Tips for the Worried Test Taker

by Jeffrey S. Nielsen, PMP

I am a worried test taker; what should I do?

There are a number of things that you can do to be more comfortable (if it is ever possible to be comfortable with taking a test). I will address some of the most important things, as well as some you may not have thought about.

First you want to make a list of things that are worrying you about the exam, the test center, the study process, etc. The longer list, the better it will be. Why the longer the better? I look at it from the standpoint that a long list is more inclusive, and if you can deal with the longer list first, smaller or less important items will remain.

Once you have the list, go through it point by point and decide if the item will significantly bother you in getting ready for the exam. Put the items in priority order, and address the ones at the top of the list. As these big problems are identified and addressed, you will begin to feel more comfortable with the entire process.

Let's look at some of the things that will make your test-taking experience more rewarding. Did I just say rewarding? YES! Let's start to think of this experience as a fun and exciting opportunity. I want to look specifically at attitude, possible surprises, testing, and checklists.
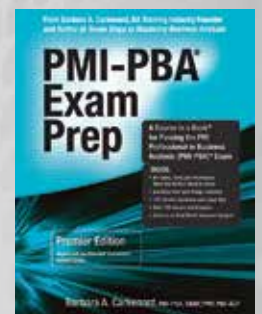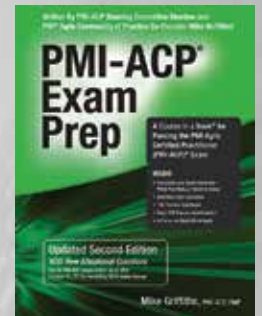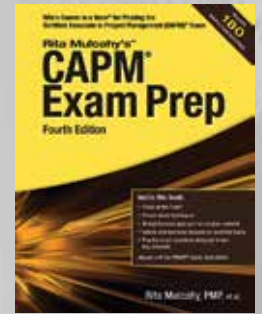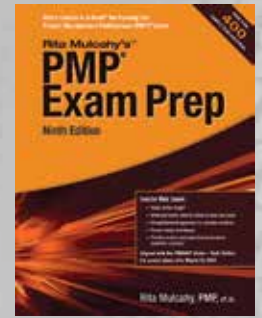
Positive Attitude

First and most important is to put a good light on your objective. Looking at the experience as an opportunity will help you see the benefits and focus on the positive aspects. If you worry, you are spending time on the negative and will, in all likelihood, have a terrible experience. What can you do to change your view? Good question—I'm glad you asked. Start by thinking about the good that will come from getting your PMP certification—a promotion, better projects, better tools to use on projects, more work as a consultant, or maybe even keeping a job (though this has a hint of the negative).

As negative ideas creep into your mind, shoo them out. Remember that you are a good project manager, and this exam is just a validation of that fact. They cannot hide anything from you!

Since you now have the beginning of a positive outlook, continue building it. Let's think about the exam itself. Many people before you have passed the exam; about 70 percent overall pass, according to PMI sources. Now, even better, almost all of the people who took the RMC PMP Exam Prep class passed the first time. (It is nice to know that those few who did not pass were not the ones who were initially nervous about the exam; they were the ones who did not develop and follow a study plan!) You can say to yourself that you are in the right place, using the right materials. There, now that helps, doesn't it?

Another feather in your cap is the fact that you ARE well prepared. You took the time to lay out a plan and stuck to it. You understand the material as if you have been doing it all your life. Since you are so well prepared, you will not need to cram the night before; you will not need to study six to eight hours a day. You can be assured that there is no way you will NOT pass the exam. This assurance will help you look at the exam as just another challenge you can pass.

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Positive Attitude

Now that you know you will pass, the job of actually passing becomes much easier. However, we still have a lot of things that might go wrong. In project management terms, we are talking about risks to the project of passing the PMP exam. As with our projects, there are both opportunities and threats with which we will need to deal. Look at making the threats less likely or the impact less important, and doing the opposite for the opportunities. Unfortunately, you may not transfer this risk to someone else—you must personally sit for the exam.

What are some of the threats you should deal with early in the process? You should address the unknowns of the test environment, the disruptions of the study environment, family and work commitments, etc. Let's start by looking at the test environment.

