



Professor Messer's  
**CompTIA**  
Exam Hacks  
A+ ▪ Network+ ▪ Security+

James "Professor" Messer

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by James "Professor" Messer



<http://www.ProfessorMesser.com>

## **Professor Messer's CompTIA Exam Hacks**

Written by James "Professor" Messer

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## About the Author

James “Professor” Messer is a network expert, security engineer, and the creator of Professor Messer's A+, Network+, and Security+ training courses. Professor Messer has completed over twenty-five IT certification exams in his career, including the CompTIA A+, Network+, and Security+ certifications. He has also helped hundreds of thousands of people around the world study for their IT certifications from his web site at [ProfessorMesser.com](http://ProfessorMesser.com), and his training videos have been viewed over 90 million times on YouTube.

# Introduction

## What is an Exam Hack?

In my career, I've taken (and passed, thank you very much) a lot of information technology certification exams. In all, I've completed over twenty-five tests and approximately one million multiple choice questions. Well, it seemed like a million.

After completing a few of these tests, I started to notice some trends. Regardless of the exam I was taking, there were similarities in the study process, the test preparation, and the actual testing experience.

Most CompTIA study materials discuss the technical exam details regarding technologies, use cases, procedures, and the other various exam objectives. However, some of the most important parts of the exams aren't covered in any of these training courses.

This book is an effort to give you all of the information that you won't find in those technical guides. Make sure you study the official exam objectives, but also include these life hacks to help you prepare, study, and pass your CompTIA certification exam.

I've spent my career in IT, and I'm proof that information technology can provide you with job security, financial success, and a great life for you and your family. Good studies!

- Professor Messer



# Exam Prep Hacks

A passing score on a CompTIA exam doesn't happen accidentally. The long road between study and exam will include many different study techniques, and these hacks will help you prepare now for your future success.





# Hack #1: Get the Exam Objectives

If you've ever taken a certification exam before, then you know that most certification providers will provide an outline that includes a high-level overview of what the exam will cover. For the CompTIA exams, these exam objectives are very different than what you may have found from other companies. CompTIA provides an extensive list of every possible topic that might be covered on the exam, and they make them available for FREE.

You can follow this link to download the latest CompTIA Exam Objectives:



CompTIA Exam Objectives

<https://www.professormesser.com/objectives/>

These exam objectives should be the first thing you download for your studies, and they make a perfect checklist to help guide your learning process. The Exam Objectives for a single CompTIA exam are about twenty pages long and include topics summarized by domain, a list of important acronyms, and a recommendation of useful hardware and software for your lab. As you finish up your studies, you can use these objectives as a checklist to see which topics may need a bit more work.

Although CompTIA mentions that these Exam Objectives may not include all topics covered on the actual exam, my experience has found that the exam questions stay very close to this list. If you know everything listed in the Exam Objectives, you'll do just fine on your exam.

## Hack #2: Use the Right Study Resources

There are never any shortcuts when studying for a certification, and you never want to walk into the exam room without the best possible chance for passing the exam. Different types of study resources allow you to learn the material in different ways, and combining these resources together can often make a huge difference in your final score. If you're on this journey to earn your CompTIA certification, you'll need to make sure you have the right resources at your fingertips.

- Watch training videos - All of my CompTIA training videos are available to watch online for free without any paywall or registration. Even if you don't use my video courses, watching someone else step through these exam concepts can make a big difference in understanding some of the important nuances and concepts.
- Get a good book - With certification books, the term "good" can be very subjective. Different books will appeal to different people, so it's useful to read through a few different options online and see which books may appeal to your personal tastes. I've listed a few options on my recommendations page, located from the main menu of my site:



Professor Messer's Study Recommendations

<https://www.professormesser.com/>

- Test yourself - One of the best ways to see if you've learned the material is to try some Q&A with some sample exams. Some of these exams may be in book form or in a browser, but it really doesn't matter which format you use.

It's important to get practice questions right, but it's also important to understand why you got a question wrong. If you aren't recognizing some of the answers or you need more help with a particular topic, make a note and review those topics with your videos and books.

**Warning!** The quality of free online tests can vary widely! Make sure that you're using trusted resources.

- Get plenty of hands-on - There's something about hands-on lab work that can really broaden your understanding of a topic. Maybe it's the physical link between the keyboard and our brains, or perhaps performing your own command line functions and network utilities help create an experience that's difficult to forget. Regardless of the reason, getting hands-on time can decrease your study time and make a big difference with your final exam score.

