PROFESSIONAL GUIDE FOR CLOUD + AI CERTIFICATION



CERTIFICATION EXAMS: STRATEGY AND TACTICS

A practical guide to preparing, taking, and passing certification exams

PETER VOGEL

CCDV-F | CCAR-P | Azure Solutions Architect Expert
Azure Administrator Associate | MBA

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Introduction

I'm not going to try to convince you about the value of having a certification – if you're reading this, you've already made that decision. Besides, I'm the wrong person to ask: I've never met a certification I didn't want. I understand there's a twelve-step program for people like me but, first, I'd have to admit that I have a problem.

I've had about two dozen certifications from various sources over the years, beginning with Access 95 and, most recently, getting Anthropic's CCAR-P: Claude Certified Architect Professional certification (I also have their CCDV-F and CCAR-F certifications). If you want to check out my technical credentials, I have a blog with Telerik software that you can look at.

While that probably means that I'm a certification junkie, none of it means that I'm a good source for advice on taking certification exams. What I can say is that I've done the math: I pass certification exams the first time about 85% of the time. I pass the second time on every certification I've ever taken (well, except for the Office 365 Administrator's exam – I still don't know why I wanted that one).

I realized early on that, as a certification junkie, I would be taking lots of exams and I didn't want passing those exams to happen "by accident." So I sought advice, did some research, looked at my own successes/failures, and figured out how to pass reliably. I have some war stories in this e-book, including some cases where I crashed and burned – hopefully, you'll notice that most (not all) of the "crashes and burns" are from early in my career as a certification junkie.

Let me put it this way: You can question my abilities in all the fields I work in, but if you want someone to pass an exam, I'm your guy.

You, however, are probably *not* a certification junkie which means I should be clear about who I'm writing for. I wrote this e-book for people who want to take an exam to certify their knowledge as:

- Cloud architects
- Engineers
- Administrators
- Consultants
- AI practitioners

Basically, people like me (though not, perhaps, certification junkies).

I should also tell you that this e-book is not for you if you:

- Want a shortcut
- Are looking for brain dumps only
- Aren't interested in understanding the material

Still, even if you are the person I wrote this e-book for, this one might not be what you need. We need to talk about your goals because the goals I've assumed you have drive everything I've written here.

Your Real Goal

It would be wonderful if being knowledgeable about the field that a certification covers guaranteed that you would pass the related certification exam. Personal experience: I can tell you that's not necessarily the case (see later on, in this e-book). Passing a certification exam is a goal related to, but not identical to, being knowledgeable about or experienced in the field. This e-book is about just the "passing the certification exam" goal. And, I've also assumed, you want the certification because that certification attests to some skill that will advance your career or is required for some job.

You get the certification by *passing* the certification exam, not by *excelling* on the exam (though there's nothing wrong with excelling, if that happens: I once got 93% on an SQL certification exam because I was so familiar with SQL). As far as your career goes, all anyone wants to know is "Do you have the certification?" No one really cares how well you did (though they care very much about how well you do on the job). Besides, no one can check on how well you did.

To achieve the goal of passing the certification exam, you need two things:

- A strategy that prepares you to take the exam
- Tactics to apply when taking the exam

Those are the two sections in this e-book. We'll start with strategy.

Strategy

At the strategic level, you want to focus on what you have to know to pass and how you're going to get that knowledge. You should recognize two things:

- You don't have to know everything. A typical passing mark for a certification exam is in the 70% to 75% range. If the certification vendor (e.g. Microsoft, Amazon, Anthropic) wanted you to know everything then the pass mark would be 100%.
- Whatever your current job is (or the job you expect to get, thanks to the certification), it also doesn't require you to know everything, either…at least, not yet

Which leads to the three things you need to determine to prepare for your exam (your strategy):

- What you have to know to get a passing mark
- How to focus your study time and attention
- Where to find the "Gimmies" – the "free marks"

Fair warning: The next section uses a lot of arithmetic – you might want to just skip to the section after it and assume that I'm right about the numbers involved.

May the Odds be Ever in Your Favor

The good news: The odds actually *are* in your favor.

On a typical certification exam, the number of questions ranges from 45 to 70. If the exam's passing grade is 70%, that means you need to get 32 to 49 questions right to pass. To put it another way: on a 50 question exam with a 70% passing grade, you can get 15 questions wrong and still pass.

Since, to support automatic marking, most certification exams consist of multiple-choice questions (or cleverly disguised variations on multiple choice questions), you can count on getting some questions right just by chance. Specifically, your chances of getting a question right are one-in-four to one-in-five, depending on the number of answers offered for any question. Even with questions that ask you to pick "two-of-five" (and assuming you won't get any marks unless you pick both right answers), you'll still have a one-in-ten chance of getting the question right.

That means that if there are 50 questions on the exam with four answers on each question, you're going to get 12 questions right, just by chance. On that 50 question exam with a 70% pass mark, if you get 30 questions right because you knew the answer and one-quarter of the remaining 20 questions right just by chance, you've passed.

But those odds actually overstate the difficulty because they assume that you're picking answers among those "remaining 20 questions" completely blind. Because you will have studied and prepared for the exam – because you know stuff – that won't be true. For most questions whose answer you're not sure of, you'll probably be able to eliminate some "obviously wrong" answers. That will narrow your choice down to "It's either B or C" or (for "pick two" questions), "It's definitely A…and either D or E."

Which means that your odds on the "remaining twenty questions" are actually one-in-two: You'll get half of the "remaining 20 questions" right, even if you don't know the answer for sure because you'll have narrowed the candidate answers down to two options.

Going back to my 50 question example with a 70% passing mark, you need to be

- Absolutely certain of 20 of the 50 questions = 40% of the questions – less than half of the exam
- Able to eliminate obviously wrong answers on the remaining 30 questions = 60% of the questions – over half of the exam

Even that overstates the difficulty because it assumes that you do no better than chance on the "It's either B or C" questions – you'll probably do better than that.

As an extreme example, I recently took a certification exam consisting of multiple-choice questions with four potential answers on each question. The first 23 or so questions on that exam came out of an area I wasn't expecting and had not included in my study plan. But, because I knew something about the field and was able to eliminate obviously wrong answers, I still got about 33% right on the questions in that area – better than the 25% I should have got by pure chance…and that was without *any* preparation in that area except for general knowledge of the field (and, by the way, I passed).

But here's the point of all that math: Those numbers drive your study plan.

Your Study Strategy

When it comes to your exam, you have two authorities: The syllabus that describes the certification exam (what's being tested) and the vendor's documentation (your "single source of truth"). You will use both and, potentially, some outside sources that help you understand the documentation. It's the certification's syllabus/exam guide, however, that lets you focus your studying.