Since each testing center is different, you will not have the exact same experience as someone else who has taken the exam before. Even in the same test center, you may experience differences. (I took an exam where I was told I would get two sheets of 8-½ x 11 paper. When I got there, they gave me two white boards and a dry marker instead.) You need to eliminate as many distracters on the day of the test as possible. I suggest you visit the test center and ask questions about the process and their policies. Ask questions like: "Do I get earplugs or a headset? What type of paper do I get? How can I keep my brain dump (download sheet)? Do I need to bring a calculator? Where can I put my snacks so I can get to them when I need to? What happens if the test crashes while I am taking it?" Answers to these types of questions will give you a sense of control over the unknown. Don't forget to ask questions about the process for signing in, using the tutorial, taking the exam, and the post-test processes. Anything that might worry you, ask about and get the answers now.

What might happen before you get to the test center? How about the roads and time it takes to get there? What problems might you encounter there? Do a trial run at the time of day and week that you will be going to the test center. See if there are alternate routes, in case something slows traffic on the main route. You want to get to the test center in time, but not with too much time. If you have too much time and nothing to do, you will sit there and worry. Come on—you know you will.

What about the fact that you can't seem to get any quiet time for studying? Figure out where you can go and not be disturbed. A trick I used was to schedule a conference room but not put it on my public schedule. I would leave my cell phone at my desk for an hour and focus on study in the conference room. Another option in many libraries is to get a study room. This is especially good for taking practice tests.

Dealing with work and family commitments also worries many people. If you develop a study plan based upon RMC's recommendations, you will know you are taking away only the time you need to study, though this may not be very convincing when the boss wants a report or your child needs to go somewhere. In your study plan, try to limit your study time to one hour per day during the week. Spreading the study out over a period of time will help you retain more, and thus help you pass the exam easier. You should plan to take the exam within four to six weeks after reading the book the first time or taking our class. This is a short-term disruption to your life, and it will successfully be over soon.
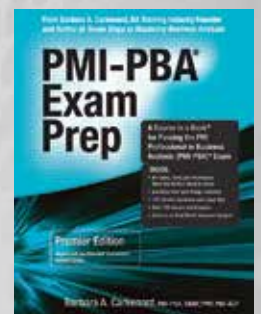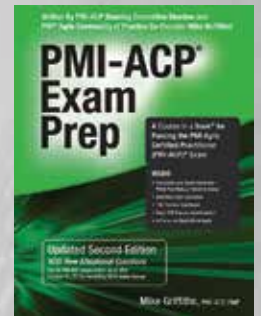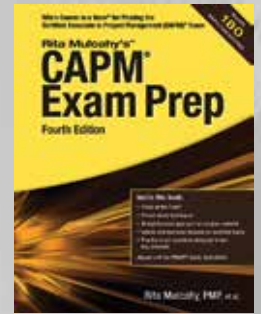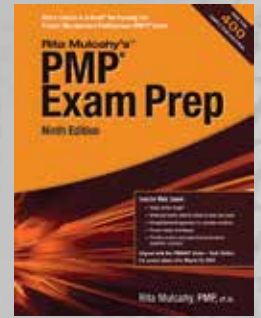
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During the Test

As you sit down to take and as you are actually taking the exam, there are more things to consider. Now the stress is really building; the administrator sits you in the room and walks out, leaving you alone with a person taking a typing test and another who likes to hum while answering questions. Not only that—the lights above your cube are flickering, and they are doing road construction outside. You say it will never happen; well, all these situations HAVE happened.

We study lessons learned so we do not make the same mistakes. If there is any reason you feel you will not be able to focus on the exam, let the test center person know right away. You may be able to move to another cube or reschedule for another time when the distractions are not present. Do not make the mistake another student has made and have a distraction disturb you so much it causes you to fail.

While you were taking practice tests, you practiced your test-taking strategy. You tweaked it until it worked for you. Now you just need to follow it. You should not do things differently when you sit for the real exam. Some of the things you may have thought about are:

- Dress in layers so you are comfortable
- Make sure you have your PMI hat on
- Read every word of every question
- Make two or three passes through the test
- Mark for review difficult or time-consuming questions
- Take breaks when you need them
- Have snacks available, and eat them to maintain your energy
- Use stretching and breathing exercises as needed
- Use your skills to eliminate one of the two "right" answers
- Do not change answers without proof your selected answer is wrong

Remember, you will normally get through the first pass in two to two-and-a-half hours. You will have plenty of time to return to the questions you haven't finished. Here is a comforting fact: most people have 40 to 60 questions marked for review. If this is you, it means you feel comfortable with over 70 percent of the questions! Wow, the review is just for extra credit? No, don't think about it, but understand you have answered enough questions to pass at this point. Now you want to work on increasing your comfort. At this point in the test, there are two types of people: those who will click the exit button and those who won't. Which are you?

