

Effective Approach and Practical Tips for CISA Exam

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EFFECTIVE APPROACH AND PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CISA EXAM

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This article consists of two sections. The first section provides an effective approach to the CISA exam and the second section provides practical tips for before, during, at and after the exam.

I. EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO CISA Exam

A. Objective of CISA Exam

The CISA Exam Bulletin of Information (BOI) states that the CISA program is designed to assess and certify individuals in the IS audit, control, assurance and security professions who demonstrate exceptional skill and judgment. The CISA exam is offered each year in June and December and consists of 200 multiple-choice questions, administered during a four-hour session. The purpose of the exam is to test a candidate's knowledge, evaluation and application of IS audit principles and practices and six technical content areas covering IS audit process, IT governance, systems and infrastructure life cycle, protection of information assets and business continuity and disaster recovery.

B. Understanding of Information Technology (IT)

The CISA exam questions are developed and maintained carefully to ensure they accurately test an individual's proficiency in IS audit, control and security practices. Hence, CISA candidates are expected to have working knowledge of IT, auditing, control and security practices. The basic understanding of IT should cover key concepts of various components of information technology in their practical deployment. IT knowledge should encompass overall understanding of IT infrastructure, IT facilities, various types of computer hardware, systems software (operating systems, databases, networking, multimedia, etc), business application software, office automation software and audit software. Further, candidates are expected to know concepts and practice of management as relevant to IT deployment in enterprises.

C. CISA Review Manual (CRM) – Basic reference material

CISA candidates are advised to read the CISA BOI in order to understand the details of the CISA exam. The Candidates Guide to the CISA Exam must be read to understand the broad range of content areas covered including objectives, tasks and knowledge statements. The CRM elaborates and covers the topics as per the job/process content areas and including task and knowledge statements. Candidates are advised to use the CRM as the basic guide for learning and supplement it with additional materials as required based on their assessment of gaps and individual competency areas. CRM is not expected to teach fundamental concepts of Information Technology, however, IT components are explained only to the extent required.

D. Conceptual Clarity

CISA candidates need to have conceptual clarity in the following key areas:

- Risks in deployment of implementing information technology
- Appropriate risk management strategy for mitigating these risks.
- Security and controls, which need to be implemented for risk mitigation.
- Strategy, approach, methodology and techniques for auditing technology.

E. Need for working knowledge of IT

Candidates who are not well conversant with IT are advised to do a practical course on IT covering hardware, systems software, office automation, business applications and audit software. This is no substitute for working knowledge but this approach would help familiarize candidates with IT in its practical deployment.

F. Getting CISA Perspective – practical approach

The overall understanding of a CISA candidate is expected to cover the related content areas as per the objectives, tasks and knowledge statements given in the Candidates Guide to the CISA Exam. Primarily, it encompasses knowledge of information technology, management, auditing, control and security practices. CISA candidates may follow the following approach for getting the perspective of a CISA:

- Obtain an overall understanding of information technology – concepts and practice
- Understand the risks of deployment of relevant IT components
- Know the features and functionalities of security and controls of IT components
- Understand how controls could be implemented using the security features and functionalities so as to mitigate the risks in the relevant IT components
- Learn how to audit IT components by understanding the risks, review related security, evaluate implemented controls, identify areas of weaknesses and provide appropriate recommendations to mitigate the control weakness.

G. Reference Material for CISA Exam

The most recent CISA Review Manual is the best reference material for the exam. This Manual should be supplemented with other material as required. In addition to this, the CISA Questions, Answers and Explanations Manual or CD is an excellent reference point for practicing questions. Please read articles within the ISACA Journal from the last two years. COBIT Control objectives can be read to understand controls for various IT processes. Answer the CPE quiz within the ISACA journal. Sample on-line references are given below:

- www.isaca.org and www.itgi.org – IT Governance and K-Net Articles
- www.theiia.org, IT audit articles
- www.auditnet.org – articles and audit programs
- www.techweb.com – Technology encyclopedia (>20,000 IT Terms)
- <http://foldoc.org/> - free online dictionary of computing
- www.google.com – search for IT audit presentations

ISACA also offers an online review course that mirrors the CISA Questions, Answers and Explanations Manual and Supplement. This is available at www.isaca.org/elearning.