A war story: I didn't use the syllabus to drive my study plan for the second certification exam I ever took – Windows 3.1 (yes, I'm just that old). Among other things, I spent an inordinate amount of time learning about Windows 3.1's support for POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service) – information I've never used, except for remembering what "POTS" stands for, just now.

When I took the exam, I got 92%. The pass mark was around 70%. The people at the test centre said it was the highest mark they'd seen on that exam (it wasn't a big test centre). There was exactly one question on POTS and I did get it right.

The point is *not* that I got a high mark because I was able, among other things, to answer the POTS question; The point is that I would have passed easily knowing nothing about POTS. I realized that all those other people who got lower marks than me had been smarter about preparing for the exam.

So, for your studying process, you want to focus on the "areas that matter" and be willing to just make informed guesses at the questions in the other areas (i.e. eliminate obviously wrong answers). The "areas that matter" are areas:

- You're currently working in
- Will make a difference in your job/career
- You have experience in
- Interest you personally

These areas are ones that you actually care about and, as a result, are more likely to understand than the areas you don't care about.

You need enough marks from your "areas of interest," plus the other areas, plus some "gimmies" (see below) to pass. Everything else is "the POTS question" (and it's fine to know about POTS if it's an area that interests you – it did get me another mark, after all).

Identifying Your Study Areas

This is why the syllabus matters: Your first step is to use it to select your areas of interest. Let's start by assuming that you'll get over 80% in your areas of interest and that you'll do no better than chance on the other areas. I'll use this distribution as an example:

Area 1	30%
Area 2	28%
Area 3	15%
Area 4	18%
Area 5	9%

Let's assume you pick areas 1, 2, and 4 as your areas of interest. If you get 80% on those areas (30 + 28 + 18 times 80%) then you'll get 61% on the exam; If you assume that you'll get 50% in areas 3 and 5 (15 + 9 times 50%) then those areas add 12% to the 61% from your areas of interest. That gives you 73% and, the key point, you've passed the exam.

Free Marks

But there's one more area where you can boost your final mark. For most exams, there are some "low percentage" areas with multiple topics – Area 5 in my sample syllabus, for example. If that area has more than one topic then you've probably got some free marks ("gimmies") waiting for you there.

More math: If my sample exam has 50 questions then, at 9%, Area 5 will generate about four questions on the exam (50 * 9% = 4.5) – five questions at the most. If there are three topics in Area 5, then each topic can get, at most, two questions and, probably, one. While the exam writers could create a question on some incredibly obscure topic in Area 5… they probably won't. That 9% is, in fact, a signal that the certification authors don't think Area 5 is a critical area but is one that they want you to be aware of. As a matter of historical interest, that was the POTS area on my Windows 3.1 exam.

That means that each question in a low-percentage area/multiple topic area will be an "awareness oriented" question. You'll be expected to know "what x is" or "the overall process for doing x" or the "requirements to enable using x" but you won't need to know details in that area.

For the low-percentage/multiple topic areas, all you need to know are the big picture, high-level, key/critical issues – stuff you can sum up in one or two sentences. I would have been able to answer the POTS question on my Windows 3.1 exam by reading the first few paragraphs in the POTS overview documentation (as I remember, the one question about POTS on the exam was something like "Does Windows 3.1 support POTS?").

More math: With that strategy you will probably get 80% in that low-percentage area and 80% * 9% gives you 7% towards your final mark. Going back to my previous calculation, that gives you:

- 61% from the areas you focus on (Areas 1, 2, and 4) where you get 80% right
- 7% from the area you didn't focus on (Area 3) where you eliminate obviously wrong answers and get 50% right
- 7% on the low-percentage area (Area 5) where, again, you get 80% right

That's 61% + 7% + 7% = 75% altogether and a solid pass. And that's almost your goal.

That 75% is only *almost* your goal because, if you use this plan then you'll only pass *most* of the time – the odds also say that your actual marks will range from 69% to 81% (though, later on, I'm going to make the argument that you should plan to take the exam twice). My target for my mark on an exam is the exam's pass mark + 5% headroom (i.e. if the pass mark is 73% then I'm targeting 78%). Adding 5% to the passing mark moves passing the exam up closer to certainty – that "plus 5%" is probably why I pass the first time, 85% of the time.

And, yes, I realize that, in my example, I ended up picking the three areas with the largest percentage contribution to the final mark as my "areas of interest." That will often be the case, especially in exams with five or fewer areas. But, as the number of areas increases, you'll find a strategy based on a combination of areas that you're either genuinely interested in or have experience in will make more sense than "pick the top three areas."

Study Techniques that Work

So how do you learn what you need in your areas of interest?

Don't cram. Evidence shows that spaced repetition works better than concentrated reading. For spaced repetition, you "read some" from a topic in the exam's syllabus for one of your areas of interest and then "do some" with that topic's material.

Step Zero: Decide how much time you'll spend on this topic – this evening, this lunch hour, this week. You can't stay on a topic until you master it because you'll never leave it. Give yourself a deadline.

Step One: Obviously, read the topic material. But you can begin "working with the topic" as you read: Ask yourself "Why would anyone want this? Why would anyone do it this way? What problem

does this solve? What problem does doing it this way avoid?" Asking questions like that causes you to work with the material because the answers to those questions are often left out of the certification vendor's documentation. It also starts you on your way to understanding the topic rather than just memorizing it.

Understanding matters because certification exam questions will almost certainly present you with scenarios that you haven't faced. That's by intent: The certification vendor wants to know that you can "think about the area" – that you can reason your way through to an answer in an unfamiliar scenario. One of the reasons that I write and teach courses for Learning Tree International is that it forces me to repeatedly explain/understand what I work with.

You then stop reading and look for a way to use that knowledge.

Step Two: For any topic that has something you can actually do, you should do that. Nothing helps cement understanding like struggling to implement what you've just learned – hands-on experience is best. While passing the certification exam and mastering the material aren't identical goals, they are related ones and doing both supports both. If I'm studying for a programming language certification, I'm always coding something. I figure I understand how the language works when whatever I've built runs and when I know what all the error messages *really* mean (and I generate a *lot* of error messages).

If you're looking for some guidance in "what to do" in applying your knowledge (and, also, to reduce your frustration in doing something new for the first time) blogs can be a good source for step-by-step directions in performing some task. A good blog on, for example, "implementing authorization in AWS S3 using an IAM policy and tags" will identify the problem being solved, explain how the solution works, and (the key part) walk you through the process of applying it (you can get a free trial AWS account to use for your testbed). Microsoft publishes all the step-by-step instructions for its own certification-related courses on GitHub and you can use those to walk you through some process (and you can get a trial Azure account, also). Look for similar resources for whatever certification area you're working in – a Google search is your best friend here.