Sample Checklist

Below is information presented in a time-based flow. What should you be thinking about when? This will help you to organize your "Passing the PMP Exam" project more smoothly. Don't forget to add your ideas to the ones listed here. All templates are tailored to the project's needs, you being the project. (Oops, that didn't come out right!)

Studying for the exam

- Review the PMI-isms in the PMP® Exam Prep book, and understand how they apply to the best project management practices.
- Review the suggestions for taking the exam in the PMP® Exam Prep book.
- Review the material three times (follow the rule of three).
- Develop good study habits.
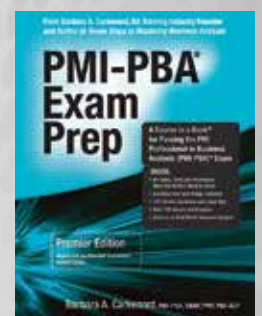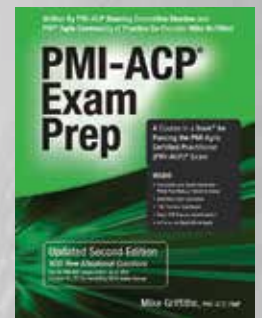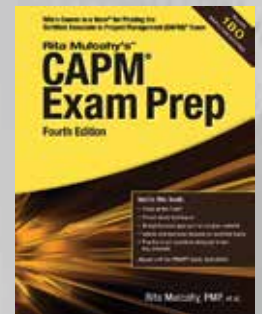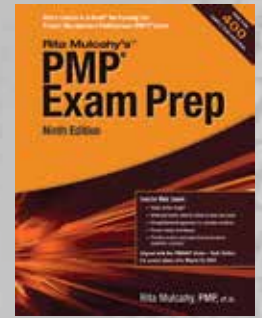
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- Form a study group of people taking the test at about the same time as you are,
- Set a date for taking the exam with the test center, basing the date on a realistic schedule.
- If you have pressure from the office to pass, do not let them know when you will be taking the exam; just tell them afterward when you have passed.
- Schedule the test for your most productive time of the day.
- Set time each day to spend studying; you cannot retain information crammed in eight hours one day.
- Study in more depth the areas you feel uncomfortable with, but be careful not to overstudy; you should not need more than 40 hours of study time after taking RMC's PMP Exam Prep class.
- Use the PMP® Exam Prep book to learn, Hot Topics to keep the material fresh, and PM FASTrack® to verify you understand the material and to find your gaps.
- Develop a test-taking strategy, practice it, refine it, and then use it.
- Visit the test center before the test.
- Practice concentrating on the question on the screen only.
- Try to learn something that will make you a better project manager; then not only will you be a PMP, but you can prove it by your actions!
- Take a four-hour practice test in a "controlled" situation (as if you were in the test center, i.e., no refrigerator runs, etc.).

The night before the exam

- Visualize the entire process from beginning to the successful conclusion.
- Gather everything you need for the next day so it is all ready and you will not need to worry about it in the morning.
- Go to bed; if you are restless, stay there and rest. Do not stress out over the lack of sleep. Get extra sleep the night before the night before the test. Normally you need a minimum of six hours of sleep to feel alert.

The day of the test

- Start with a moderate breakfast, and try to avoid caffeine.
- Get to the test center on time, not too early or too late.
- NO frantic reviews—remember, you know the material cold.
- Distract yourself by reading a magazine, newspaper, or book (not the PMBOK® Guide, or you will sleep through the test).

