10 THINGS YOU SHOULD DO
BEFORE YOUR CDL KNOWLEDGE EXAM

By Andrei Zakhareuski

driving-tests.org
Since we started Driving-Tests in 2010, we’ve heard from tens of thousands of recent test-takers who told us a lot about how their official knowledge exams went.

Many people do their best but still get to the DMV overconfident and underprepared because they fail to do some of the simple things that would allow them to pass easily. What we noticed was a discernible pattern behind the success of those who passed on their first try. If you do those same things, you will have a much better chance of passing your knowledge test, too.

What follows are the ten steps that we believe every aspiring commercial driver should take to prepare for his or her official knowledge exams.

Roughly half of aspiring commercial drivers fail the CDL general knowledge exam on their first try. If you want to dramatically improve your odds of passing, subscribe to our Premium program, which guarantees that you’ll pass the first time. We’d love to help you be fully prepared and confident when you take your knowledge exams.

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Get things in order
Before the knowledge exam, gather everything you’ll need to provide to the DMV for your Commercial Learner Permit (CLP) or Commercial Driver License (CDL). (Some endorsement tests you may take when you apply for a CLP. However, you may only take the Hazardous Materials test when you apply for a CDL or after you obtain one.)

States usually require you to provide **at least the following items**:

- Proof of your identity
- Your Social Security number or (if you’re not a US citizen) proof of ineligibility for one
- Proof of your citizenship or (if you’re not a US citizen) your permanent legal presence in the United States
- Proof of your residency in the state
- Your non-commercial driver’s license (if you’re applying for a CLP) or your CLP (if you’re applying for a CDL)
- Self-certification of commerce (interstate or intrastate; excepted or non-excepted status)
- Your medical documentation (though probably not for excepted commerce): Medical Examiner Certificate (DOT medical card) and any medical variance documents
- A completed application for a CLP or CDL

In some states, you may be able to submit some items before you apply for your CLP or CDL. You may be able to mail or fax your DOT medical card to the DMV. Also, some states now allow you to self-certify online by getting an appropriate account on the DMV’s website. The other items you will have to take with you.

If you’ve had a driver’s license from another state within the past ten years, you will probably also have to submit to a ten-year background check of your driving record with that license.
Do you intend to take the **Hazardous Materials** knowledge test? If so, be aware that for a Hazardous Materials (H) endorsement or a Tank Vehicle and Hazardous Materials (X) endorsement, you must be fingerprinted and pass a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) security threat assessment (background records check). That can take some time, so you should **start the assessment process at least 30 days before you apply for a CDL** to allow adequate time for the process to be completed. Note also that in most states, you will be fingerprinted at a TSA-approved application center, not at a DMV office.

Don't forget to take your eyeglasses or contact lenses with you for the vision screening.

Check your state's official CDL manual or the DMV's website to find out just which items you are required to provide before or when you apply for a CLP or CDL. Then collect those items so you can provide them all as you're required to.
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Prepare your mind and your body
If you don’t feel your best, you may not do your best. Although it may sound like common sense, you’d be surprised how many people ignore this obvious point. It never fails, does it! Just as a significant event (like taking the knowledge test) is about to occur, you get a bad cold or the flu or a severe migraine headache. Be honest with yourself: Can you still perform at your best? If not, consider postponing the knowledge exam. In many states, if you fail a knowledge exam, you must wait a certain amount of time before you may attempt it again. Hence, postponing the knowledge exam may not delay you any more than failing the exam would.

The night before the knowledge exam, make sure to get enough sleep. Do yourself a favor and say no to partying the night before your test. One study has found that going without sleep for 24 hours can impair your judgment, memory, and powers of concentration as much as being legally intoxicated! If you wouldn’t take the knowledge exam while you’re drunk, don’t take the exam without enough sleep either. The night before the exam, avoid stressing or stimulating yourself with suspenseful TV shows, exciting movies, video games, heated arguments on social media, or even the CDL manual. Resting your mind will benefit you much more than cramming all night. When you go to bed, go to sleep. Sleep. Not watch TV or listen to the news.