Step Three and my favourite, as the existence of this e-book testifies: Try explaining the topic to someone else. If you can't explain the topic or find it difficult to explain, then you probably don't understand it (at least, not yet). That person doesn't have to be a real person, by the way: Buy a rubber duckie and explain the area to the duckie (you'll lose less friends that way). I'll mention here that my wife is a *very* patient person. No reason.

There's another reason to pull the explanation lever: Explaining *forces* you to understand the material rather than just memorize it. The first step in building a useful explanation is supplying the part the documentation typically leaves out: The "Why" questions you asked while reading the material.

Another option for leveraging explanation: Try explaining a topic by tying the topic to something else that anyone would recognize ("Scaling out is like hiring four people to move your piano. Scaling up

is like hiring one very big person and there's a limit to what one person can do. But scaling out has its own issues: You have to decide how many people you need, when they'll show up, when you can send them home, …"). Creating analogies like that forces you to think about the topic in another way and, again, gives you a way to work with the material.

After you've created your explanation, check it against the real documentation or an actual implementation. Ask yourself "Is my explanation true? How can I check?" and then go do that check. And now you've got another way to work with the material.

And, by the way: If you see me walking down the street, muttering to myself – this is what I'm doing.

Step Four: Review and confirm. After taking that break to apply or explain what you've learned, go back and review the part of the topic you were reading. You want to see what you forgot, got wrong, or didn't integrate well into your hands-on work or your explanations. Repeat with both your hands-on work and your explanations until you run out of the time you set to spend on this topic.

Step Five: Move on. Expand to read more of the topic or, if you've covered all of the topic, move on to the next topic in your area of interest. When you add another topic, you can expand your hands-on application and explanations to include how the topics you've covered interact (or why they don't). Ask why anyone would pick one technology over another (and why there are two).

Summing Up: Memorizing facts and scenarios won't get you a passing mark but understanding the topic will. Starting with "why," then getting your hands dirty and explaining the topic (with analogies) gives you a perspective that the documentation doesn't provide (and does it in a way that improves your understanding). The result is that you'll find that you're better able to reason your way through to a right answer to a question on the exam.

Scheduling

I don't know enough about your life or study/work habits to give you a schedule for preparing for your exam (and it would be presumptuous of me to try). You'll fit your plan into your life.

Having said that, organizing your study process around "When I plan to cover topic *x* in the certification's syllabus" will give you "units of study" that you can slot into your calendar (and, after the first few topics, you'll have real numbers about how much time to give yourself for each topic). I do recommend that you schedule your exam shortly after starting your study process so that you have a deadline. To quote Samuel Johnson: "…when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

And I can tell you when to stop: The afternoon of the day before your exam – take the evening off and relax. You've worked hard and you deserve it. That evening off is your first step in implementing your exam tactics: reducing stress. And that means you don't study on the day of the exam, either.

Final Answer

1. From the syllabus, identify:
    - The areas you care about or you have experience you can build on (your areas of interest)
    - The low-percentage/high-topic “gimmie” areas
2. Work the math to determine if, with your areas of interest, you can expect to get your pass mark + headroom:
    - 80% on your areas of interest
    - 50% on the other areas
    - 80% on the “gimmie” areas
3. Read some, do some:
    - Drill into the documentation (and any other sources you have available) for a topic in your areas of interest
    - Apply or explain the material in your areas of interest (and, when explaining, start with “Why”)

    Repeat until you run out of topics
4. For the other areas in the syllabus, make sure that you cull enough from the documentation to recognize a wrong answer and improve your odds
5. Be familiar with the key material in the low-percentage areas
6. Stop the afternoon of the day before the exam. Take the evening off. You’ve earned it

Tools

Leveraging AI

At this point in the 21st century, if you're not using AI to help you then I think you're just being foolish. You should be using one of the available tools – Microsoft Copilot, ChatGPT, Claude, Google AI, whatever – to create a "study buddy."

I can't give you a comprehensive list of how you can use AI as your study buddy because there are too many opportunities. Do a web search and see what other people have come up with – I doubt that I'm the last word on this subject.

But I will tell you this: First, start a session/chat for the current certification you're working on. Then try these prompts (I've used them and you can probably come up with more):

- Orient the session:

  `Load the certification syllabus at <url>`
- Find sources:

  `Summarize <topic x> for me, highlighting key issues and including citations to the relevant documentation using public domain or copyright-free 'for personal use' material.`
- Critique your knowledge:

  `Here's my explanation of how <long prompt describing some topic area> works (alternatively: here's what I think <long prompt> is). Based on public domain or copyright-free 'for personal use' material – What am I missing? What have I misunderstood?`
- Create study aids:

  `From public domain or copyright-free 'for personal use material,' create a set of flashcards for me on <topic x> with questions and answers with citations. Walk me through the cards showing the answer and waiting for my response. After I respond, compare my answer to your answer and highlight the differences between my answer and yours.`
- Simulate an exam:

  `From public domain or copyright-free 'for personal use material,' generate 25 questions from <area a>. Give me four possible answers for each question. Use this taxonomy to generate distractors: <include the taxonomy from the section "Different Kinds of Distractors" in the **Tactics** section later in this e-book>. Score my answers and provide feedback on what I got wrong, with citations.`

For any question you got wrong, follow the citation and read the relevant material.

When you need to compact your context (assuming you're using a tool that lets you control your context), use this:

```
Compact, keeping track of the areas and topics we've
covered. Focus on the topics I've had the lowest scores in
(flash cards and tests), noting consistent
errors/misunderstandings.
```

The day before you're ready to take your exam, use this prompt:

```
Produce a cheat sheet for me (no more than two pages),
summarizing the key areas that I've struggled with.
```

On that last afternoon, sit quietly with that two page cheat sheet, along with the beverage of your choice, and review the areas you need to keep straight. Then put it away for the rest of the evening.

Practice Exams

Practice exams help you in three ways:

- They're another way to apply the material that you've learned.
- Even though no one cares how you do on a practice exam, you'll probably feel that the exam's results, somehow, "count" – so you'll also get experience in working with the knowledge while stressed
- Some practice exams replicate the experience of the testing system's UI (I'm assuming that it won't be pencil and paper). Fumbling the exam tool's UI can cost you both marks and time so getting some experience with the UI *before* the exam is useful

It's worth spending time with at least one of the practice exams that duplicate the format/UI of the testing system you'll be using. You don't need a lot of experience with the exam's UI to master it (those UIs are usually pretty straightforward) but you don't want your first experience with the exam's UI to be when you take your certification exam. You'll have enough problems finding answers to the questions without having to also figure out the exam's UI.

