

THE CREDENTIAL EXAM: DON'T SWEAT IT ... NAIL IT!

By Terrance Malloy, RPSGT, RST

"A goal without a plan is a wish" — Antoine de Saint-Exupery

A sleep technologist credential, whether registered polysomnographic technologist (RPSGT) or registered sleep technologist (RST), is a validation of knowledge, experience and professional judgment; often a requirement for employment and certainly for advancing your profession.

Whether you are anticipating taking the exam for the first time, retaking it after coming up short on your score or to maintain your existing credential, or are in a senior position with newer technicians looking to you for guidance, an exam preparation plan is the key to success. "Exams don't always test a person's true knowledge, because some people with equivalent levels of knowledge can perform differently on the same test. Some people are good 'test takers', and could easily pass an exam without the same knowledge as someone who has worked hard and studied hard to pass the exam. To become a better test-taker, familiarize yourself with the exam, develop a written study plan and utilize study guides and practice exams," says Marietta B. Bibbs, BA, RPSGT, CCSH, current American Association of Sleep Technologists (AAST) board director, past president of the BRPT and past chair of the Board of Registered Polysomnographic Technologists (BRPT) Exam Development Committee.

PREPARATION

The importance of learning about the exam content cannot be overstated. Colleagues can tell you about their exam experience and what they remember of the content, but a careful and thorough reading about the exam and review of the content outline from the examining board should be considered a first step to success.

Candidate handbooks and board study guides exist to help you succeed. They include an exam overview, eligibility requirements and application procedures. Carefully read the section about scheduling, rescheduling, and cancellation requirements. Just as carefully, read the section regarding the day of the exam.

The exam blueprint will help you to understand the broad content areas and their percentage emphasis on the exam. Don't be frustrated by what may appear to be vague descriptions of the content; take it as an overview and let the percentage emphasis help to guide your study plan. Consider whether an area has a relatively small or large percentage emphasis and reflect on your knowledge and experience with that content area. Plan more study time for those areas in the exam blueprint that cover the largest percentage of the test.

Think about exam content areas that cover procedures that are not part of your regular work, such as Multiple Sleep Latency Test (MSLT), Maintenance of Wakefulness Test (MWT), Home Sleep Apnea Testing (HSAT), polysomnogram (PSG) report calculations and sleep stage and event graphic summary interpretations. There may be sections that list terms/abbreviations that you should be familiar with. Begin reviewing these lists and checking off terms that you know and highlighting for study the ones you don't.

Gather your study resources. Your sleep center or colleagues may have textbooks or review materials. Consider the purchase of the board study guide as a wise addition to the handbook review. Give preference to the references listed in the exam handbook and consider study of American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) and AAST guidelines a must. Focus on the AASM Practice Parameters and the Clinical Guidelines that cover technical procedures and positive airway pressure (PAP) titration. Titration protocols and practices vary between even accredited sleep centers and the exam will be based on these guidelines — not your sleep center protocol.

TIME MANAGEMENT

This is a critical part of your planning and requires a realistic examination of your daily/weekly schedule. At this point in your life, you likely have many demands on your time. Work, family, exercise and of course ... sleep. Make a realistic goal date for taking the exam and plan each week up to that date. Help your family and friends understand your goal and plan. When and where you study should match testing time of day and conditions. If necessary, make appointments to meet your mind in a study location for a specific period of time. Treat it as a work meeting. If you're easily drawn to your smartphone, leave it out of the study session. Schedule time away from other distractions; family, TV and work.



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MENTAL CONDITIONING

Unless you're taking the exam right after completing a formal education course, you've probably got some mental conditioning to do. If your daily exercise consists of walking the stairs at work or even a 45 minute workout, you wouldn't expect to be able to do well on a 10 K run or an intense bootcamp workout. The exam requires 3-4 hours of concentration. The last 50 questions are no easier than the previous 150. Part of your plan should include gradually increasing the time of each study session.

THE DAY OF THE EXAM

Carefully review the information in the handbook about the day of the exam. It should be obvious that you shouldn't schedule the exam for the morning after you work. Get a good night's sleep, eat a healthy breakfast, limit or avoid caffeine and be sure to hydrate. Food and drink won't be allowed, but you may be able to take in some chewing gum. Bathroom breaks are permitted and can help you mentally refresh after an hour or two.

SO... WHAT IF YOU DIDN'T "NAIL IT"?

"Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor" - Truman Capote

If you didn't pass the exam, you're in good company. Since the BRPT credential was first awarded in 1979, thousands of now-RPSGTs failed to pass the exam on their first attempt. Take a brief step away and then mentally review the process, taking notes to guide your next attempt. Decide on a realistic date for retesting and review the first part of this article. What can you improve on? Did you have a written plan or just a goal? Did you rely on one reference book because it worked for your co-worker? Did you carefully study the AASM/AAST guidelines?

"The first time I took the exam, I was sure I would pass because I felt I had prepared well. There were questions that I never expected and to my shock, I failed. I had depended on my experience and lab protocols. I learned that there are procedures and published guidelines, not used in my lab. I focused on them, retook the exam and passed easily," says Raafat Kashlan, RPSGT, Milwaukee, Wis.

Obtaining the RPSGT or RST credential is a necessary and important goal and a very significant achievement. Planning carefully for your exam and focusing on your plan will greatly increase your chances of saying "I nailed it!" ❖

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