DVA at a physical test location(PSI). Due to the increase of Covid SOA test centers limited their hours which led me to decide that I would do SOA remote. So I do have insights I can provide you on which I thought was better and why. Here are my thoughts.

### 1. Which is better, Remote or Physical Test Center Location?

100% Physical Test Center(PSI). This is because of the limitations they seemed to have when taking the test remote and not to mention the technical issues that I faced just to start the exam. When you go to the location they lock up everything of yours. I tend to leave what is not needed in the car or at home. They sign you in and do a validation of making sure you are who you say you are. After they give you a bag to lock all your items in and you bring that bag inside the test area with you. On the desk they give you a calculator, ear plugs, paper, pencil, and a calculator. Pretty straight forward. My remote situation was nothing but challenging.

As mentioned I sat my SOA exam remotely due to a date limitation caused by Covid. They only provided an option for the weekday. After taking the exam twice I thought I knew the routine. The night before I installed the proper software on my laptop and ensured that the room that I would be sitting the exam in was a sterile space. I included a piece of paper, calculator(Not on my phone), and a pencil. Nothing else was in the area. I wanted a way to calculate cidr or Dynamodb read/write capacity but that was a no-go. I was grateful both never came up in the sysops exam.

Before I even got to the proctor I had to work with technical support which had a temper that was hot and cold. I wasn't able to access the portal that connected me to the proctor on the PSO platform, which worked on the night before to avoid any conflicts. Lets just say it's better to keep your mouth shut when working with them. I could tell that she was annoyed so I didn't engage much but regardless this wasn't a great start and knocked me out of focus mode. Luckily I was able to rebound and made it through the exam.

### 2. What is your test strategy?

I must say being a good test taker helps and the only way that you get your mind right is practice. Take as many practice exams up to the exam as you can. The day before I take up to 3 practice tests that I save just for the purpose of training my brain on how to take tests. I treat them the same as I would the actual test. Depending on the questions I focus on the ones I fail the night of the exam. I call it buttoning up your gaps in my knowledge. Because it is important to get a good night's sleep the day before I try to reduce any stress I have and aim to relax my mind by playing some music or watching a show. Just something that doesn't completely remove me from my study mode but does create added worry.

Now about the timing of the exam. Should you take it in the morning, afternoon, or night? Timing of the test depends on the person. I am 100% a morning person and the gap between waking up and taking the test should be short without little interruptions. During this time I lock in to the test process.

This is where ACloudGuru comes into play. I watch all the section summaries and the most important section is **THE STUDENT FEEDBACK**. This section is based on students' feedback of the exam so they are most likely going to be on the test. I want these questions topics fresh in my mind. ACloudGuru forgot about these topics but the students handed them some insight on the exam and they felt like it was necessary to include. So this is 100% is the last thing I review before the exam. I know during my DVA by doing this I got a few extra points I feel like I would have missed.

3. Will you see your score at the end of the test?

**YES!** This question is asked over and over again but honestly, I don't blame those who miss it at the end. When I sat the SAA I had such bad tunnel vision and not taking the test before I didn't know what to look for at the end of the exam. However, when I took the DVA and SOA I clearly saw "Congratulations" and "Pass." The two most important words that you are looking for. If you see a lengthy list of instructions it is not a good sign and that you most likely didn't clear the exam. Little note here but an important one. I met someone that was a very intelligent technical colleague who failed and then gave up. I looked at this guy oddly because I knew the amount of dedication and time that it takes. Why would you just give up. Don't be this guy. Don't throw away the work that you put in. Keep going!

## What would I do differently?

1. I would have taken SOA before DVA. As mentioned above there was a lot more overlap with SOA and DVA. I feel like this would have provided a complete picture of the services mentioned in SAA as I found a hunger to know more of what a service can do and possible issues that could be faced. SOA allowed

these questions to be answered and how to troubleshoot and recognize common errors.

2. I would have integrated DigitalCloud by Neal Davis into my studies earlier on. I only decided to watch his content when I found others dry and needed a change. I typically don't watch other videos end to end outside initial ACloudGuru but I did with DigitalCloud as the content filled in areas which ACloudGuru felt short. It is the closest content to an actual in person class then the others provide. I really enjoyed this.
3. I would have made arrangements to go to PSI Testing Center rather than remote. Even though I passed, the overall remote experience wasn't for me. I like the ability to streamline from studying to taking the test and found out that there were too many prerequisites that created a bottleneck in the test taking process.
4. Don't wait for anyone. My study partner and I started to drift a little on the timing of our studying during the developer. I found myself chasing him down for his progress. Even though we both got DVA he was able to get it a few weeks after I achieved it. However what did help is that I could provide insight on the exam to him when he was ready to sit it.

## **Jobs and Next Step**

As I had mentioned I am lucky enough to already work for one if not the most well-known technology consulting firms on the globe. For me there has been a lot of opportunities outside the company but I continue to love my work and the company that I work for. So I am not on an official AWS project but and this is a big but I have created opportunities within my current/role and project that will leverage AWS and allow me to create/lead from the ground up. This includes working with AWS Workspaces, App Stream 2.0 and AWS CICD integration. However with all these certifications I might have put myself in a position to move to leading an AWS project or at least be reassigned to a 100% AWS project.

What is important is your ability to know where there is an opportunity and know how to create one. Don't get me wrong I am getting 10 calls a week asking me to join an AWS project. I am choosing right now to build my foundation to be a better cloud engineer, be technically sound in AWS, and contribute on day one. I plan on continuing my learning but will feel out my next certification, which is either going to be Security Speciality as this concept is important for a cloud engineer and will only help when I sit a professional exam or just completely jump to AWS Architect Professional. Im still undecided as I need to speak to my career advisor on advice. Again using support structure to navigate uncertainties.

For those that are trying to get in the space don't just hope that these certifications will get you a job by themselves. Make sure you have a strong secondary skill that can accompany your AWS certifications. I see this question a lot about what is the best way of getting an AWS Job? Well for us in the field the simple answer is whatever AWS certification you aim for build on your strengths or use it as a stepping stone for a field you want to be in. If it is solely about money you won't last.

## Summary

Overall my road to accomplishing 3 certifications on my first try was a hard but rewarding one. If i can do it trust me so can you. These certifications have no way of guaranteeing you a job but you will get a lot of attention and will open doors that were once close. Remember to find a way to enjoy the journey. I don't think I went through a day including holidays without thinking about ways that I can fit in some kind of studying or gaining knowledge. Set goals for yourself and refuse to have excuses on why you haven't been able to accomplish them. Make sure that you use reliable sources that I have mentioned as your main study guides and don't fall for the cheaper approach to whatsapp and test dumps. As you approach each certification dont lose track of why you decided to take these certifications. Lastly, remember the best investment in life that you can make is in yourself. I hope this has been helpful and wish you the best on your success in the cloud!