

# A Guide to Teacher Certification Exams



This guide is brought to you by the [USC Rossier School of Education's Master of Arts in Teaching](#) and [Teachers Test Prep](#).

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# An Introduction to Teacher Certification Exams

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Whether you recently decided to [become a teacher](#) or you have been teaching for years, you will need to pass a standardized test (such as the [CBEST](#) or [Praxis](#) exam) in order to obtain your teaching credentials in the United States. Even if you are already a certified teacher, new laws may require you to pass a test to continue teaching. Increasingly, charter and private schools are also seeking teachers with [teaching credentials](#), which means charter school teachers are likely to be required to pass the same state required exams.

This question-and-answer guide will help you learn more about how to prepare for the exams, mitigate any anxiety and know what to expect on testing day so you can pass the tests and be on your way to earning or keeping your teaching credentials.

## **Which test do I need to take?**

Each state sets its own requirements and standards. It is important to check the requirements in your [state](#). If you are currently enrolled in a [teacher education program](#), check with your academic adviser.

In almost every state there are multiple tests that must be taken at different stages of the credentialing process. In most states, you also need to take a basic skills exam in order to enroll in a teacher preparation program or meet credential requirements. In California, the basic skills exam required for a teaching license is called the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST).

Usually, these tests are required fairly early in the teacher preparation process. Teachers typically have to take a subject-area exam based on the specific subject(s) and grade level(s) they plan to teach.

# An Introduction to Teacher Certification Exams

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## **Which test do I need to take? (*Continued*)**

In California, the subject-area exam is called the California Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET). In some states, including California, aspiring teachers must pass these exams before they begin to student teach, and working teachers who plan to add an additional subject matter credential must also pass these exams before they can teach a new subject. In some cases, teachers may even need to go through a third or fourth set of tests — such as the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) test that all California elementary teachers must pass — to be considered fully qualified.

## **How soon should I start to prepare?**

Teacher certification exams are challenging, especially if it has been a while since you took courses in the subject area of the exam. Tests are designed to assess an individual's competency in a wide range of subjects or one particular subject. Therefore, the more specialized the test, the more difficult it may be. Start preparing for the test as soon as you have decided on your subject area, and find out which tests you need to take to obtain your teaching credential.

## **When are the tests given?**

This depends on the test and location. Check for upcoming [test registration deadlines](#) to know when tests are given and make sure to schedule enough time in advance. It is best to check the website of the test itself for the most up-to-date registration deadlines.

## **Should I plan to take tests more than once?**

Some candidates find the tests difficult to pass the first time they are taken. These tests are designed to assess your knowledge of subject matter and must be passed prior to entering student teaching. We recommend that you plan enough time to take the tests more than once in case you do not pass the first time.

# Top Five Test Concerns



## 1. Knowledge of content

Make sure to study the content that is actually covered in the exam. This may seem obvious, but studying the wrong content is a common mistake. Once you know which tests you need to take, confirm the content that is covered in that specific test and study accordingly.



## 2. Time

Many test takers run out of time — sometimes they don't study early enough, they miss a test registration deadline or they don't complete the test itself on time. To avoid this, plan twice as much time as you need to study and make sure you know your test registration dates and deadlines. We suggest anticipating having to take the test twice, which means you'll need to schedule time for two rounds of tests.



## 3. Practice

In preparation for the actual test, make sure to take practice tests in a similar setting as the real test, and use the same tools. For example, if a test is computer-based, then you should take the practice test on a computer. Follow actual time constraints according to the test specifics, which can be found on each exam's website, such as no breaks or 40 minutes for a specific section. When you're doing the practice tests, recognize the areas you need to work on and pinpoint what your biggest struggles are, such as running out of time on a certain section or forgetting formulas. In each case, take steps to solve these problems before you take the real test. Possible solutions include solving the multiple-choice questions first or writing down all the formulas you need to refer to as soon as you start the test, so you won't forget them later on.



# Top Five Test Concerns



## 4. Understanding the questions

Make sure you take your time, read each question carefully and select the best answer for the specific question.



## 5. Anxiety

To prevent anxiety prior to or during the test, you should first understand that it's OK to be nervous, but do not get anxious about being anxious! Instead, make a plan to properly prepare for the test. Once you have worked on a practice test and assessment, you will have a more realistic idea of how well you will do on the test and how much time you need to prepare in order to pass. Having realistic expectations will ease the anxiety and help you prepare under less pressure. You should also spend time the night before the test to unwind and mentally decompress, so you are relaxed and ready for the next day.