Candidates may also wish to read the article published in the ISACA Journal 2006-1 titled: “Preparing for the CISA or CISM Examination: A Brief, Hands-on Supplement for Candidates” By Derek J. Oliver, CISA, CISM, CFE, and Max Shanahan, CISA, FCPA.

II. Practical Tips for the CISA Exam

A. Before the exam

1. Decide early when to take exam. Please remember that early registration reduces fees and also provides you more time for preparation. Make an early commitment so that you have more time and save money but don't postpone your preparation. You need to be regular and consistent in your preparation.
2. Read the "CISA Exam BOI" and "Candidates guide to the CISA Exam and Certification" to get an overall understanding of exam and scope of coverage of the exam.
3. Use the CISA Review Manual as the basic reading material and supplement other material as and when needed. If you are from IT, make sure you understand the basic concepts of auditing. *IT Auditing* by Ron Weber is an excellent book for this topic, however, read only what is relevant. If you are an auditor, then a basic book on computers and networking may be needed in addition to a basic course on computers.
4. Take your family and friends into confidence so that you are able to sacrifice your social commitments and focus on the exam.
5. Motivation is an important aspect of preparation for the exam. Motivation will help you concentrate and be focused on the task on hand. Self motivation is the best motivation. Remember, you are taking a prestigious and global recognized exam, which will make a significant difference to your career, earnings and your self-esteem. Visualize receiving the congratulations letter from ISACA as well as ultimately receiving CISA certification. See yourself being congratulated by your peers and colleagues.
6. The exam is not technology or platform specific. Hence, do not get too engrossed with technology details and the reading of technology. Focus during your study to get clarity on the fundamentals. Read the IS auditing standards, guidelines and COBIT control objectives to get the thinking of an IS auditor. Put on the cap of the global IS auditor. Don't bring in your personal experience and answer questions from your past unless this is in line with ISACA thinking. Please don't focus on what is practiced in your technology platform or industry as it may not be applicable or relevant.
7. Make a time plan of what you need to read and prioritize. Deal with unread materials concisely. Formulate a reading strategy in advance with a time table and study plan.
8. The approximate time required for preparing for the exam is subjective and depends on the individual's competency, skill-sets and learn-ability. However, it is advisable to study for about 1 hour daily for 3 to 4 months. The best way to study is to follow a regular habit. Follow a regular schedule which is most convenient to you but ensures consistency.
9. Practice the questions and get the reasoning and choice correct. Remember, the exam is not expected to test your memory but your understanding. Hence, don't cram any definitions or concepts except the most fundamental ones for understanding.
10. Practice, practice and practice questions available to you. But remember the standard of the questions in the exam is much higher than what you have practiced. Be mentally prepared. If you have conceptual clarity and apply your thinking as an IS Auditor, you should be able to choose the correct answer.
11. Use the CISA Questions, Answer and Explanations Manual for practicing the questions. Answer questions in a block of 100 at a time and then review your performance.
12. Evaluate your performance both for correct and incorrect answers. You should have got the correct answers by choice not by chance and for the incorrect answers, analyze why you got them wrong:
 - a. Is it because your logic was wrong or you did not know the topic of the question?
 - b. If you got the answer wrong because the logic was wrong, think, introspect and get your logic right.
 - c. If you got the answer wrong because you did not know the topic of the question, read the CRM or additional material as required.