## Hack #3: Do Some Recon

Not all testing centers are alike, and some testing centers might actually work against you during the exam. On one of my certification exam attempts, I entered a small office on the second story of a run-down building to find that the testing “room” was literally a three-foot square closet. Inside the closet was a small desk with a monitor, keyboard, and mouse, and they had removed the closet door so my chair could be more easily pushed up to the edge of the desk. I managed to pass that certification exam, but taking the test in a literal closet put me at a significant disadvantage from the very beginning.

If possible, you should always visit your testing center prior to booking the exam. If the exam center is in your area, it’s worth your time to stop by and see the overall facilities and the testing room for yourself. Is the center easy to locate? Is parking available? How private are the testing stations? All of these questions and your overall impression of the testing center will be important on the day of the exam.

## Hack #4: BYOM (Bring Your Own Marker)

In years past, you were given paper and a pencil when entering the exam room. This provided the exam taker with a convenient way to take notes, perform calculations, and write anything else that might come to mind in the testing room. The testing companies found that having paper made it too easy for information to leave the testing center, so they now provide a single page of laminated paper and the pages are cleaned after each exam.

To use these laminated pages, the testing centers also provide a dry erase marker. Unfortunately, the markers used by many of these centers have large chiseled tips or have been worn into a flat, wide tip. These markers work great if you're building a poster for a football game, but they're useless for any type of note taking during the exam.

I've had great success by using my own fine-tip dry erase markers on the exam. You have to clear the markers with the exam proctor, but most of them can appreciate the use of a proper writing utensil for the exam. This is something that has to be approved by the exam proctor, so it's worth a call before the exam to verify that you can use your own fine-tipped dry erase marker.

Important! Make sure you use a DRY ERASE marker. You don't want to use a permanent marker on their laminated writing page.

If they say they already have dry erase markers that are perfectly suited for the exam, bring yours anyway. Trust me on this one.

## Hack #5: Schedule Your Exam NOW

It's human nature to wait until the very last minute to complete important tasks. A single CompTIA exam, however, can take months of dedicated study before someone might be ready to take the test. To help increase the urgency of this process, some folks like to purchase a voucher and schedule their exam for a future date. With this date “locked in” and written on the calendar, there’s often more motivation to get through the material before the exam date arrives.

In practical terms, the exam date can always be rescheduled more than 24-hours before the scheduled date and time. However, just knowing that a financial investment has already been made and a slot has been selected can be enough of a catalyst to power through the exam studies and prepare for exam day. This exam hack is more of a personal preference, but it can sometimes make the difference when some additional motivation is needed.

# Exam Day Hacks

All of your preparation has brought you to exam day. The goal of these exam day hacks is to put you into the exam room with the best mindset to maximize your score.





## Hack #6: Take Care of You

On exam day, you need to be the best version of you. On the evening before, you should eat well and schedule yourself a quiet night in to make sure you get plenty of sleep. Before your exam, make sure you have eaten and that you have nothing else on your schedule immediately before or after your exam time. Your goal is to get the highest score possible on the exam, and sometimes external forces can create a conflict with that goal. If you plan ahead, you'll be calm, cool, and collected when exam time arrives.

## Hack #7: Be the Early Bird

On the day of the exam, make sure you're aware of the current weather situation. Both summer and winter storms can create travel problems, so check for traffic conditions in your area. If you've taken advantage of hack #3 and performed reconnaissance of the testing center, then you won't have any problem finding it on test day.

The exam center test schedules can vary widely. In busy geographies, every seat in the testing center may be allocated for the entire business day. In this tight scheduling situation, you don't want to miss your testing window and it makes sense to arrive as much as thirty minutes before your scheduled test time.

Even if your testing center is relatively slow and plenty of seats are available, planning to arrive early provides your psyche with some significant advantages. You might have the choice to start right away, or you may want to take the time to do some last minute studying in the waiting area.

Self-Serving tip: The Professor Messer Course Notes PDF or book makes a perfect last minute study guide!

## Hack #8: Don't Lose Time

You want to be at your best during the exam, so make a restroom stop before checking in for your exam. This might appear to be an obvious hack, but exam day can bring some anxiety and sometimes even the most important things can be missed. Not taking advantage of this hack is something that I often hear as a common mistake from test takers, so it's worth mentioning here.

The problem becomes very clear once the exam has started. Leaving the room during the exam requires interaction from the proctor, and your exam clock doesn't stop while you're away from the desk. Remembering to take a bathroom break may seem trivial, but not following this hack can literally cost you the exam.



# Exam Room Hacks

Once the exam has started, the hacks become a bit more critical. These exam room hacks will help you get every last point out of your test.