I found, for example, the UI for case studies on Microsoft's Azure exams to be very confusing the first time that I encountered one. Not surprisingly then, the first case study question that I met cost me both time and attention (and, also, increased my stress). After that first interaction, I set aside 15 minutes with a practice exam just to work with the case study UI. Because I spent that time, I didn't have to think about how to work the case study UI the next time I met one. Do the same: If you find part of the testing UI challenging, make mastering it part of your study plan.

Before spending money on practice exams, check out the testing provider: They might have a sample exam you can try for free (or at the expense of giving up your email). That will probably give you all the UI experience you need. These days, your testing provider is probably Pearson Vue and they have a sample test. MeasureUp has exams that target the Microsoft and AWS testing UXs (among other certifications). There are probably other vendors that a Google search will turn up.

You can also build up experience with the exam's UI by working through two or three sample practice exams from different practice exam vendors – sometimes called "certification readiness" exams (they aren't: they can't possibly tell you in ten questions how well you know the certification's field). Those samples may be enough to get you up to speed on the UI you'll have to deal with on the exam.

Since it won't take you long to get up to speed on the exam's UI, your chief criteria for picking a practice exam should be finding one that supports your study plan (which might be a practice exam that duplicates the testing system's UI, killing two birds with one stone). You want practice exams that both measure your progress and help you progress.

One warning: In some cases the sample exams provided by the certification vendor are deliberately *not* like the real thing. This is especially true of quizzes and tests in the vendor's training material. Those sample tests/quizzes are intended to reinforce learning but don't, in fact, look or sound like the related certification exam questions – they may help you learn the material but they won't do a good job of preparing you for the questions on the exam.

So, here's what I look for in a practice exam.

First, of course, I want a practice exam provider that tells me how I did in each of the syllabus's areas (that's the reason that a five or ten question "certification readiness tool" can't tell you how well you know the area's content: they can't cover all the areas in ten questions). If a practice exam gives you a breakdown of your scores across the certification's areas, including your areas of interest, then you can decide where you need to focus in your study plan.

Then the exam provider should tell you two things about every question on their practice exam:

- Why the right answer is right

AND

- Why the wrong answers are wrong

Knowing why the wrong answers are wrong matters: Being able to eliminate wrong answers reduces the number of choices you have to make on a question and improves your odds. In the same vein, if your practice exam provider supports these kinds of questions:

- "Two of five": The exam should also explain how the two answers work together (or don't) to make a right answer and the other combinations don't
- "Does this answer solve the problem": The exam should also explain why the wrong answers don't solve the problem (what's missing or wrongheaded) in addition to how the right answer does
- "Put these items in sequence": Why each item belongs in its slot, why the 'extra' items didn't belong in the sequence, and why the right order matters
- "Which of these are characteristics of this scenario": Typically framed as a set of statements about some scenario with you having to decide which statements are true and which are false. The exam should not only explain why each statement is true or false but how you could determine that from the scenario

You probably won't find a sample exam that does all these assessments (I've tried creating these myself, for example, and could only manage some of them, so I feel the sample exam provider's pain). But this is a case where having more is better.

Finally, I'm looking for high-quality questions that I can't game. High-quality questions don't just test your knowledge of facts from the documentation: They present you with questions that test your understanding, questions that require you to reason through what you know to get to the right answer.

Unfortunately, some practice exams are easy to game (I suspect they're generated by badly trained AI models). Those exams are useless to you in testing your knowledge. Typical examples are:

- The right answer is always the longest one (related: The right answer has more detail on how it works than any other answer)
- The right answer is self-justifying "Do <something> because <it delivers exactly what the question asked for>"
- There's something that is never part of a right answer (when I took my driver's license test, I could eliminate every answer that included "honk your horn")
- Answers that categorically reject doing something (e.g. an answer that includes "without testing the changes"). The world is full of nuances, which is exactly what the exam is testing for
- A series of answers that all begin with the same words ("Raise the…") and one answer that does not ("Structure the…"). The odd duck answer is probably the right one
- Only one question on the exam has "None of the above" as one of its answers. When that question turns up, "None of the above" is the right answer

Tests and quizzes in training material are often very "gameable." I recently took one sample exam where I'm pretty sure I would have passed just by always picking the longest answer, for example.

Once you've found a provider that meets your study goals, use the practice exams to both measure your progress and test what you've learned. And, like the rest of your study plan, space the practice exams out over your preparation time. For example, I take:

1. A practice exam at the start of my study process to "measure my ignorance": Which areas I should concentrate on and which areas I am already good enough in
2. Another exam part way through my study plan to see how I'm progressing towards my target marks in each area
3. A final exam when I think I'm done to see if I've learned what I need to know

If your practice exam provider also provides multiple levels of exams (e.g. "easy" and "hard") then you can use that, also: Scale up from "easy" for your first exams (which are there to measure where you need to spend your time) to "hard" on your later exams (to identify where you're short on that 80% goal in your areas of interest).

Personally, for my final practice exam I prefer an exam that's *harder* than the certification exam: If I can pass (or come close to passing) on that final practice exam then I know that I'll pass the certification exam.

I've been using AI to build sample exam questions, for example (and have probably spent too much time building those models). On my last certification, I never got better than 70% on my AI-generated exam…but I got 83% on the real exam, which is what I wanted. Well, actually, more than I wanted: I would have been happy with 78%. C'est la vie.

Exam Dumps

Exam dumps are a different thing from practice exams: Exam dumps are actual questions captured from the exams while someone took the exam. Not surprisingly, most/all certification vendors regard using the exam dumps as cheating. Microsoft, for example, has a zero-tolerance policy around exam dumps and classifies them as unauthorized, unethical, and a direct violation of the Microsoft Certification Exam Candidate Agreement. Worst-case scenario: If a certification provider believes you've used an exam dump, they can disqualify you from certification.

I think that the vendor's concern is overstated, though, because they assume you're using the exam dumps to memorize the questions and answers. Quite frankly, that isn't a winning strategy: It's easier and more productive to just learn the material. There are two reasons for that:

- The answers in the dumps are, frequently, flat-out wrong. For at least one exam dump I saw, there were so many wrong answers that I'm pretty confident that the person taking the exam to capture the questions didn't pass
- The number of questions in the exam pool for the real exam is huge; The number of relevant questions in the exam dump is much smaller. That means you're unlikely to see many of the exact questions from the exam dump when you take your exam (I've seen, at most, four or five exact matches out of fifty questions – and the number is usually less).