# Test Prep Tips

## Take a practice test.

Before creating a plan of action, take a practice test to assess your strengths and weaknesses. Once you know where you stand, you can spend more time preparing and focusing on your weakest areas.

Note: Anyone who creates a free account on Teachers Test Prep can then take one free full-length practice test for each test or subtest they are taking. After completing the practice test, you will receive a free basic diagnostic breakdown.

In addition to the resource links to the right, each type of exam has its own test preparation resources on its website, such as study guides, practice tests, computer-based testing tutorials and explanations of possible test results. To learn more about state-specific exams and requirements, click on the resource links below.

Need to take a practice test?  
Click on one of the tests  
below to get started!

[Teachers Test Prep](#)

[Praxis Practice Tests](#)

[CSET Practice Tests](#)

[CBEST Practice Tests](#)

[CPACE Practice Tests](#)

[RICA Practice Tests](#)

## NATIONAL CERTIFICATION TESTS

[\*\*PRAXIS\*\*](#)

[\*\*NES\*\*](#)

## STATE-SPECIFIC TESTS

California: [\*\*CBEST, CPACE,\*\*](#)

[\*\*CSET, CTEL, RICA\*\*](#)

Colorado: [\*\*PLACE\*\*](#)

Florida: [\*\*FTCE\*\*](#)

Georgia: [\*\*GACE\*\*](#)

Illinois: [\*\*ILTS\*\*](#)

Massachusetts: [\*\*MTEL\*\*](#)

Michigan: [\*\*MTTC\*\*](#)

Minnesota: [\*\*MTLE\*\*](#)

New Mexico: [\*\*NMTA\*\*](#)

New York: [\*\*NYSTCE\*\*](#)

Washington: [\*\*WEST\*\*](#)

Texas: [\*\*TEXES\*\*](#)

# Test Prep Tips

## Figure out your learning style.

Are you a visual learner or an aural learner? Figure out how you learn best, as your style will determine how you should prepare for the test. Everyone learns differently and will require different study techniques.

## Make a plan.

Once you have taken a practice test to assess your strengths and weaknesses and figured out your learning style, you are ready to make a study plan.

Here are some tips to help you create a study plan:



Split up your test preparation into manageable chunks. It may be helpful to break up your study plan into day-to-day lesson plans, where you focus on one area for one day.



Find a study buddy! If you don't have a study buddy, find a friend or family member to help you stay on track and follow your study plan. If you are a Rossier student, just ask your student support adviser and he or she will be happy to keep you on track.



Use high-quality test preparation materials. [Teachers Test Prep](#) has online videos and study guides to help you prepare for the real test.



Allow twice the amount of time you think you need to study.



Plan breaks within your study sessions. 10 minutes for every 1 hour is a good rule of thumb.



Study slowly and over a longer period of time, so you can retain all the information. Cramming leads to selective memory.



# Recommended Test Prep Materials

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Teachers Test Prep offers a variety of preparation materials for many of the most popular teacher certification exams, including:

**Praxis**

**CSET**

**CBEST**

**RICA**

Each link includes free resources like full-length practice tests with diagnostics and simple, concise online study guides specific to each test. The study guides provide an overview of the exact topics that will appear on your exam so you can be confident that you're studying the right material.

Teachers Test Prep also offers a variety of paid services for those who want additional help, such as group [prep classes](#), one-on-one [tutoring](#), [on-demand online prep](#) programs and even [written response grading and feedback](#) from live, professional graders.

# 10 Test-Taking Tips

Earn your best score with the following test-taking tips.



## 1. Be on time.

Every test has a time limit. Be sure to arrive to the testing center early.



## 2. Read all the directions on the test carefully.

Make sure to pay special attention to the test moderator because many test directions are verbally announced.



## 3. Manage your time wisely.

Mark particularly challenging questions and come back to them at the end. Many test-takers waste time on one difficult question and then run out of time to answer 5-10 other questions they could have answered more easily. To practice managing your time, we recommend that you time yourself during practice tests to see how long it takes for you to complete each section.



# 10 Test-Taking Tips



## 4. Write down all formulas right away.

As soon as you've entered the examination room, jot down any equations you may need for your test on a sheet of paper. This will free up your mind to focus on the questions at hand. When you get to a question where you need the formula, you can refer to what you've already written down. Use this method for any other piece of information you think you might forget.



## 5. Read constructed responses first.

Read through the constructed responses first. Then as you are taking the multiple-choice section you can think about your answers and jot down notes on the scratch paper provided. After you go through the multiple-choice section, you can go back to the constructed responses. Sometimes, you may encounter information or examples in the multiple-choice sections that you can incorporate into your written responses.