## Hack #9: Don't be Thrown

Of all the hacks in this book, this one is probably the most difficult to follow. Once the exam begins, you have ninety minutes to complete all of the questions, and the exam will automatically end when the clock ticks down to zero. A timer will always be available at the top of the screen.

The first handful of questions on the exam are performance-based questions. These questions are very unlike multiple choice questions. They could be fill-in-the-blank, matching, command-line labs, drag-and-drop, or sorting. The performance-based questions have thrown test takers who weren't expecting such detailed and time-consuming questions right at the beginning of the exam, so don't let the clock eat away at your available time!



## Hack #10: Flag your Questions

This is one of my favorite hacks, and this simple technique has provided me with many exam points over the years. During the exam, you have the option to mark a question by clicking a check box at the top of the screen. When you look at the exam review screen, all of the marked questions will have the letter "M" next to them. You can then quickly select the marked questions for further review.

This allows for a few different exam strategies. My personal approach is to go through the questions as quickly as possible, and any questions that I'm not 100% certain of the answer will get marked. As you might expect, this will leave me with a very large list of marked questions after my first time through. However, I don't have to double check any questions that weren't marked, and I can quickly start narrowing down my review questions from there.

You might want to flag the really tough questions, or use the mark as a way to quickly return to the questions that you think you can answer correctly after some additional review. Either way, the option to flag the questions can be a useful strategy, and you should use it to your advantage during your exam.

## Hack #11: Use the Exam to Tell You the Answers

Wouldn't it be great if the exam would tell you the answers to the questions? For this hack, that's exactly what happens.

Many CompTIA exams present about 90 questions across all of the exam domains. That's a lot of questions, and some of those questions will sometimes reveal the answer to a different question, or a set of answers will jog your memory about an important fact related to a different question.

This can be especially helpful with the performance-based questions. My recommended strategy is to completely skip the performance-based questions at the beginning of the exam, and instead start the exam with the multiple-choice questions. Once I'm through the multiple-choice questions, I circle back to the performance-based questions and use the information from the multiple-choice questions to hopefully provide me with some additional hints or tips. With these additional details, it can often make it easier to get through the more extensive performance-based tasks.

This can also work the other direction, where the details in the performance-based questions can be used to help answer multiple-choice questions. Every exam is a random set of questions, so you won't know exactly what you'll be faced with until the exam starts.

## Hack #12: Fix Problems Immediately

Every exam center must conform to a standard set of requirements, but that still leaves a lot of different seating arrangements, testing room layouts, and construction soundproofing standards. Although it would be perfect if every exam center was as quiet as a library, this is rarely the case.

If you're in the middle of an exam and there are problems with noise or environmental issues, make sure the exam proctor is aware of these issues immediately. Do not wait until the exam is over to discuss any issues. Once your exam grade has been determined, it's too late to solve any problems. The exam center knows that a comfortable work environment is important, and they'll do everything they can to keep things quiet and comfortable.

Some exam centers will provide earplugs, especially if the exam rooms tend to be on the noisy side. It might also be a good idea to bring your own earplugs, as long as you make sure the exam proctor clears their use before going into the exam room.

## Hack #13: Answer Everything

We don't know a lot about the grading process that CompTIA uses. We believe that each question is worth a different number of points, but there's no way to know what those point values might be. The most pragmatic approach is to focus on doing well and hope that enough exam points go your way.

Based on some non-scientific analysis, we believe that incorrect answers on a CompTIA exam do not count against you. If you get a question wrong, they aren't going to take points away from your score. Obviously, incorrect answers also won't help your final results.

This means that correct answers provide you with exam points, and questions that you get correct with a guess will help your final score. If you find yourself short of time, you should quickly pick an answer for every multiple-choice question. If you get the question wrong it won't count against you, and you'll get points if you guess right!



# After-Exam Hacks

The exam is over, but there's still some work to be done.  
Don't forget this important hack before leaving the building.



## Hack #14: Check your Results

When your exam is complete, you'll be asked to answer some demographic questions, and then your final score will be revealed. If you've done everything right, then you'll see the congratulations screen. If you didn't make the cut, then you'll see that as well. Bummer.

Your results will be available on the Pearson VUE site immediately after your exam. If you were successful, then this online summary will be the validation of your passing score. If you didn't pass the exam, then this information documents the areas where you answered incorrectly.

These results contain valuable information for your studies! As you plan to retake your exam, you can use these results to help focus your studies. The areas marked as incorrect should be the first place you start when studying for the next exam.



# Final Thoughts

The CompTIA exams are tough, and I hope that some of these hacks will help you on your journey towards earning your CompTIA certification.

Thanks for reading, and best of luck with your CompTIA exam studies!



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