- d. After you have done the above evaluation for the 100 questions, answer the questions again and evaluate. You should have gotten 100% right. It is suggested that you repeat the above steps until you get 100% of the questions right.
 - e. Once you have 100% of the questions right, then repeat for the next 100 questions and follow the cycle. Keep repeating this until you complete all questions.
13. After you have completed answering all the questions, then answer the questions in block of 200 questions at a time; evaluate your timing and performance.
 14. After you have practiced all the questions, then read the CRM once fully and answer the questions.
 15. Consider joining a local CISA Review Course. CISA review courses are conducted by many ISACA chapters. These courses are often taught by current CISAs who present and discuss exam topics and share their secrets of success. These courses may be detailed and conducted over a few months generally for 2-3 hours on weekends or crash courses conducted over 2-3 full days. You may choose the course as feasible to you but it is strongly advisable to attend the course as they provide practical insights from experienced CISAs and help you to better prepare for the exam.
 16. Consider using the online CISA Review Course to track your progress as you go through questions in the different job practice areas.
 17. Form a small study group or join an e-group for studies and discussions. Review your preparation actively alone and also with group on a regular basis. Review and discuss with group your logic and reasoning and get other perspectives also. Use these discussions to understand different perspectives but remember everyone is preparing for the exam.
 18. Focus on ensuring that you get the required knowledge and competency rather than worrying about your prospects of passing the exam. Don't be too concerned about the percentage that pass or how to apply for certification. Focus on passing the exam first.
 19. Don't stay up late day the before the exam trying to read and catch up on lost time. Remember, the principle of farming, you need to sow in time and take care on a regular basis so as to reap in time. Last minute preparations may result in lack of concentration in the exam.
 20. Prepare yourself emotionally and physically to take the exam. If you have any medical problems, such as needing food or regular medication, these special accommodations for the exam, will need to be made in advance and require medical documentation. The deadline for requesting special accommodations is listed in the respective Bulletin of Information under the section titled Special Arrangements.
 21. Don't stress yourself physically before or during the exam. You need to be fully relaxed in order to have maximum concentration. Avoid last minute reading and late night reading before the exam day. It may not really help. Please also take care of your food intake so that you are able to concentrate well during the exam.
 22. You may need probably all of the four hours to answer the 200 questions. Hence, it is essential that you practice sitting in one place and practicing answering the mock tests so that you get into the practice of sitting for four to five hours at a stretch.

B. About the Exam

1. The exam is objective (multiple-choice). The answer is available in the choices provided. Hence, the approach to studies should not be from the perspective of remembering but more from the perspective of understanding.
2. The CISA Exam Questions could be broadly categorized into 2 categories:
 - a. Fact based – technology, auditing standards. No specific technology related questions. For eg: SAP, Oracle, SQL, etc.
 - b. Analysis based – context and decision oriented. These questions require you to understand the scenario and formulate your opinion/judgment.
3. In every case, the candidate is required to read the question carefully, eliminate known incorrect answers and then make the best choice possible. Every CISA question has a stem (question) and four options (answer choices). The candidate is asked to choose the correct or best answer from the options. The stem may be in the form of a question or incomplete statement. In some instances, a scenario or description problem may also be included. These questions normally include a description of a situation and require the candidate to answer two/more questions based on the information provided. The candidate has to read each question carefully. Many times a CISA exam question will require the candidate to choose the appropriate answer that is MOST likely or BEST.
4. To assist candidates taking the exam with the translation of technical terminology, a list of the most frequently used technical terms in English along with how they will appear on the exam in other languages offered is available on ISACA's web site at www.isaca.org/examterm.
5. The questions and choices are straightforward and simple. They are meant for testing your understanding of concepts and practice of IS audit. They are not meant to test your grammar or proficiency in English. Hence, do not try to analyze the question and answers too much. Don't waste time trying to read between the lines to find hidden meaning.
6. The exam consists of one paper, which has all 200 questions. The questions are not in a particular order of domains or chapters but are mixed up at random. It is not worthwhile trying to figure out to which domain a question belongs. What is most important is how well you are able to answer the questions in the exam.
7. Exam scores are reported as a scaled scoring system and are not based on an arithmetic or percent average. A scaled score is a conversion of a candidate's raw score on an exam to a common scale. ISACA uses and reports scores on a common scale from 200 to 800. A candidate must receive a score of 450 or higher to pass the exam. A score of 450 represents a minimum consistent standard of knowledge as established by ISACA's CISA Certification Committee.
8. Generally, the style of writing in the CISA Exam is based on American English and it follows American spelling. Hence, please get acquainted by practicing the questions in CISA review manual and CISA Questions, Answers and Explanations manual.

