ATP GLOBAL

Advancing equity, integrity, and learning

Guidance for Test takers Taking High Stakes Exams

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The Association of Test Publishers (ATP) is the global body for the testing industry, seeking to promote equity, integrity, and learning in testing. This guidance produced by the ATP Test Infringement and Fraud Coalition includes important information for test takers to keep in mind as they study and prepare to take any type of exams that may be high stakes.

Introduction to high stakes exams

A high stakes exam is an assessment that measures a test taker's progress and/or competence and is considered one for which there are beneficial results, such as a milestone for the awarding of a qualification or outcome (e.g., degree, job, credential, license), whether in education, employment, or training. Most testing organizations take great care to ensure that such exams are valid and reliable measures of the subject matter covered as well as being fair and inclusive.

A typical exam consists of a series of questions or tasks which the test taker must answer or solve. Test takers who demonstrate competence pass the exam, meeting one of high stakes requirements related to the assessment.

For employers, test takers, the public, and other interested parties to trust the test results, testing programs invest in the integrity and security of the exam process. A trustworthy outcome benefits all candidates as they use those results to demonstrate their competence, progress, or level of achievement/accomplishment.

As a result, testing programs have put in place test taker agreements, which include exam rules to protect the integrity of the assessment content and process. Many require test takers to affirmatively consent to a list of test administration rules (e.g., candidates are required to take the exam without external help and must keep all exam content they see confidential), as well as to acknowledge the consequences for violating those rules. Often such a test taker agreement is used at time of registration or immediately before the exam; sometimes the test taker may have to sign the agreement both times. Be sure to read these carefully so you understand what is and is not allowed during the exam and follow those rules.

Although most test takers follow the rules, testing programs have a range of security measures in place to identify those test takers who do not follow these procedures and ensure that no unfair advantage is gained by any test taker. Such measures vary from program to program but often include technical and statistical security measures, whistle-blower/hot line programs,

and other deterrence and investigative techniques. Most individuals who break the rules are easily identified by these measures, and action is taken to ensure that they are not awarded a qualification or credential that they did not earn. These measures may include requiring the offending test taker to retake an exam, delaying when the individual is allowed to take the test again, or even banning someone from a testing program and removing all previous test results (e.g., earned qualifications, credentials) from that person's record.

Unauthorized training materials

When training to prepare for an exam, it is important to focus your learning on the topics that the exam covers because the exam will measure your competence, knowledge, and skill on those topics. Avoid sites or sources that claim to have the actual exam questions – you will be more likely to pass the exam if you focus on learning the topics rather than trying to memorize questions that purportedly might be on the exam. Most testing programs change questions frequently and even vary them between test takers during the same test cycle. Focusing on a specific set of questions can set you up for failure. You can usually obtain recommendations for appropriate training from the testing program.

Exam content is considered to be the intellectual property of a testing program and as such is protected by copyright laws. Additionally, high stakes exam content is rarely released to the general public. If an individual or a website offers to share actual exam content, they will either be deceiving you or both of you will be violating copyright law if you access and use those questions. If you do use unauthorized exam content to prepare for an exam, this constitutes a breach of the testing program's exam rules under test taker agreements.

Testing programs often use statistical analysis of exam data to identify scoring anomalies that could indicate pre-knowledge of items or other exam fraud. If you are discovered (e.g., through whistleblowing or statistical analysis) to have used or shared unauthorized exam preparation materials, the testing organization may invalidate the resulting exam score.

If you are unsure whether the training material you are using is authorized, contact the testing program prior to using such material. If you think you have discovered a site or training provider that appears to be selling or distributing unauthorized materials containing actual exam content, please inform the testing program immediately.

Even if you do not know with certainty that the content is unauthorized, if it is used to unfairly pass the exam and the testing program discovers this, the exam rules and associated consequences will be applied (e.g., banned from the program, scores invalidated, etc.). These actions may be taken even if the test taker did not have fraudulent intentions.

Avoid people who offer to take the exam for you

It's important to take the exam yourself, unaided. If you allow someone to take the exam for you, the testing program is likely to discover this. Most testing programs take severe action against anyone found to have used an imposter to take the exam for them, as well as encouraging test takers to report such people.

Red Flags

If you encounter any of the following during your exam preparation, this could indicate that exam fraud is happening, and you should “walk away”:

- Anyone who tells you that you are “guaranteed” to pass.
- Anyone who claims to have the latest or actual exam content.
- Any site or training that only provides questions/answers and has no educational content.
- Any site or training that covers a wide variety of exams in different sectors and industries.
- Anyone who offers to register you for the exam or asks you for your online account username and password.
- Anyone that encourages you to share real questions that you encountered in the exam with them.
- Any individual online or at a testing center who offers to take the exam for you.
- A community or chat room, including social media, that encourages sharing of exam content in a forum or message board.
- Any exam prep site that includes content with persistent typos and poor grammar.

Consequences of breaking the exam rules

Most test takers take exams honestly and fairly.

Test takers who are found to have broken the exam rules **or are found to have pre-knowledge of exam items** will often have their scores and/or qualifications, credentials, etc. invalidated or revoked if they have already been issued. In more serious cases, test takers can be banned from future testing, resulting in a severe impact on career advancement or professional reputation, or the individual may be subjected to legal prosecution for copyright infringement or fraud.

Questions

Testing programs are keen to provide a fair environment and a test administration process that allows all test takers to have the opportunity to pass their exams. If you have any questions on the best way to prepare for your exam, please reach out to your testing program.