



Seven Steps to Passing the CBAP® or CCBA® Exam: A Foolproof Plan

The CBAP® (Certified Business Analysis Professional) certification from IIBA was begun in late 2006 to screen, test, and certify qualified and senior BAs. The CCBA® (Certified Competency in Business Analysis) was added in 2011 for intermediate-level BAs. As of this writing, we number over 9200 CBAPs and 1350+ CCBAs around the world, with more added every week. IIBA's newest offering, the ECBA, is not a certification but a certificate, and over 1000 ECBA certificates have been granted as we speak. This article focuses on the CBAP and CCBA.

What are the CBAP and CCBA and Why Become Certified?

The CBAP and CCBA were created by the IIBA® (International Institute of Business Analysis). For those of you who don't know of it, the IIBA is a non-profit organization created to promote the growth and professionalism of business analysis. A large part of IIBA's mission is to document and maintain standards for business analysis, and to recognize and certify practitioners. Visit <http://www.iiba.org/Certification> for more information, including qualifications you'll need to apply for the exam.

We estimate there are thousands of eligible people thinking about or wanting to become certified, but who haven't started yet. Both the CBAP and CCBA applications and the

by:

*Richard Larson, PMP, CBAP, PMI-PBA, and
Elizabeth Larson, PMP, CBAP, PMI-PBA
Co-Principals, Watermark Learning, Inc.*



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exams are difficult, yet many people do make it through the process!

This article briefly summarizes the CBAP and CCBA programs, and how eligible business analysts can create a “fool proof” plan to obtain their certification. Bear in mind that any certification plan is only foolproof if you personalize it, commit to it, and follow it. The majority of the article covers the crucial steps for your plan and several tips to help you execute it to become certified.

Preparation Plan

Step 1: Obtain and Skim the BABOK®

One of the main creations of the IIBA has been its *Guide to the Business Analysis Body of Knowledge*® (called the *BABOK*® *Guide* for short). The *BABOK Guide* compiles the generally accepted knowledge and practices in the BA profession. The newest version in effect is 3.0; this is the version the CBAP and CCBA exams at present are based on.

The other significant creation of the IIBA has been the CBAP and CCBA credentials. The authors are proud to be among the world’s first CBAPs (numbers 21 and 16 respectively). The CBAP and CCBA exams are based almost exclusively on the *BABOK*, so the guide is essential to have and to read. You can download it for free from the IIBA if you are a member, and if not, you can purchase a PDF copy from IIBA, or a paper copy through Amazon.com. The *BABOK Guide* is a solid framework, and worth the cost. Not only will it help you prepare for the CBAP or CCBA exams, but it will be valuable after you get certified as a reference for the commonly accepted practices for business analysis.

The original and updated certification exams came from BA task analysis studies. From those, committees of experts have developed questions for the exam to test the business analysis knowledge of BAs. The questions are based on the *BABOK Guide*, so knowledge of the information in this guide is essential for passing the exam. We encourage CBAP/CCBA candidates to read the entire guide at least once. Step 1, though, should be to skim the guide and familiarize yourself with the *BABOK* tasks, which will help you complete your application.

Step 2: Apply for the Exam

Before scheduling an exam, you must apply for it and be accepted by IIBA to sit for the exam. The application requirements are rigorous and designed for intermediate- to senior-level business analysts. The sidebars below list the requirements for each exam, which you must meet before you apply. (Note: ECBA only requires 21 hours of BA training and has a 50-question exam.) If possible, complete your application and get it approved before doing any serious self-study or taking a prep class. We recommend doing this because the application may take longer than you think and will only delay your certification preparation.

- a. Visit the [IIBA Certification page](#) on IIBA.org as your “home” for applying for the CBAP/CCBA. It has links to the online application and other useful information.
- b. Download the applicable **Certification Handbook** for your certification to read an overview of each process.

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- c. **Start your online application.** We suggest you complete the **References** section first.
- You need to add two references who can attest to your BA knowledge and skills. They can be managers, peers, clients, or a CBAP.
 - Your references will receive an email form to be completed and returned electronically to the IIBA. Your application can't be completed until your references return their forms, which is why we advise starting with this step. See the [sample Reference Email](#) that IIBA provides.
- d. Complete the **Education** and **Personal Development** sections. These are both simple and self-explanatory. You need a high school or higher education and be prepared to produce a transcript to prove it. You may be audited, as Rich was, and you will then need the transcript.
- e. The **Work Experience** section is extensive and the most difficult. **Before you start**, create an electronic record of your projects so you can copy and paste into the online application. Your session may time out if you are interrupted and you may lose what you entered. Check our [CBAP-CCBA resources page](#) for a free time-saving and frustration-reducing template to use.
- f. Your CBAP or CCBA application requires a **\$125 USD fee** for applying and it is non-refundable. There is also an exam fee of **\$325 USD** for members (\$450 USD for non-members) of IIBA. The IIBA will collect the application fee online when you apply. You will need to pay for your exam later once your application has been accepted. Note: IIBA fees are as of this writing and may change.
- g. You will need to agree to the **IIBA Code of Conduct** during the application process.
- h. **Submit** your application, pay your fee, and then wait for approval. The IIBA responds quickly to applications with either an approval or with questions. Some students tell us their applications have been questioned, so you may be asked to provide more information.