I use the word "relevant" in that last bullet because, while the exam dump providers advertise that they have hundreds of sample questions, most of the exam dump questions are of historical interest, at best. That's because the exam dumps were captured at some time in the past and:

- The certification or technology has moved on, invalidating many questions that were captured years ago when the certification was first launched
- The exam pools are sufficiently volatile that most of the questions on the exam dumps have been retired and will no longer appear on your exam

Does that mean that the exam dumps are useless? Not entirely. The more recent questions in an exam dump can provide a good picture of the distribution of questions across topics. That's not as easy to get as you might think.

Sample tests embedded in training material, for example, won't typically give you that "distribution picture" because tests in training material are built around the learning module the test is part of. For example, in a training package, a topic in a "low percentage" area will get just as many

questions as a key topic in an "area of interest." You can, however, in any of the *non*-"low percentage" areas, leverage the topics asked about in those quizzes: If someone took the time to write a question for a topic, it's a signal that the topic will probably be on the exam.

A sample exam from the certification provider with 50 or more questions will probably give you your best approximation of the question distribution on the real exam. If you can find one of those, exam dumps (and quizzes in training material) lose a lot of their value.

Leveraging the Documentation

Reading the certification vendor's documentation about their own product in order to answer questions on the exam is so obviously key that you might think it's not worth mentioning. But, in addition to being your "single source of truth," the certification vendor's documentation also fulfils another role: making you familiar with the vendor's vocabulary.

You can go to outside providers to support your study plan. That's often a good idea; there are a lot of excellent resources out there in terms of blogs, instructor-led courses, learn-on-demand sites, etc. But recognize that those providers are putting the material in "their own words" and, often, better words than the certification vendor's documentation (which is why those outside providers are successful).

Certification exams, however, are written in the certification vendor's vocabulary and you need to be familiar with the vendor's terms when you take the exam.

When I took the ASP.NET certification exam I didn't read the documentation: I had been building applications using the product since it was released (and had even presented on it at various conferences). I was confident that I knew how ASP.NET worked and, in fact, I was right about that. That didn't help on the exam as much as I thought it would.

I was halfway through that certification exam before I realized that what the exam called "session affinity" was what I called "sticky sessions" and that when the exam said, "deploying to multiple servers" they meant what I called "using a Web farm." I lost a lot of time going back to fix up some of my answers (and I didn't pass, either: see below).

Reading the certification vendor's documentation avoids the "vocabulary problem."

One more thing: Exam questions and answers are a peculiar thing – they use a syntax/sentence construction that really doesn't crop up anywhere else in the world. You need to get familiar with that, and, yes, this is also an area where exam dumps can help because they are actual questions from the exam…but so will a sample exam from the certification vendor.

Final Answer

1. Read the certification vendor's documentation to get familiar with their syntax and vocabulary
2. Use AI with publicly available documentation to build an interactive study buddy
3. Use practice and sample exams to become familiar with the exam provider's UI
4. If there isn't a large enough sample exam from the certification vendor (50+ questions), consider using exam dumps to see what's actually being tested and become familiar with the way questions are phrased (remembering that certification vendors frequently have a zero-tolerance policy on exam dumps and memorizing questions and answers isn't a successful strategy). Exam dumps are your last resort when the certification vendor hasn't provided a sample exam
5. Use practice and sample exams to both determine how you're doing and to help you learn

Tactics

While, at the strategic level, you're focussed on understanding, at the tactical level you're focussed on taking the exam. There are two things to concentrate on here, also:

- Reducing your stress
- Answering as many questions as you can correctly

You won't be able to achieve the second goal if you don't achieve the first. And, for the second goal, remember that "answering questions correctly" depends on "doing exams well" as much as it does on "understanding the material." While the previous section focussed on "understanding the material," this section focuses on "doing exams well."

Reducing Stress

Like everyone else, this is probably the place where I should recommend getting a good night's sleep the night before your exam. However, that's also something you and I have very little control over. Do, at least, plan your night before the exam so that getting a good night's sleep is more likely than not.

Next, do whatever you can to reduce the stress created by actually taking the exam. For example, pick a time and delivery process (test center or online) that works for you. I get up at 5am, don't like people, am at my best first thing in the morning, and feel most comfortable in my own home: I schedule my exams for 6am when I'm brightest and no one else is around, and take the exam online from my home office. You should do you.

Test Centre

If you take your exam at a test centre, your goal is to ensure that, if anything goes wrong on the way to the centre, you'll be thinking "I've still got lots of time and I've already worked out a backup plan."

If it's your first test at a testing centre (even if you've been to other testing centres):

- Try taking a tour of the testing centre a day or two before the exam (call ahead and ask)
- At the very least, go to the testing centre once before the exam so you'll know your route and know how long it will take you to get there (and, ideally, do it at the same time of day and same day-of-the-week as when your exam is scheduled so you can measure traffic)
- Plan to be at the test centre at least a half-hour early so you can sign in, sit in the waiting room, get used to the A/C, and hit the washrooms without crowding your time
- Get the centre's phone number. If, on the day of your exam, things go wrong in getting to the centre, you can call them and figure out what you both are going to do about it (re-schedule to another day, move your time back an hour, etc.)

Quite frankly, even if this is a test centre you've used before, if it's been more than a couple of months since the last time you were at that testing centre, I'd consider doing all those things anyway. Things change and any surprises will increase your stress.

When I was living in a small town and driving to the big city to take my certification tests at a testing centre, I drove into the city the night before, got up two hours before I needed to be at the centre, and had my car parked and was waiting in the centre 45 minutes before my exam started (I also brought a good book to read while I waited). When the exam started, I was bored, not stressed.

Online

Your goal for starting the exam is simple: You want to walk into the room where you'll be taking the exam knowing where everything is in the room and that it all meets the specifications of the testing provider. That helps ensure that the onboarding process will be straightforward and take less than half the time allowed – in other words, that onboarding will not increase the stress in taking the exam.

If you're taking the test online, you'll get an email with a link that will download a software package that you can use to test the computer you will use for the exam. *Always* run the test.

When I took Anthropic's developer's certification exam (CCDV-F), I hadn't taken a certification exam with Pearson Vue for a year or two. Because I'd had a long run of previous "no problem" events with Pearson Vue, I didn't run their software package to check my computer. When I tried to start my exam, I discovered that neither my camera nor my speakers were compatible with the current exam software. As a result, I spent 45 minutes fighting with hardware and started the exam both late and rattled (the Pearson Vue people were both very patient and very helpful). I passed, but by less than my headroom. Don't be like me.