C. Approach to exam

1. As part of preparation, do discuss the questions and answers with an open mind. If you are an auditor, get the technology perspective and if you are from IT, get the audit perspective. Remember as an IS auditor, you are expected to be auditing technology as deployed in the organization.
2. Familiarize yourself with the test. Know the tasks, knowledge and scope of the subject, the type of questions and proposed answers. The key ideas to be remembered as an IS auditor are IS risks, IS security, IS control and IS audit. You need to be well versed with these concepts. The questions may require you to grade the risks in terms of highest or lowest. In terms of security and controls, you may be required to pick up the best or least effective controls in the context of the question. An IS audit question may require your judgment in terms of concepts, practical procedures or risk ranking or presenting the findings to the management. There may be few questions which test your understanding of core technology. For example, encryption, EDI, internet security, telecommunications control, etc.
3. There are 200 questions to be answered in four hours. This means that you have approx. 70 seconds per question. Some of the questions may be answerable within 30 seconds and some may take more time. Further, in some cases, if you get lost in too much thinking, you may lose track of time and may not have time to answer all questions. Hence, it is essential to manage based on a slot of one hour for a block of 50 questions. Depending on the progress, you can increase or decrease the pace as required.
4. The questions are not directly picked up from any text book or reading material but are prepared by practicing CISAs and are aimed to test your understanding of the concepts and practice of IS audit.
5. Remember that CISA is an objective type exam and just like any exam, it is not necessarily a reflection of your talent, capabilities, competencies or skill-sets. Hence, if you have not been or are not successful, then you should not take it personally. There are times when senior and experienced professionals have failed in the CISA exam not once but two or three times. It does not mean that they were not capable. This only means that they need to learn the knack of passing the exam. It is important to analyze what could have gone wrong and learn from it. It is quite possible that your current experience itself is becoming baggage. Think from a new perspective and focus now only on the questions and answers and read the topics which you need to.
6. Learn to play the game of CISA. It is not just your knowledge but your ability to answer the questions correctly which is very important. Most candidates who take the exam may probably have the knowledge required to pass the CISA exam. You are possibly making the same mistake again and again because you are stuck in your approach or relating the answers to your personal experience. Hence, read the CRM afresh and answer the questions keeping the context in mind. Interact with other students and get your perspective right. If required, attend a CISA review or CISA refresher course conducted by a nearby chapter. Identify where you are going wrong else you may commit the same mistakes again. It pays to work smart not hard.

D. At the Exam

- A. Do not attempt to read through the question paper fully. You may lose time and may not have time to answer all the questions. The ideal method is to take up one question at a time and answer them one by one.
- B. You need to compartmentalize your mind and take one question at a time. Think and decide on the right answer. Once you have answered, forget it and go ahead and tackle the next one and so on. Don't carry your doubts of the previous question to the next.
- C. There may be questions for which you may not be able to strike the right answer straight away. You may skip it, but mark it in the questions paper so that it is identifiable and come back to it later. However, the best approach is to make a DECISION and answer then and there. You may not have time to come back to the question again. Further, there may always be lurking feeling that you have left some questions unanswered. This could be always in the back of your mind. However, if you do have to change an answer, please ensure that you erase the previous answer carefully and fully.
- D. Please do not think of coming back to the answers for correction later on. Change them only if you have additional insights or data, which necessitates that your previous answer was incorrect.
- E. You may decide in which order you want to answer the questions. Some tend to start from question no. 50 or 100 as it gives them confidence they are progressing and come back. However, the ideal approach is to answer sequentially one at a time.
- F. Take one question at a time. Read it fully and carefully. Identify the stem, the key concept that is being tested. Underline the core concept, which is being tested. Read all the choices even if you think you have the right answer in the first or second or third choice.
- G. As there is no penalty for incorrect answers, you should answer all questions. Even in the case of questions where you are not sure of right answer, you should guess intelligently.
- H. For choosing the right answer, you may be able to identify the right answer straight away. You may also adapt the process of elimination by ruling out the incorrect choices one by one so as to narrow down your choices and pick the right choice.
- I. Every question will have one of the choices framed as a distractor. The distractor may attract those with incomplete knowledge or attempting to answer the question with just common sense. It is essential to be able to eliminate the distractor.
- J. It is recommended that you record your answers directly on the answer sheet so that you eliminate the risk of running out of time to do so.
- K. If you have to modify your answers for any reason, please ensure that you erase the previous choice properly so that there is no trace of marking else as it may be construed as multiple marking and your answer ignored during grading.
- L. Your concentration level may come down after an hour or so. If necessary, pause and take a few deep breaths, then get back to the task. Consistent concentration is important.
- M. You may encounter some questions which are familiar to you, which you have answered in the CISA review manual or in the test questions. Don't be prejudiced by your past answers. Read the question fully, understand it, and look at the choices and then answer. It may be possible that the questions may have been rephrased or re-worded and may have a different answer to what you have seen in the tests or the choices may be re-arranged or rephrased.
- N. In the choices, when there are two choices which are similar, pick the one which is more macro and bigger in nature. Remember the context of the situation as given in the question and the available choices have to be considered to arrive at the best choice.
- O. Ensure that you are marking the answers exactly. Cross-check regularly to ensure this. You have to be extra careful if have skipped any questions to be answered later. It is important to ensure that you skip marking the answers for that question.