CBAP Certification Requirements: How do you stack up?

- 7,500 hours of business analysis work in the last 10 years
- Demonstrated experience with 900+ hours in each of 4 of the 6 BABOK® Knowledge Areas
- 35 hours BA professional development in last 4 years
- Two work references
- Minimum high school education

CCBA Certification Requirements: How do you stack up?

- 3,750 hours of business analysis work in the last 7 years
- Demonstrated experience with 900+ hours in each of 2 of the 6 BABOK® Knowledge Areas OR 500+ hours in each of 4 of the 6 BABOK® Knowledge Areas
- 21 hours BA professional development in last 4 years
- Two work references
- Minimum high school education

Step 3: Read the Entire BABOK

Once your application is submitted, you should begin your preparation in earnest. We recommend that both CBAP and CCBA candidates read the entire *BABOK Guide* before doing any other preparation. You won't want to try this in one sitting, but plan to read it over time and take notes as you do.

Choose any Knowledge Area (KA) you feel comfortable with to start, since business analysis is iterative and non-linear. Start by listing out the Knowledge Areas and their tasks. There are six Knowledge Areas, and 30 tasks among them as the following chart shows. Some candidates find it helpful to read a chapter at a time from a study guide, such as the one we wrote, in conjunction with each KA from the *BABOK Guide*.

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Business Analysis Planning & Monitoring	Elicitation & Collaboration	Requirements Life Cycle Management	Strategy Analysis	Requirements Analysis & Design Definition	Solution Evaluation
3.1 Plans Business	4.1 Prepare for Elicitation	5.1 Trace Requirements	6.1 Analyze Current State	7.1 Specify & Model Requirements	8.1 Measure Solution Performance
3.2 Plan Stakeholder Engagement	4.2 Conduct Elicitation	5.2 Maintain Requirements	6.2 Define Future State	7.2 Verify Requirements	8.2 Analyze Performance Measures
3.3 Plan Business Analysis Governance	4.3 Confirm Elicitation Results	5.3 Prioritize Requirements	6.3 Assess Risks	7.3 Validate Requirements	8.3 Assess Solution Limitations
3.4 Plan Business Analysis Management	4.4 Communicate Business Analysis Information	5.4 Assess Requirements Changes	6.4 Define Change Strategy	7.4 Define Requirements Architecture	8.4 Assess Enterprise Limitations
3.5 Identify Business Analysis Performance Improvements	4.5 Manage Stakeholder Collaboration	5.5 Approve Requirements		7.5 Define Design Options	8.5 Recommend Actions to Increase Solution Value
				7.6 Analyze Potential Value & Recommend Solution	

Most people encounter a terminology “eye opener” when reading through the *BABOK Guide*. What we mean by this is that some or even many of the terms in the *BABOK Guide* don’t agree with your actual practice of business analysis. The tasks and techniques that are brand new to you are one thing, and you will have some learning to do. We consider this to be positive for BA practitioners, since the exam leads us to discover and learn new things.

The trouble you will more likely have is dealing with different terms for the same thing. For instance, we have worked with software packages since 1980 and are quite familiar with them. Although commonly used in organizations, Rich’s first reaction to the term “COTS” in the *BABOK Guide* was, “What are they talking about?” After discovering COTS was just an acronym for “Commercial-Off-The-Shelf” software packages, he quickly adjusted his own terminology to match the *BABOK*. You will undoubtedly have your own moments of “terminology tension” as you adjust to the IIBA terms. Remember to use and study the *BABOK* terms, even if they are “wrong” (we mean that tongue-in-cheek).

The reason the above points are important is this: **you need to know and absorb *BABOK* terms, concepts, tasks, and techniques to pass your exam.**

Step 4: Absorb the BABOK

A few people may be able to read the *BABOK Guide* and then pass the exam. Most of us, though, need something more, and a foolproof plan should include additional study to help absorb the key concepts of the *BABOK Guide* and to practice answering exam questions. The three main methods are the following (in order from expert to peer to individual study):