The day before the exam (and, again, I'm assuming you're taking the exam through Pearson Vue):

- You'll need a smartphone to take pictures of:
    - Your ID (I use my driver's license)
    - Your face
    - The room where you're taking the exam

  Put the ID you'll use on the desk the night before the exam. If you can, leave your phone charging overnight in that room (and check that it is charging. Let's not ask why I mention that). Plan how you'll take the necessary pictures
- The surfaces of your desk must be clear of everything except your computer, monitor, keyboard, mouse and power/connection cables. Clear your desk the night before
- Additional monitors (including any TVs) must be unplugged and turned away from you or covered. Take care of your monitors the night before
- You'll need to have a video camera and be in view throughout the whole exam. Make sure your camera works and you will be visible in it when at your computer

The day of the exam:

- You may not have food or drink during the exam – allow time to drink/eat before entering the room. If you bring a drink into the room, know where you'll put it when the exam starts

- You can't talk to yourself and will be challenged if you spend too much time looking away from your screen. Blow your nose and take care of everything else you need to do *before* you walk into the room
- Enter the room where you'll take the exam 15 minutes before you'll start the onboarding process. Check everything listed from the "day before list"
- Start the onboarding process as soon as the testing process will let you (thirty minutes before your scheduled exam start is the usual)
- Bring a good book because you're planning on having some time to kill after you finish onboarding. Know where you'll put the book when the exam starts
- While you'll use your phone during the onboarding process, you'll have to put it out of arm's reach when you start. Know where you're going to put your phone

If you've prepared, then onboarding will take ten to fifteen minutes. You can then spend fifteen to twenty minutes sitting quietly with your book. When the exam starts you will be bored, not stressed.

Assume Failure

This is a more radical approach to reducing stress: Assume that you will not pass the first time you take the exam. Instead, assume that the first time you take the certification exam is just to find out where you need to build up your strengths.

With this approach you don't book just a day and time for your exam: Instead, you set aside three or four days. Assume that, since you won't pass the first time, you will spend two or three days after taking the exam in building up your strengths in the areas where you didn't do well. Then, on the second or third day after your first run, you'll retake the exam and pass.

This means that, when you purchase your exam, if you're offered a deal where you can buy an exam and "a retake" for a discount, take the offer. If there isn't an offer then, as part of preparing for the exam, set aside the money to retake the exam.

Now, when you take the exam the first time, if you feel the exam is not going well for you, your stress is reduced: You've already set aside the time and committed the money for your retake. There's a side effect here: Reducing your stress actually improves your chances of passing the first time. More critically, you can now start cataloging the areas where you'll focus your time over the next two or three days before you retake the exam (and, do remember – for all of those questions where you're not sure that you picked the right answer, you probably got half of them right).

If you pass, you get a prize: some free days (and, if there wasn't a discounted offer, some money you no longer need to spend). If you don't pass, you achieved exactly what you set out to do: Find your weaknesses.

There's a third reason for this approach, but it's one you don't have any control over: Because an exam is built for you from questions in an exam pool, it's possible that the mix of questions on any

one exam won't favor your study plan. That won't happen twice in a row (the odds really *are* always in your favor) but it can happen on your first run at an exam.

On that ASP.NET exam I mentioned earlier, I got 63% on my first time (not a pass) even though I'd been using the tool since it was released – as I said, mastering the product and passing the exam are two different, though related, goals. But, following my "fail the first time" plan, I retook the exam three days later and got 85%. That 85% mark is 22 points higher than my original 63%: A 35% gain over my original mark. Did I get 35% more knowledgeable/intelligent over those two days? Don't be silly.

What happened was that the first time I took the exam I got a lot of HTML/CSS/JavaScript questions that I didn't know (I can barely spell "CSS"). On my retake I got a lot fewer of those questions and more actual ASP.NET questions (material I actually knew). But, in addition to having a better mix of questions, I had also spent the days between the two exams learning "enough HTML/JavaScript" to pass (I ignored CSS as hopeless, except for understanding margins).

That extra studying added about 10% to my final mark and the better mix of questions got me another 12%. Either would have given me a passing mark. And, because of spending that time, I also started writing more JavaScript and have gotten pretty good at it (in fact, I keep thinking about taking the Salesforce JavaScript certification exam – plainly, as I said, I have a problem).

Final Answer

Once the exam starts, you will be stressed. You want to start from as close to ‘zero stress’ as you can get. Whatever you need to do in order to be as unstressed as possible when the exam starts is right. Period.

And remember: If you don’t pass the exam, nothing bad has happened. You are, in fact, exactly where you were before the exam, just with some more experience.

Answering Questions

I'll repeat: Knowing the material is what matters most…but your "exam taking" skills also matter. You need to work on any exam "bad habits" that are stopping you from picking the right answers.

Start by recognizing that the goal of any exam question is not to trick you. Instead, each question is designed to test your knowledge on one specific thing. Most of the time, the certification provider is trying to determine if you know "this specific thing"; Occasionally, they're testing to see if you know that "this specific thing" isn't true (i.e. common misconceptions).

For the certification provider to determine whether you know "this specific thing" they need the question and the answer to work together:

- The question sets the stage for the thing being tested
- The answer you pick shows that you know it

You need to know, therefore, what the question is testing for in order to pick the right answer.

Your first step in doing that is to find the "question stem." The question stem – and it isn't always a question – tells you what you need to look for:

- "What action will lower the billing costs?" is a typical (and obvious) question stem
- "Company x is trying to reduce latency in…," is a question stem even though it isn't a question
- "What's the first thing that should be done?" is a question stem where *all the answers for the question are right*. The goal is to figure out which of those correct answers needs to be done first

As my last example shows, you won't be able to read the answers correctly unless you've identified the question stem.

But don't worry if, even after reading the question, you're still not sure what the question stem is – that may not come into focus until you read the answers. Remember: the two parts (the question and the answers) work together. That means that you shouldn't even begin to pick the right answer until you've read the question and *all the answers*. Sometimes the question stem won't be obvious until you see the answers: "Oh, I'm supposed to decide between caching or batching in order to lower costs".

It's only after reading the question, determining the question stem, and reading all the answers that you actually understand what the question is asking. So it's only then that you're (finally) at a point where you can pick the right answer.

Different Kinds of Distractors

As a way of eliminating obviously wrong answers, it may be helpful to be able to recognize the kinds of wrong answers in a question that you'll be faced with (these are called "distractors"). Some distractors are just wrong – "That would never work" answers or code with syntax errors.