Finally, set your alarm clock so you’ll wake up a couple of hours before the knowledge exam. There are a couple of other things you should do before the exam.
Start your day off right
If you’ve taken the previous step, you should be well rested and awake this morning. Now start your day off right.

**Have a well-balanced, protein-packed breakfast**

Have a well-balanced, protein-packed breakfast to fuel your mind and body for the knowledge exam. But be careful with stimulants like caffeinated beverages. Too much caffeine can make you too jittery to concentrate. Instead, consider doing some mild, non-exhausting exercise to keep the blood flow surging to your brain.

Exercise can also help dissipate the nervousness that virtually everyone feels just before an important exam. However, if you’ve found that test anxiety causes you to freeze up and your mind to go blank during an exam, consider learning some relaxation techniques such as meditation or even seeking professional counseling before your knowledge exam is scheduled.

In short, pamper yourself and don’t take on anything that may add to your stress level. Try to avoid other sources of stress at this time so you can focus on passing the knowledge test.

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Review your training materials one last time
Take one last quick look at your state’s official CDL manual to refresh your memory, especially of the topics you found trickiest.

The CDL manual includes a tremendous amount of information. You may wonder, How am I supposed to remember all this?

The good news is that you probably don’t need to study it all. Some sections of the CDL manual apply only to certain CDL classes or endorsements. (For example, if you’re not going to be driving passenger vehicles commercially, you don’t have to study the sections on passenger vehicles or school buses.) Somewhere near the front of the manual, there should be guidance on which sections you must study for the CDL class and endorsements that you want.

As for the sections that you must study, you can often figure out the correct driving technique to use in a given instance. However, you’ll probably have to memorize specific, often numerical facts such as the various hazardous material class definitions, the rules on following distance and numbers of tie-downs, where to place your warning devices if you must stop your commercial vehicle on the road, and so on.
While you are scanning through the sections of the manual for the CDL class and endorsements you wish to obtain, jot down such specific facts. By the time that you are done scanning these sections, you will have compiled a list of the facts that are usually the hardest to remember. If you need to refresh your memory, you can go through the list rather than the entire manual again.

The pre-trip inspection process for commercial vehicles and the coupling and uncoupling processes for combination vehicles are complex. There are many steps to perform, and you should perform them in a particular order. Instead of just trying to memorize a seemingly arbitrary sequence of steps, try to learn and remember why you must do these steps in a certain order. What might go wrong otherwise?

As a simple example, when you couple a tractor-semitrailer, doesn’t it make sense to lock the trailer brakes before you try to back the tractor under the trailer? And before you try to lock the trailer brakes, doesn’t it also make sense to first make sure that the trailer brakes are working correctly? (And how do you do that?) What things might go wrong otherwise?

Acting out the steps in order rather than just reading about them will help you remember them. You can even do this at home. Imagine that there’s a truck sitting right in your living room. Act out the steps involved in inspecting this imaginary truck and preparing to drive it. Walk around it, check each item, and so on. (If the actors in “Jurassic Park” could pretend that there was an actual live dinosaur in front of them, you can pretend that there’s an actual truck in front of you. And you don’t have to worry about being criticized for bad acting!) Explaining the sequence of steps to a friend or relative will also help you remember the steps.
There are many vehicle components involved in the inspection process, the coupling process, and other procedures. You may find that it’s easier to remember what each component does if you can see what it looks like and how it operates. Some states’ CDL manuals are better illustrated than others. If a component lacks an illustration, search the Internet for a picture of it. You may even find a video on YouTube that shows how the component works.

When you think you’ve done enough studying, take our permit practice tests to evaluate your understanding of general commercial driving, air brakes, or those specialized subjects requiring endorsements. If you’re dissatisfied with your performance on these practice tests, don’t get discouraged. Note which questions you missed and resolve to study those topics some more.
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Wear appropriate clothing for the knowledge exam
You don’t want to become chilled or overheated during the knowledge test; either one can make you drowsy. Dress in comfortable clothing that is appropriate for the ambient temperature. Pick out a comfortable outfit that isn’t constricting or annoying to sit in for long periods. You might as well look presentable too because once you meet all the requirements for a CLP or CDL, you’ll have to have your picture taken for it.