## 6. Read all answers on multiple-choice questions.

You should read each answer to the question provided to ensure that the answer you choose is the best possible option.



## 7. Guess wisely.

These tests are difficult and you are not expected to know every answer. Gauge the answers to a question carefully and eliminate as many options as you can.

# 10 Test-Taking Tips

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## **8. Answer constructed response questions as thoroughly as possible.**

Be sure to read the question carefully and proceed to answer all questions posed in the constructed response question. These responses are going to be scored based upon the thoroughness of your answer and ability to address the question at hand.



## **9. Study the scoring rubric.**

For constructed response questions, familiarize yourself with the scoring rubric available on the official testing website and read the full-credit sample answers provided there to get a sense of what the graders are looking for.



## **10. Mark your answers carefully.**

If you are taking a paper-based test, be sure to mark the answers carefully on your test sheet. If you skip a question, make sure that you skip the exact question on the answer sheet. If you have time at the end of the test, make sure you go back and check the accuracy of your work.

# Day of the Exam

Now that you've practiced test-taking strategies and absorbed as much information as you can, it's time to take the exam! Here are some final tips to follow the morning of the test, which can help you mentally and emotionally prepare for the big day.



## 1. Know where you are going and how long it will take you to get there.

Testing locations sometimes change, so it's important to verify the location of the test before you go.

Estimate your travel time and allow for traffic. Report to your testing center at least 30 minutes before your scheduled testing time.



## 2. Eat a healthy meal.

The brain requires quality nutrition to ensure [optimum performance](#), so make sure you eat a healthy meal beforehand.



## 3. Be sure to dress comfortably.

It is recommended that you dress in layers since temperatures vary at testing centers and may not be under the control of the test administrator.



## 4. Exercise.

Exercising before a test releases chemicals that increase mental agility. In fact, only 15 minutes of brisk walking or a light jog will be enough to stimulate your heart and brain. Consider exercising on the day of the test – just enough to burn off extra nervous energy, without tiring yourself out.

# What You Need to Bring to the Exam

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## Always bring the following items to the test center.

**Proper identification**

You must bring a current, government-issued identification printed in English, in the name in which you registered, bearing your photograph and signature. Copies will not be accepted.

Failure to provide proper identification will result in an admission denial to the testing session and forfeiture of all fees.

**A printed copy of your testing admission ticket**

**Several sharpened No. 2 pencils (if you're taking a paper-based test)**

## Do not bring the following items to the test center.

**Cellphones**

**Electronic communication devices, visual or audio recording or listening devices, or any device with an on/off switch**

**Calculators (unless otherwise indicated)**

**Handwritten or printed materials**

**Packages and bags**

**Hats or headwear (unless it's for medical or religious reasons)**

**Food and drink**

**Unauthorized testing aids**

**Unauthorized medical devices**



# After the Exam

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## **How do I get my results?**

It usually takes one month to receive your exam results, but times vary depending on which test you take. You can find out how long it will take to process your exam results by asking a test administrator before you sign up.

## **What if I fail?**

Assess your results. Many people who get a failure notice see the disappointing results and simply toss it out without reading the section that contains helpful information. With many tests, your results will include a brief breakdown of areas where you can improve. This is important to know as you prepare to retake the test.

If you do fail, you can schedule to take the tests during the next available testing period, but remember, this can lead to further delays in your overall goals. If your teaching preparation program requires that you pass certain exams to start student teaching, a failed exam can delay your graduation date. If you need to pass the test in order to continue teaching, this will delay whether or not you can continue teaching. To avoid dealing with delays, it's important to properly prepare for the test ahead of time.

# After the Exam

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## I've passed the test, now what?

Congratulations! Once you have passed the appropriate tests for your subject area, you will be on your way to earning your teaching credential and, if you're in the [USC Rossier MAT program](#), you can enroll in your next term. We suggest you commit to being a constant learner, especially in your subject area, and continue to seek out new information to stay updated on subject matter. Here are some ways you can stay in top shape for your future classroom:



Participate in a [Twitter chat](#), such as #Edchat, for your subject matter.

Visit museums and attend events and meetings to expose yourself to other perspectives in your subject matter.

Follow organizations and research institutes that specialize in your subject matter to stay up-to-date on the latest research.

Seek out the experts in your subject area — you never know who might want to come visit your future class or have a Skype-session with your future students!

Build a [Feedly page](#) that pulls from the top news sources and blogs.

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Looking for more teacher certification resources?

Visit [www.certificationmap.com](http://www.certificationmap.com) for more information on how to become a teacher.

*Click here to learn how to earn your teaching credential*

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