The dangerous distractors are the ones that are right answers…just not for this question. Those distractors fall into six categories. These two distractors reflect the state of your knowledge:

- **Confident:** A distractor that many people think is true but is wrong. These distractors check whether you've made some incorrect assumptions
- **Stale**: This distractor was the right answer…once upon a time, not now. These check that your knowledge is up-to-date

The other four distractors reflect how well you've understood the question:

- **Partial**: An actually good answer that would genuinely solve part of the problem…but it's missing some key requirement specified in the question. If the problem is high costs and frequent errors, this is a distractor that reduces costs but doesn't touch the frequent errors
- **Adjacent:** Also a good answer…but for some other question**.** This distractor identifies a real feature that would solve a related or "neighbouring" problem (e.g. this answer would, in fact, speed up processing…but the problem in the question is how to improve throughput)
- **Family**: A distractor related to the correct answer — the question is about picking the right AI model but the answer uses the wrong criteria (picking a fast/low effort model when you don't need speed and do need deeper reasoning)
- **Scope**: A distractor that moves in the right direction but is the wrong magnitude. Upgrading every computer in the organization when it's only the server's speed that's the real bottleneck, for example

When you're assessing a sample exam provider, give the provider bonus points if their sample exams also identify your "question answering" kryptonite. Do you jump at partial distractors that only address some of the question? Do you pick adjacent answers because they're really good answers, even though they don't solve the problem being presented?

If your sample exam provider doesn't do this, you can still do it for yourself: When explaining why a wrong answer is wrong, exam providers will probably provide a clue about the kind of distractor each wrong answer is. Use that information and this taxonomy to see what your "exam bad habits" are and practice avoiding them. Identifying the kind of distractors you typically fall for helps you do a better job of eliminating obviously wrong answers.

While a ten question sample exam can't assess how well you know the material for a certification, a ten question sample exam *can* let you assess whether a particular distractor is one you fall prey to. Another benefit of finding a sample exam with forty or more questions is that it lets you assess how you do on *all* these distractors.

After You've Picked Your Answer

Back to answering questions: After you've picked your answer, go back and read the question again. By the time I pick my answer, I've clarified the question in my mind, decided what the question stem is, and eliminated some distractors. However, instead of getting a clear picture of the actual question, I've sometimes created a new and different question (probably one that I'd

prefer to answer). Reading the question again both lets me confirm that I'm answering the question being asked and further protects me against the four 'misunderstanding the question' distractors.

For example, rereading the question lets you check that you've addressed *all* the requirements listed in the question and, as a result, avoided partial distractors. In a troubleshooting question, for example, did your answer match all the conditions supplied? Or is this when you realize that the answer you picked doesn't account for the 400 status code error reported in the question?

If you can't pick between two answers, going back to the question may reveal the key point in one of the answers that lets you either eliminate the answer or select it. If, for example, you can't pick between two answers, you can ask, "What would make one of these answers the wrong one?" and look for that requirement in the question: "Wait a minute, this answer addresses response time, but the question is about processing more input faster" (an adjacent distractor). Or do the reverse: "Is there something in this question that invalidates one of my two candidate answers?"

And don't make up new requirements based on what you think would be an intelligent solution. The question is typically designed to test your knowledge of one specific thing and, as a result, the question can be…contrived. If the only requirement is "to minimize billing costs" then it doesn't matter how unmaintainable the solution in the right answer is: The answer that gives the lowest billing cost is the right answer.

Case Studies

One special type of question is worth mentioning here: Case study questions where you're provided a lot of background material followed by 4 to 6 questions based on that background material. The reality is that much/most of the background material is going to be irrelevant to the questions on your exam.

Often case studies are written to support multiple questions from the exam pool but only some of those questions will be on your exam. If you see a section in the background material labelled "Problems" or "Issues" *do not* assume that the following questions will be about resolving all those problems or issues – often those problems/issues are present to support questions *not* on your version of the exam.

This means that you should *not* attempt to thoroughly learn the background material. Read the introduction that describes the case study and then skim its section headings so you know what kind of material is available (at most, take enough of a look at the material in each section to confirm you're right about what's in the section).

After that, read the first question and its answers. The question and its answers tell you what (if anything) matters in the background material. Once you've read a question and its answers, you can go to the background material to find the relevant information (this is the "What information would let me pick the right answer?" scenario, again). Sometimes, you may find that the question can be answered without referring to the background material at all: There's only one answer that's technically possible, regardless of the information provided in the background material.

The Most Important Rule

I don't know of any certification exam where there's a cost to having a wrong answer: If you get the right answer (even by accident) you get the marks; If you leave a question blank then you don't get any marks. As a result, the most important rule is:

ALWAYS ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS

Timing Your Questions

That rule matters if you find that you're tight for time when taking the exam. You will normally have plenty of time: The certification vendor doesn't want you to fail because you ran out of time; They want you to fail because you don't know stuff or because you "know stuff" that's wrong.

But you also don't want to worry about time because that creates stress.

So, before you start the exam, determine how many questions you should have answered in the first 15 minutes. If the exam gives you two hours (120 minutes) then, by 15 minutes into the exam, you should have covered 15 of 120 minutes or 12.5% (15/120) of the questions. If there are 55 questions on the exam, then the question you should have reached in the first fifteen minutes – your timing question – is 55 questions * 12.5% = Question 7.

If you don't know how many questions will be on the exam before you start, round your "15 minute" percentage to the nearest multiple of 10 (my 12.5% would become 10%). Once you know how many questions there are, do the math in your head (10% of 55 questions is 5.5 questions). Round that up a little to give yourself some headroom (I'd round up to 8 questions) and that's your timing question. If you're past question 8 at the 15 minute mark then you're fine.

And then use even simpler math to determine where you should be halfway through the exam: At one hour into a two-hour exam with 55 questions, you should be on question 28. If you're past question 28 at the one-hour mark then you're really fine.

Then, when taking the exam and you get to your 15 minute "timing question," check your time: If you've used more than 15 minutes then you have a problem.

If you are, in fact, running behind, the "Mark this question for review" button is your new best friend. If you're running behind and hit a question that you're going to have to think about…

> Pause to be clear about what "have to think about" means. You've done all the work to let you pick the right answer because you've:
>
> - Read the question
> - Read the answers
> - Tried to identify the question stem
> - Eliminated obviously wrong distractors
> - Reviewed the question
>
> But you still aren't sure what the question is asking or, from the choices given to you, which one is the right answer.

If you're running behind and hit "a question you have to think about", do three things in this order:

1. Pick your best candidate answer
2. Mark the question for review
3. Move on

Why? Because of the most important rule: *Always answer all the questions*. You've answered the question and, as a result, removed some stress. In addition, your "best candidate answer" is probably a pretty good choice. And, by moving on, you're giving yourself the chance to answer all the remaining questions.

Keep following this strategy until you're ahead of the clock: Answer the questions you know, give your best answer for the "non-obvious" questions, and mark them for review. Be a shark: Keep moving.

To figure out whether you've gotten ahead of the clock, check what question you're on at the 30 minute mark: That should be twice your 15 minute timing question (e.g. if your 15 minute timing question was 7, your 30 minute timing question is 7 * 2 = question 14). Once you're ahead of the clock, take the time you need on each question.