E. Exam Venue

1. Prepare an exam kit in advance of the exam and carry it to the exam. This kit could include your admission ticket, identity card, pencils, erasers, etc.
2. Your ID must be a current and original government issued identification that is not handwritten and contains both your name as it appears on the admission ticket, and your photograph. Any candidate who does not provide an acceptable form of identification will not be allowed to sit for the exam and will forfeit their registration fee.
3. Visit the venue in advance before the exam and know the route, parking facility and exact place of the exam. Reach the exam half an hour before the scheduled time so that you are not running to the venue in a hurry. Do come to the exam venue early and use the time for relaxing.
4. Carry your identification cards, admission tickets, 3-4 pencils sharpened, and 2-3 erasers. Don't carry any books. You may not get time to read and it may not be worthwhile trying to read in the last minute. Remember the questions don't test your memory but are more a test of your judgmental ability as an IS auditor.
5. The admission ticket is sent by email and post approximately 4-6 weeks prior to the exam. You may use either a printout of the email e-Ticket or the hard copy admission ticket for entry into the exam. You do not need both copies. If you do not receive your ticket by 1 June for the June, or 1 December for the December exam, please contact exam@isaca.org immediately, using "Exam Admission Ticket" in the subject line. Only those candidates with an admission ticket will be allowed into the exam.
6. The chief examiner (CE) will start reading instructions promptly at 8:30 am. . No candidate will be admitted to the test once the CE begins reading the instructions. Any candidate who arrives after the instructions have begun will forfeit their registration fee.
7. The instructions relate to signing of forms and filling up your registration particulars. Clarify your doubts about any procedures you have. Follow the CE's instructions carefully and write down the details as per instructions.
8. The CE will not answer any questions pertaining to the questions or answers.
9. You can go out of the exam hall for answering nature's call with permission from the CE. You may have to hand over your questions and answer paper before going out of the hall and collect it back on return.
10. The CISA exam is a closed exam which means neither the question paper or answer papers are released. You are not to discuss questions or answers with anyone.
11. After completing the exam, leave the venue silently. Don't discuss your answers with the other candidates to confirm the answers. You may only get confused and discussion does not help as the exam is already over.

F. After the Exam

You may be greatly relieved after writing the exam but begin your preparations for the next exam. Hence, when your memory is fresh, as a first step, walk-through the CRM and Questions Manual to identify what went wrong and what went right. This could help you for future exam, if you fail, or to become a CISA item writer, once you succeed. Yes. You can become a CISA item writer and earn US \$50 per question!

Once you have received your exam score indicating you are successful in the CISA Exam, read the Application for Certification (available at www.isaca.org/cisaapp) and if eligible, apply for certification with all the required documents. Understand the CPE requirements and adhere to them. **Until your application is received and approved, you are not CISA certified and cannot use the designation.** If you have any questions about your eligibility for CISA certification or about whether or not your experience qualifies for certification please contact the ISACA certification department at certification@isaca.org.

G. Summary

You may have all the knowledge but remember that CISA is a multi-choice exam. Hence, there is only one correct answer and it is right in front of you. You should learn how to choose the right answer. Being an experienced professional hard-pressed for time, you need to find time for study and orient your thinking as global IS Auditor. Practice the questions and get perspective right. Remember that passing the exam is only the beginning. Success in CISA exam opens out new windows of opportunity in your professional career. Hence, make learning a life-long experience.

This article is primarily written for the CISA exam candidates but the general concepts and tips could be used by candidates taking the CISM/CGEIT exam also by adapting them as per the specific requirements of the relevant exam as outlined in the respective BOI and candidates guide.

Disclaimer:

We are glad that you read through these tips. While hoping they would be useful to you in passing the CISA Exam, please note that we do not provide any assurance of your success. We do not claim that all the tips would be relevant and useful. However, you may select and use whatever you deem useful. Your success in the CISA exam depends on YOU – your preparation and your performance on the exam day. You may consider the above guidance as friendly tips from those who have written and passed the CISA Exam themselves and who have interacted with CISA exam candidates since last thirteen years. We wish you success in the CISA exam and in your professional career.

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