Before beginning the test

- Sit in a location that is away from distractions and has good lighting. If they put you in a poor place, ask immediately to be moved or reschedule your test when a suitable location is available.
- Practice deep breathing.
- Do your download sheet.
- Ask any questions you have so you are not distracted during the test.
- Do not start the exam until YOU are ready to start. Have the administrator restart if you are not ready.
- Budget your time by using the Mark for Review button. Use the three-pass method as you have practiced. It will take two to two-and-a-half hours for the first pass, one hour
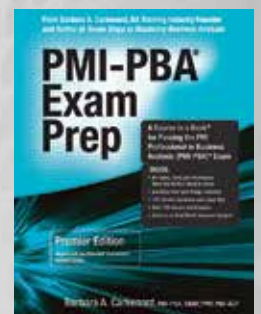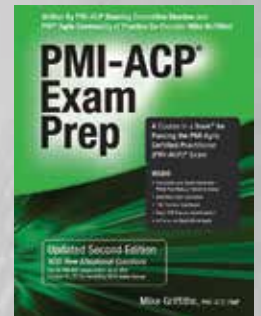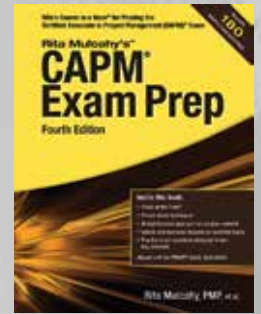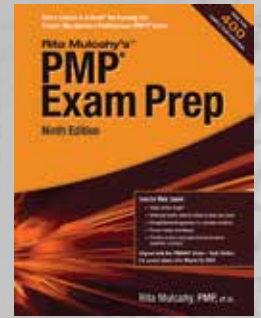
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for the second pass, and the rest of the time for the third pass (first pass: easy, second pass: more difficult or time consuming, third pass: hard).
- Bring an aggressive but realistic attitude to the test.
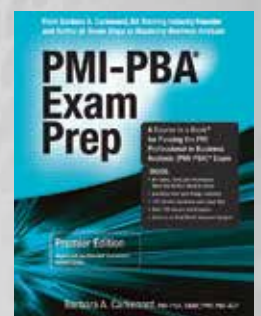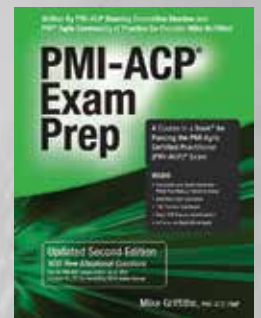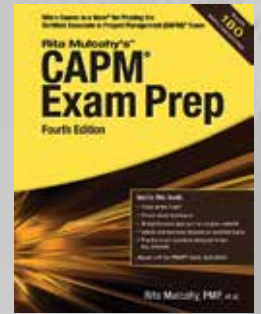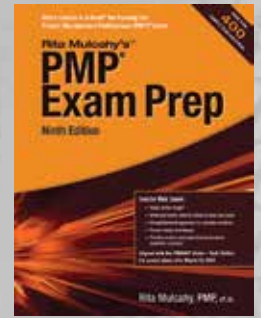
During the exam

- Focus on the test. All the things you need are on the download sheet. If you encounter some hard questions, easier ones are coming.
- Focus on one question at a time, totally concentrating on the one on the screen in front of you. You can go back to the others later.
- Figure out the topic for each question, to put it in the proper perspective.
- Remember the three-pass rule. Do not spend too much time on a question on the first pass; instead, mark it and move on.
- If the test feels more difficult than you anticipated, focus on just doing your best.
- There WILL be questions you cannot answer; expect it, and move on.
- Do not change answers without PROOF you made a mistake. Between 70 and 80 percent of the time, your first "gut feel" is correct.
- Avoid worrying about time. I know this is hard with the stupid clock in the upper right hand corner ticking away. Ask for a post-it note to cover it if it bothers you.
- If you become anxious, visualize a calm, soothing scene, or better yet, visualize seeing "you passed" on the screen.
- As you begin to reread, or if you find it difficult to concentrate, practice relaxation and stretching techniques. Who cares what the person next to you thinks? You will be a PMP, and they won't. Stand up, loosen up, bend over—all the stuff you practiced during your practice tests!
- Have energy snacks available to eat during the test BEFORE you get tired. It takes time for them to work, so do not wait until you need them to use them. They can be stored on top of the locker or behind the front desk (as required by the test center; ask ahead).
- Think of the test as a game. Do your best.

Some Key PMI-isms

- Memorization is not the key; understanding is.
- Identify and fill gaps using the PMP® Exam Prep book and PM FASTrack®.
- You do not "figure it out as you go." You plan ahead and make it happen correctly, according to the plan.
- You must have metrics to know where you are and how far you are from the plan.
- Ensure changes go through a process to make sure only approved changes make it into the plan.
- Use control limits, and refine them as needed.
- Search for the root causes of problems.
- Check your work as you go. Do not wait until the end.

I hope this helps you feel more confident and less stressed about taking the PMP exam. Please let RMC Project Management know if you have any thoughts or experiences we can share with others, helping them as well.

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