Don’t forget to take your state’s required items with you. And go to the bathroom just before the knowledge exam starts so you won’t have to later.

Now it’s time for the knowledge test – but there are some important steps you should take there as well.

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Read each exam question intelligently
Your eyes and mind work at different speeds. If you rush through a question, you might pick the wrong answer. No matter how simple the questions seem, be sure to read each one at least twice while keeping the following tips in mind.

Look out for negatives. These are keywords like “avoid,” “except,” or “not” that can invert the sense of the question. If you fail to spot these, you might interpret the question backward and choose a wrong answer.

You may encounter a question that appears to have two correct answers. What should you do? Logically, one answer must be better or more complete than the other one. Don't rush to pick the first plausible choice you find. There may be more than one plausible choice, but the correct answer is the best or most complete answer. Find a reason to prefer one answer over the other. Try to critique both answers. Is there a situation for which one answer is less appropriate than the other?

Watch for “All of the above” choices. If “All of the above” is true, then all the other choices are also true! If you don't notice the “All of the above” choice, you may pick one of the other true choices even though “All of the above” is the most complete answer.
Use the process of elimination
If you don’t know the correct answer to a test question, use the process of elimination to eliminate choices that you know are wrong and then make an educated guess from the remaining choices.

A test question may include one ridiculous or outlier choice, intended to catch test takers who guess completely randomly. Quickly identify and eliminate that choice.

For example, here is a question on accidents from some of our CDL practice tests:

**What can you do at an accident scene to help avoid another accident?**

1. Stay in your vehicle and do nothing until help arrives.
2. Set out warning devices to keep other vehicles from running into the accident scene.
3. Have a drink to calm your nerves.
4. Leave your vehicle, do nothing, and get to higher ground.

This question has four answer choices. However, choice (3) is clearly absurd. Eliminate this choice immediately.

If there are four choices and you can eliminate two of them, your chance of guessing correctly will rise from one in four to one in two. In the above question, choice (4) is only slightly less absurd than choice (3). From your experience as a car driver, you already know that leaving the scene of an accident is illegal. Eliminate choice (4) too. Hence, the correct answer is either choice (1) or choice (2).
Note that if “All of the above” is one of the choices, you can eliminate it if you can eliminate at least one other choice as incorrect. (And similarly for “None of the above.”)

For example, here is a question on backing from some of our CDL practice tests:

**Why is it important to use a helper when backing?**

1. Because you have blind spots
2. Because people feel more comfortable when you do
3. Because you are providing a job for someone else
4. For all of the above reasons

Choice (3) is the absurd choice here, so it can be eliminated immediately. (Unless you’re the boss of your organization, you’re not the one providing jobs to people.) Now you can eliminate choice (4) as well, meaning that the correct answer is either choice (1) or choice (2).
Take your best guess if necessary
If you still don't know the answer even after applying the process of elimination, don't get rattled or panicky. You don't have to get a perfect score to pass the knowledge exam.

If you're allowed to skip the question and come back to it later, go ahead and do so, making a mental note to return to it. As you're answering other questions on related topics, the correct answer to the skipped question may occur to you. If not, then after you've eliminated as many wrong choices as possible from that question, calmly take your best guess from the remaining choices and move on to the next question.
Double-check your answers
When you do know the correct answer to a question, select that answer. Before you move on to the next question, however, take a deep breath and double-check that you indeed selected that answer.

When a person is under pressure, he or she may accidentally pick the wrong choice even though he or she knows which choice is right.
Believe in yourself
Be confident in your ability to handle the challenge of passing the knowledge test. In fact, believing in yourself is necessary to succeed in handling any challenge!

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If you have done everything you could to prepare for your knowledge test, revel in thinking positively. Be proud of yourself for having prepared so well, and visualize yourself happily walking out of the testing facility after having passed the knowledge test with a high score. Remember, you can do it!

You’re on your way!

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Add these 10 things to your CDL knowledge exam preparation plan, and you will see results. Sign up for CDL Premium, and you’ll see even more. In fact, we guarantee that you’ll pass. We’d love to help you be fully prepared and confident when it’s time for you to take the exam.

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CDL Premium member from West Virginia

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Driver Services, Program Manager,
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Register Today

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