

Tips to pass the CPA exam

Advice to help your staff and CPA exam candidates prepare for exam questions

By Tom Howard, CPA

One thing consistent about the CPA exam is its reputation for being one of the most rigorous professional tests.

So, how do you pass the CPA exam? The long answer is to know everything accountants are expected to know when entering the profession. However, the following suggestions will help you prepare to take the exam.

Handle multiple choice questions

Most of the CPA exam is comprised of multiple choice (MC) questions. With focused practice, you can get better at answering these types of questions.

- Every time you practice a MC item, you will get it either right or wrong. If you got it right, spend a minute reviewing what you knew and how you managed to avoid selecting one of the incorrect choices. If you got it wrong, learn the concept by returning to your study materials and concentrating on that concept. Ask yourself what happened. Did you fail to read the question in its entirety? Did you supply some wording that was not actually in the question? Did you made a computational error? Learn from your mistakes. This approach to studying the material will take longer, but the learning pays off.
- There are many theories about the optimal way to take multiple choice tests. Here's my strategy:
 - Read the question carefully, avoiding the temptation to jump to conclusions about what is being asked or overlooking key words in the question
 - Come up with the answer before looking at the choices
 - If your answer is not among the choices, review the choices and determine the best fit to the question
 - Eliminate obvious bad choices and increase the probability of success

Answer questions and work problems

You know from college that the secret to learning accounting is to work problems. In fact, we learn most effectively from trying to answer questions and computational problems, making mistakes, and trying similar questions again until we get it right. There are no shortcuts; the payoff lies in the struggle. Working problems is a great way to determine where you need to target your study efforts.

CPA exam sample questions are available on the AICPA and MNCPA websites and the Internet. CPA review programs also provide access to representative questions and problems.



Simulate exam conditions

One of the training techniques many organizations successfully use is to simulate real-life situations so the individual can experience the feeling.

You can create exam conditions during your study routine. Study in 3½- and four-hour blocks of time. Do not get up, move around or take breaks. This trains your brain to concentrate for the entire length of the exam. Practice taking multiple choice questions in groups of 24 questions for the regulation and BEC sections, and 30 questions for the FAR and AUD sections. Time yourself to develop a rhythm of reading and answering questions. This will help you to not feel rushed to complete the MC testlets during the exam.

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Demonstrate written communications skills

Effective January 2011, test developers moved the essay questions to the business environment and concepts (BEC) exam section. This makes a lot of sense, as the task-based simulations in the other sections also allow the examiner to evaluate the candidate’s written communications skills. These simulations are not part of the BEC section.

Follow this suggested structure in constructing your essay answers:

- Introductory paragraph — two or three sentences stating your understanding of the question and ending with a statement of your thesis
- Two or three short paragraphs presenting your primary arguments in support of your thesis
- Concluding paragraph — summarize your point of view

When you get an essay question, the temptation is to jump all over it and write everything you know. Resist the temptation. You need to stay disciplined enough to meet the requirements of the assignment and then move on to the next question.

However, what should you do if you don’t know the answer to an essay question? First, don’t panic. Your objective is to pass the exam, not to ace it. Second, even if you don’t know the precise answer to the specific question, you probably know something about the subject; tell the examiner what you do know. Remember to keep your answer direct, even if not entirely focused on point. The written communications part of the exam tests both your knowledge and your ability to express yourself in writing. The examiners want to see that you can string words together in a sentence and sentences together in a paragraph. Organize your response the same way you would if you knew the answer cold. Form counts.

Make time to study

Make time each day for studying, even if it’s only 10 minutes at lunch. Take advantage of every opportunity to crack the books and practice. Study those topics you are less confident about. If your environment is not conducive to reading technical material, practice working a set of questions instead. Every little bit helps! After all, you only want to do this once.



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CPA exam resources

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Sample CPA exam questions

One thing that can help prepare you for a challenge is to eliminate the unknowns. Take some of the mystery out of the CPA exam with sample exam questions provided on the MNCPA website.

www.mncpa.org/examquestions