

Tax Preparer Exam Test-Taking Tips

Step 1: 144 questions (not including the mini problems)

On your first run-through, read the question, and if you know the answer without looking it up, answer it quickly, and move on. If you don't know it quickly without looking it up, you may make a guess, but don't dwell on it. Just mark the question to come back to it later and move on. Spend no more than 5-10 seconds on each question. This will enable you to get a chance to answer all the "easy ones" and not run out of time.

At this point, you should be around the half-hour mark. (144 questions @ 10 seconds = 24 minutes)

Step 2: mini-problems:

There are 19 mini-problems. You will get four to six scenarios, each with three to five questions. For example, you may get the details for a Schedule A, and it will ask you what's on specific lines of the Schedule A.

First, skip the scenario and read the question. If it's only asking about charitable donations and medical expenses, there's no reason to read about the interest and taxes paid, right? Don't fill out the entire schedule if you don't need to. Only do enough of the problem to answer the questions asked.

If you work through a question, and your answer doesn't match any of the options, don't dwell on it. Pick the answer that's closest, mark the question for further review, and move on to the next one.

Now you should be anywhere between one hour to 1.5 hours in.

Step 3: second pass (whole exam):

Okay, it's time to go back over the first 144 questions, just looking at the ones you marked to look at again. The index and table of contents of the Pub 17s are very helpful at this point. And don't forget to utilize those cheat-sheets we give you, and the back page of the OR-17. And charts and tables, plus any notes you took throughout the course.

Once you find the correct answer, select it, unclick the "mark" so you don't have to go back, and move on. You can take more time on each question, but there are still some important rules: Don't spend too much time on any question. If you're feeling frustrated by a question, leave it marked and move on.

Do the same for the mini-problems. The change in scenery may help you answer some questions you missed before.

Step 4: final pass:

Okay, we're on the final stretch. At this point, if you have more than an hour left, AWESOME! You've got time to stretch a little, maybe grab a quick bathroom break. Now. The ones that are still marked: Read those questions very slowly. See what you may have missed the first two times. See if you read something in answering other questions that may have helped. Can you eliminate some of the questions? See some of the general tips below.

If you have less than an hour, you'll have to run this last step a little more quickly. I'd do more guessing and less careful reading. Look for questions that you think you can find. You've read everything at least twice now, so you should have a sense of what you know you know, and what you know you don't know. Try to answer as many of the remaining marked questions as quickly as possible.

Step 4: final pass:

- Make sure you're prepared. Bring everything you're supposed to bring, and nothing you're not supposed to bring. Double- and triple-check the list of allowed documents. Make sure you leave plenty of time to get there. Get a good night's sleep before, have a good meal and stay hydrated. All of these things will help you perform better on the exam.
- Don't spend too much time on any one item. If you come up with an answer that isn't one of the options, don't dwell on it. Mark it and come back to it later.
- Read each question thoroughly. Don't dwell on the problem, but don't skim it, either. Many students have found that they missed a problem because they didn't read it carefully, and thought it was asking something else.
- If you can eliminate one or two of the options, guessing is not a bad strategy. There is no penalty for wrong answers (a wrong answer is no more wrong than a blank answer), so you have a better chance of getting it right if you guess something than if you leave it blank.
- We are not trying to trick you. Some of the questions are hard, but they are not "gotcha" questions. Every year we try to make the language as clear as possible, because we want you to perform well if you know the material.
- Trust your gut. The answer is often the first thing you think it is. So many students change their answer, and then find out they had it right the first time.