When you get to the last question on the exam and have time, bring up the list of "Questions marked for review," go back to those questions, and see if you can pick a better answer (it can happen: later questions can clarify earlier questions). If you don't have time, you've still *answered all the questions*. And your answers were probably fine.

If you get down to the last two or three minutes and you're not done, race through the remaining questions and pick any answer (answer all of them with "A," for example).

But I'll repeat what I said at the start: You probably don't need to worry about time – the test is there to determine what you know, not how fast you know it. And if all this math is increasing, rather than reducing, your stress ignore it.

Final Answer

Before the exam, figure out what question you need to be on at the 15 minute mark in order to finish on time. Then, for each question:

1. Read the whole question before thinking about your answer
2. If a question is a case study with lots of background material, just skim that material so you know what information is available
3. See if you can determine the question stem because it tells you what you are looking for in the answers
4. Read all the answers before thinking about picking one
5. Confirm your understanding of the question stem
6. Eliminate the distractors: which answers contain information that contradicts the question or don't meet the question's requirements
7. If you have a case study, go into background material to find the information you need to pick your answer
8. Pick your answer
9. Check your answer against the question to make sure you've met the question's requirements
10. If you're on your "timing question," check your time: If you've used more than 15 minutes then, for any question where the answer isn't obvious, pick your best answer, mark the question for review, and move on. Use this tactic until you are ahead of the clock
11. Repeat from step 1, checking that when you get to your "halfway through" timing question that you do, indeed, have more than half your time left. If have less than half your time left then, for any question…
12. At the end, if you have time, go back to the questions you've marked for review
13. At the end, if you've run out of time, **answer all the questions**

The Final “Final Answer”

Think strategically to prepare your study plan and work through the areas you need in order to pass. “Read some” of a topic, then “do some” of the topic. Repeat until done. Build a study buddy. Use practice exams to measure your progress, support your study plan, and give you experience taking the test.

When it comes time to take the test, first reduce your stress. Then, for each question, make sure that you understand the question by reading all of it (including the answers) before thinking about your answer. After you pick your answer, check it against the question to make sure you answered the question being asked. Be a shark: Keep moving.

Conclusion

First, since you read this far, thanks. Here's my plug: I do half-day general certification prep sessions and full-day prep sessions for specific certifications. Also, weddings and bar mitzvahs.

You can reach me at peter.vogel@phvis.com – keep in touch.

But I also have some closing thoughts.

At the start of this e-book, I lied: In the end, getting a certification *isn't* the goal, no matter what I say. In fact, in the end, neither is mastering the areas. The goal is growing and extending your career. And, I think, keeping your mind alive.

You're working towards your next certification because it will give you new opportunities. The skills you gain in working your plan, along with the certifications that attest to the knowledge you acquire, are the tools you're using to create your future. Your new skills and the future those skills open to you are worth the effort. You know this.

So, create a plan and work that plan.

And you'll be fine.

Really, I mean it: You'll be fine.

Appendix: This E-book's Two Page Cheat Sheet

Strategy and Tactics

Your goal is to get the certification. Passing the certification exam is how you will do that.

Think strategically to prepare your study plan and work through the areas you need in order to pass. "Read some" of a topic, then "do some" of the topic. Repeat until done. Build a study buddy. Use practice exams to measure your progress, support your study plan, and give you experience taking the test.

When it comes time to take the test, first reduce your stress. Then, for each question, make sure that you understand the question by reading all of it (including the answers) before thinking about your answer. After you pick your answer, check it against the question to make sure you answered the question being asked. Be a shark: Keep moving.

Your Study Strategy

1. From the syllabus, identify:
    - The areas you care about or have experience you can build on (your areas of interest)
    - The low-percentage/high-topic "gimmie" areas
2. Work the math to determine if, with your areas of interest, you can expect to get your pass mark + headroom. Assume that you'll get:
    - 80% on your areas of interest
    - 50% on the other areas
    - 80% on the "gimmie" areas
3. Read some, do some:
    - Drill into the documentation (and any other sources you have available) for a topic in your areas of interest
    - Apply or explain the material in your areas of interest (and, when explaining, start with "Why")

    Repeat until you run out of topics
4. For the other areas in the syllabus, make sure that you cull enough from the documentation to recognize a wrong answer and improve your odds
5. Be familiar with the key material in the low-percentage areas
6. Stop the afternoon of the day before the exam. Take the evening off. You've earned it

Tools

1. Read the certification vendor's documentation to get familiar with their syntax and vocabulary
2. Use AI with publicly available documentation to build an interactive study buddy
3. Use practice and sample exams to become familiar with the exam provider's UI

4. If there isn't a large enough sample exam from the certification vendor (50+ questions), consider using exam dumps to see what's actually being tested and become familiar with the way questions are phrased (remembering that certification vendors frequently have a zero-tolerance policy on exam dumps and memorizing questions and answers isn't a successful strategy). Exam dumps are your last resort when the certification vendor hasn't provided a sample exam
5. Use practice and sample exams to both determine how you're doing and to help you learn

Reduce the Stress

Once the exam starts, you will be stressed. You want to start from as close to 'zero stress' as you can get. Whatever you need to do in order to be as unstressed as possible when the exam starts is right. Period.

And remember: If you don't pass the exam, nothing bad has happened. You are, in fact, exactly where you were before the exam, just with some more experience.

Answering Questions

Before the exam, figure out what question you need to be on at the 15 minute mark in order to finish on time. Then, for each question:

1. Read the whole question before thinking about your answer
2. If a question is a case study with lots of background material, just skim that material so you know what information is available
3. See if you can determine the question stem because it tells you what you are looking for in the answers
4. Read all the answers before thinking about picking one
5. Confirm your understanding of the question stem
6. Eliminate the distractors: which answers contain information that contradicts the question or don't meet the question's requirements
7. If you have a case study, go into background material to find the information you need to pick your answer
8. Pick your answer
9. Check your answer against the question to make sure you've met the question's requirements
10. If you're on your "timing question," check your time: If you've used more than 15 minutes then, for any question where the answer isn't obvious, pick your best answer, mark the question for review, and move on. Use this tactic until you are ahead of the clock
11. Repeat from step 1, checking that when you get to your "halfway through" timing question that you do, indeed, have more than half your time left. If have less than half your time left then, for any question…
12. At the end, if you have time, go back to the questions you've marked for review
13. At the end, if you've run out of time, **answer all the questions**

Acknowledgements

My wife (of course)

Christopher Vogel

Arnold Villeneuve

Literally, every instructor/teacher/fellow student I've interacted with

Certification Exams: Strategy and Tactics

Peter Vogel

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Published by PH&V Information Services

First published October 16, 2026

ISBN 978-0-9735355-4-9

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