

Most nurse anesthesia students are excellent test-takers. If you weren't, you probably wouldn't have gotten this far. The National Certification Exam, however, is not like any other exam you have taken. It contains a wide-variety of question types you may not be used to such as multiple-choice, calculations, drag-and-drop, image evaluation, and image hotspot identification.

In addition to unfamiliarity with the test format, the stress of the exam is unbelievably higher than your school exams. As you progress from one question to another, it becomes difficult to focus your attention on the question at hand because of worries about failing, delaying your career, feeling embarrassed if your peers learn that you failed the exam, disappointing you family, and struggling to go another month without income.

Practicing for the exam using PACES (available at www.prodigyanesthesia.com) will give you plenty of practice for the exam. The tips below will also help you be more prepared for the exam so that you can perform your best and move on to your career as an anesthetist.

Preparing for the Exam

Give yourself plenty of time to study. Cramming is only partially effective and can actually worsen your chances. You may be able to rattle off a list of newly learned material at home, but when you're under a considerable amount of stress, the information can be difficult to recall accurately. Many students cram for a solid month between graduation and their exam date. The document *How To Prepare for Exams* available in the article archives at www.prodigyanesthesia.com gives you specific tips on the materials to study, when to start, how to incorporate PACES into your study regimen to gain the most benefit, and the techniques used by successful students.

Study in small groups. Some students prefer to study alone, but studying in small groups can help in clarifying information you don't understand and also help relieve the stress as you discuss concerns during breaks. The important thing to remember is that you should only study in groups with similar study habits and avoid the 'talker'. That is, don't study with students who constantly digress and cannot keep their mind focused on quiet study. Typically, the larger the group, the more likely it is that the 'talker' is present.

Eat the elephant. When confronted with an exam as expansive as the certification exam, it is easy to get overwhelmed. Students will typically drag every note they've ever taken, all their textbooks, a computer, notecards, study sheets, and any other review material they can find when they go into the library. This will leave you overwhelmed and unsure of where to start. At best, you will end up jumping from one resource to another in a chaotic sweep that accomplishes little. Remember the old joke, 'How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.' Focus on your plan and take only the material you need to cover your goals for that day. Resource books and a laptop are handy when you need to clarify something you don't understand, but don't overdo it.

The Night Before the Exam

Get plenty of sleep the night before the exam. Staying up late cramming will leave you stressed and in a poor position to do your best.

Stick to your normal schedule on the morning of the exam. If you normally eat breakfast or drink coffee, then don't change your pattern. Your mind will function best if you following your normal rituals. Above all, do NOT introduce new techniques or drugs on the day of the exam that you have not tried prior to exam day. Some students take stimulants to increase their mental acuity or beta-blockers to reduce anxiety. If this is something that has always worked for you, then continue it, however, do not try anything new on this morning! You may be so maladjusted due to the change that you cannot function at your best.

The Day of the Exam

On the day of the exam, you need to bring your NBCRNA certification exam eligibility card and two forms of identification. One of the forms of identification must bear a photo (a driver's license is most commonly used). Everything else will be provided for you. Cell phones, PDAs, computers, calculators, notes, and other paraphernalia are prohibited. Also remember that your identification must have the same first and last name as your eligibility card, so if you are changing your name due to marriage or divorce, do so in plenty of time to change the necessary pieces of identification so that they match your eligibility card.

When you begin the exam, there is **no tutorial and no practice questions!** Be prepared to begin answering questions shortly after entering the examination room. PACES is designed to simulate the look and feel of the exam and the various question formats and will provide you with an additional sense of comfort as the exam gets underway.

You must answer each question before proceeding to the next one. When you are faced with a question about which you are unsure, you have to make your best guess and move on. The difficulty this presents is that while reading the next question, your mind is still working on the previous question. You must practice answering a question and then putting it completely out of your mind so that you can focus on the question in front of you.

You will receive a minimum of 100 questions during the exam. The computer may calculate that, at the end of 100 questions you have either passed the exam or failed it. If the exam calculations have not yet deduced your pass/fail determination, the exam will continue to a possible maximum of 170 questions. You should also be aware that a certain small percentage of students will receive all 170 questions regardless. This means that going beyond the 100 questions does not mean you have failed or are failing. The maximum amount of time you have to take the exam is 3 hours.

After the Exam

You will find out the results of your exam immediately after completion. Now's the time to unwind and celebrate! All of your hard work has finally paid off! Remember, though, it often takes a month or more to get credentialed in your new facility and you often have to work two weeks or more before you get your first paycheck, so plan your finances with this time frame in mind