

Navigating the CPA exam: An unconventional guide to endurance, dedication, and success

by Blake Carroll, CPA-NC

The journey to becoming a licensed CPA is one of the most challenging professional goals a person can pursue. It's an exam that tests not just knowledge but resilience, adaptability, and a deep well of commitment. For many, the CPA exam can feel like an endless mountain to climb. Every candidate will have moments of doubt, fatigue, and frustration mixed with glimpses of progress and excitement.

Still, one thing that often goes unsaid is passing the CPA exam isn't just about intelligence. Sure, knowing the material is important, but far more significant is the ability to endure and persist, to stay committed to your plan, even when it feels like progress is slow or obstacles appear insurmountable. In that way, the CPA exam isn't just a test of book smarts but also a test of grit. It's about how you manage yourself through the hard times, and there will be hard times. You must ask yourself how willing are you to persist when you're tired, burnt out, or unsure of success.

Redefining success: It's not all about passing quickly

There's an unspoken belief among CPA candidates that can be harmful: the idea that the faster you pass, the better. That you must try to pass as quickly as you can. We see this reinforced through the success stories we read online – stories of candidates passing all four parts in six months or less. It creates a false narrative that if you don't pass quickly, you're somehow falling short, or you are behind. But success is far more nuanced than that.

The truth is, how long it takes to become a CPA doesn't define the quality of the CPA you'll become, at all. In fact, some of the most competent and confident CPAs didn't pass the exam in record time. They had to do several retakes of multiple different sections. What truly matters is that you keep going, no matter the obstacles. In the grand scheme of your career and your life, no one will care if you passed the exam in six months or two years or even longer. No one will care what your scores were. What matters is that you took the lessons learned during the process and applied them in your professional life, and even your personal life too.

It's essential to view the exam as part of a broader personal growth and development journey, not just a credential you need to achieve. While passing quickly might sound ideal, the deeper benefit comes from the persistence, discipline, and problem-solving skills you develop along the way.

Embracing the long game: A marathon, not a sprint

Think of the CPA exam like a marathon, not a sprint. While it's important to train and prepare, the key to finishing the race isn't speed – it's stamina and endurance. You can't sprint through 26.2 miles. In the same way, the CPA exam is about pacing yourself, managing your energy, and understanding that not every day will be perfect. You can't sprint through all four sections.

Too often, candidates burn out by cramming and pushing themselves too hard, too soon. What they don't realize is that the CPA exam rewards consistency over intensity. Success comes from setting realistic, achievable study goals, and sticking to

them day after day, week after week. The small steps you take consistently add up over time, and eventually, you'll cross the finish line. The best study plan is the one you can actually do consistently.

When you're studying, it's easy to get overwhelmed by the amount of material you need to cover. You might feel like there's too much to learn and not enough time. When that happens, you are much more likely to procrastinate because you think there's so much to do, what difference would today even make? But instead of focusing on the enormity of the task, break it down into manageable chunks. Aim to master one topic at a time one day at a time. By breaking the material into smaller sections, you'll find that your confidence grows as you make incremental progress. Each step forward, however small, is a win and deserving of recognition.

Managing your mindset and developing mental toughness

One of the most important yet overlooked aspects of CPA exam preparation is mental toughness. The exam is designed to challenge you, and there will be days when you feel defeated or like there is no way you will be able to pass. You'll face difficult questions, encounter topics that don't click right away, and possibly even fail a section after months of hard work. On average most candidates take six or seven total attempts, which means you will fail a section 2 to 3 times. That is just on average, so for half of candidates it will be even more! We need to normalize failing a section, instead of treating it like a sign that you cannot pass.

This is where mindset becomes crucial. Success in the CPA exam isn't about avoiding failure; it's about how you respond to setbacks and failure because they are unavoidable. Candidates who ultimately succeed are those who see failure not as an endpoint or an indictment, but as part of the process. They recognize that a failed section isn't a reflection of their potential but an opportunity to regroup, reassess, and come back stronger.

Building mental toughness is about training your mind to stay focused and resilient, even in the face of challenges. It's about adopting a growth mindset – one that says, “I may not have mastered this yet, but I will.” Everything is figure-out-able with enough time and effort! When you encounter tough material or feel overwhelmed, remind yourself that struggle is part of learning. Every CPA candidate has felt the same frustration, but those who pass are the ones who push through it.

How flexibility and adaptability lead to success

One of the most critical shifts that CPA candidates need to make is letting go of rigid timelines. Many candidates set arbitrary deadlines for themselves— “I'll pass all four sections in this many months,” or “I need to pass before the end of this year.” While setting goals is important, an inflexible mindset can lead to unnecessary pressure and anxiety, which can hurt your overall performance.

Think of your CPA journey like building a solid foundation for a house. The time and care you invest upfront in laying down each brick makes all the difference in how tall and sturdy the final structure will be. If you rush through the foundation because of some self-imposed deadline, the risk of it crumbling later is much higher. The same principle applies to your CPA exam preparation. You need time to fully grasp the

concepts, practice questions, and, most importantly, allow the material to settle into your long-term memory so that you can recall and apply it on test day.

This is where adaptability becomes your greatest asset. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you'll find yourself feeling unprepared or mentally drained as your exam date approaches. In these moments, you need to ask yourself: "Am I taking this exam because I'm ready, or because it's the date I set months ago? Is there any real reason why I can't push back?"

Remember, this exam is designed to challenge you. It's not supposed to be easy. So if you feel like you're not making progress as quickly as you'd hoped, that's completely normal. The candidates who succeed are the ones who give themselves permission to slow down when needed, even if that means rescheduling an exam date. Rushing leads to superficial understanding, which is risky because you won't have the deep comprehension needed to tackle challenging questions.

Being able to push back your test date isn't a sign of failure or lack of commitment. Quite the opposite—it's a demonstration of self-awareness and wisdom. You're acknowledging that your long-term success is more important than sticking to a short-term schedule. This flexibility even gives you a better chance to pass, rather than risking burnout or anxiety or a failing score by forcing yourself to take the exam when you're not ready.

Candidates often fall into the trap of thinking they must stick to their initial study plan no matter what. This kind of rigidity can become an obstacle because life happens. Unexpected events, work commitments, or personal issues can derail your progress, and that's okay. Every candidate will deal with that. The key is not to judge yourself harshly for needing more time, but to see these delays as opportunities to refine your approach. A flexible mindset keeps you focused on the ultimate goal of passing, without letting arbitrary deadlines undermine your efforts.

The power of a growth mindset: Turning setbacks into learning opportunities

A core element of the CPA journey is adopting a growth mindset. With this perspective, you understand that ability and intelligence aren't fixed qualities—they can be developed with time, effort, and perseverance. This mindset is crucial because, as you progress through your CPA exam, there will inevitably be setbacks. Maybe you fail a section. Maybe you have to postpone an exam. These challenges are not reflections of your potential; they're learning opportunities.

Every candidate experiences moments of self-doubt, but those with a growth mindset view these moments as part of the process, not as indicators of failure. When you stumble, you don't see it as a permanent state. Instead, you ask, "What can I learn from this? How can I improve?"

The key is to keep your focus on the long-term outcome rather than getting discouraged by short-term results. After all, not everyone becomes a successful CPA because they passed all four sections without a hitch. They become successful because they learned from every challenge, improved along the way, and stayed committed to the end goal.

Self-care: An overlooked key to success

Amid all the study schedules, flashcards, and practice exams, one aspect of CPA exam prep often gets overlooked: self-care. But maintaining your mental, physical,

and emotional health during this process is just as important as understanding the material itself.

It's easy to fall into the trap of studying endlessly, thinking that more hours equals better results. However, burnout is real, and it can sabotage your progress faster than you realize. To avoid this, make self-care a non-negotiable part of your routine. Take regular breaks, prioritize sleep, and try to stay active. Think about what types of studying you can do while you walk so you're not sitting in a chair all day! These practices aren't distractions that take away from studying; they're essential for maintaining the mental clarity and energy needed to retain information and perform well on exam day.

Incorporating activities that help you recharge is equally important. Whether it's exercising, spending time with loved ones, or practicing mindfulness, these moments of relaxation will help you stay focused and energized when it's time to study.

The role of support systems

Another critical factor in your success is having a strong support system. Whether it's family, friends, coaches, or an online study group, having people who understand your goals and can offer encouragement will make the journey more manageable.

CPA exam prep can feel isolating at times. You'll spend countless hours studying alone, and it's easy to forget that others are going through the same process. Connecting with fellow candidates can offer a sense of community. You can share study tips, celebrate milestones, and lift each other up when motivation wanes.

Moreover, don't hesitate to lean on your support network during tough times. Let your family or friends know when you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed. Sometimes, just talking about your frustrations can help you reset and find the motivation to keep going.

Preparing for exam day: The final push

As exam day approaches, the final phase of preparation is about refining your strategy. At this point, you should have a strong grasp of the material, but it's equally important to know how to manage your time and stress during the exam itself.

Practice exams are invaluable for this reason. They not only help you test your knowledge but also give you a sense of how to pace yourself. Time management is key. You don't want to rush through questions because that makes it so much more likely you will make a silly or avoidable mistake from going too fast. But you also can't afford to get stuck on one problem for too long. There is an ideal middle ground you need to get used to. Practicing under timed conditions will help you develop an internal clock and improve your ability to make quick decisions when needed.

On exam day, trust in your preparation. You've put in the hours, and you're ready for this. Go into the exam with confidence, knowing that you're not expected to get every question right. You don't have to get an A; you just need to pass. The CPA exam is designed to challenge you, but you don't need a perfect score. Stay calm, focused, and resilient because you think so much more clearly when you are in that state. Remember, this is just one step in a much larger career journey. Don't put too much pressure on yourself!

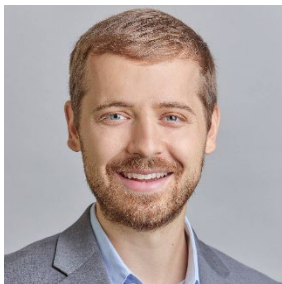
Post-exam reflection: Learning from the process

Once you've completed all four sections of the exam, take time to reflect on the

experience –after you celebrate! The CPA exam is more than just a test. It’s a transformative process that teaches valuable skills like discipline, resilience, and time management. Regardless of how long it took or how many obstacles you faced, you’ve emerged stronger and better prepared for the challenges of your career.

So, give yourself credit. This was not easy! Not everyone can do this! Passing the CPA exam is a monumental achievement, and it’s a testament to your ability to persevere in the face of adversity. Whether you passed all sections on the first try or needed several attempts, you’ve proven that you have the endurance and dedication required to succeed in this demanding profession.

Now, as you move forward in your career, remember the lessons you’ve learned during this journey. The same qualities that helped you pass the CPA exam – resilience, mental toughness, and a commitment to long-term goals – will serve you well in whatever challenges come next. When you are faced with difficulties in the future, you can think back to this process as a huge source of encouragement and self-belief that you are capable of greatness!



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