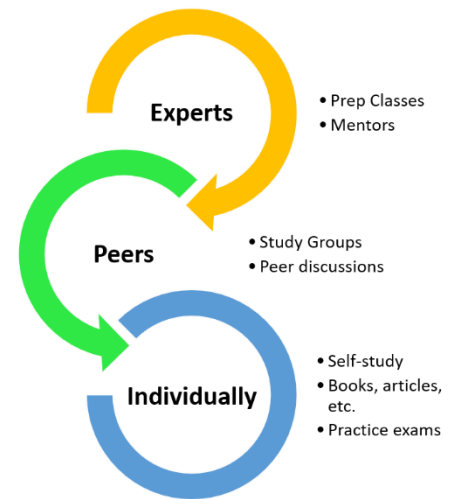
- Prep Classes
- Study Groups
- Self-Study

Prep classes. Another beneficial study method is to attend a [CBAP/CCBA preparation class](#), whether in-person, virtually, or with our [AnyTime Learning mode](#). A class is a great way to get your study off to a quick start or as a review to give you confidence right before taking the exam. It also helps you to compress your study time. You get the benefit of learning from the instructor and other students, some of whom you might be able to keep in touch with after class and form your own informal study group.

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Study groups are effective ways for many people to study. Being part of a group that meets regularly can be motivating for participants to keep up with studying. Participants report that they learn from each other, they learn by teaching each other, and by letting people “think out loud.” You can also benefit in a study group from using prepared or self-made flashcards of key terms/concepts. Visit our [CBAP/CCBA resources page](#) for a free template to create your own.

Individual study. If group learning is not your preferred way, or you don’t have access to study groups or classes, you need to try the individual approach. Even if you take a class or participate in a study group, you will likely need to do some individual studying. You can create your own study outlines and flashcards as you read the *BABOK Guide*, and practice using them on your own.



3 major sources of learning and absorbing information

Study by Style. Research from Insights Corporation shows that individuals study according to a few preferred styles. Table 1 summarizes the four basic learning styles and offers some ideas for how to orient your approach to preparation according to your preferred style.

BLUE	RED
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Give me the details• Thorough processing• Research• Data/facts <p>Study Tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Re-Read BABOK• Take Notes• Do practice exams• Study your notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Action-oriented• Get to the point• Practical action• Immediate and fast <p>Study Tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do practice exams• Read Study Guide(s)• Use Mnemonics
GREEN	YELLOW
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflective• Give me time to process and review• Structured activities <p>Study Tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Training Class• Flashcards• Do practice Exams• Notes review	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experiential• Get me involved• Interactive• Spontaneous <p>Study Tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flashcards with a “buddy”• Training Class• Do practice exams• Audio Flashcards

Table 1: Learning Styles by Color. © 2000 Andrew Lothian, Insights Learning.

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Step 5: Take Practice Exam Questions

In addition to the above methods, practice exams are an essential way to prepare. Based on our own exam prep experience, a suggested approach is to study key sections in the *BABOK* and supplement with a study guide that also contains practice questions in them. Use online exam simulators for practice answering questions for those sections. Take numerous practice exams and keep track of your progress. For the Knowledge Areas you are not scoring well on, do additional reading and studying. Finish by taking several practice simulations to get a feel for the real exam environment and to track your scores. When averaging 80% on simulation exams, you should be ready for the real thing.

Practice exams are the best feedback in your preparation because they let you know how well you are absorbing the *BABOK Guide*. There are a few online exam simulators available on the web. [Visit our CBAP page](#) for more information on our exam simulator, study guide, and other preparation aids.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

We have done two informal research studies of CBAP and CCBA recipients, and the median study time in our survey has been 100 hours of study time (reduced by the hours spent in a CBAP or CCBA preparation class). Some have reported as many as 200+ hours, but that is at the high end. Our research also reveals that the ideal time to take the exam is anywhere from 6-8 weeks to 3 months after taking a prep class.

Step 6: Do Final Preparation

Whatever your methods or style of studying, you will want to spend your final preparation by focusing on areas you have had trouble with. If you keep track of your practice exam results, you can focus your final preparation time on the Knowledge Areas, tasks, or techniques that were the most challenging. If you can, practice taking exam questions on those subjects. Make sure to re-read the *BABOK Guide* in the areas you are struggling with. Rich did this before his exam and it helped.

To help internalize important *BABOK Guide* terminology and concepts that may be different from “real life,” many people find practicing with flashcards beneficial in the final preparation stages. Start with a broad cross-section of terms and concepts and narrow them down to the ones you have trouble with.

Your final preparation step should be to get plenty of rest the night before the exam. You will be better served by having a relaxed and rested mind before the exam than by staying up late and cramming. We know of one person who booked a room at a hotel the night before her exam to ensure she would be relaxed and refreshed for the exam. Not everyone needs to or can go to that extreme, but it demonstrates a great commitment to preparing for the exam. And, it helped her pass!

REST WELL = TEST WELL

You will be better served by having a relaxed and rested mind before your exam than by staying up late and cramming.

Step 7: Relieve Test Anxiety, then Pass the Exam

On exam day, make sure you eat a nourishing breakfast or lunch to give you energy during the exam. Do something that relaxes you, such as exercising, spending time with family, or reading. Drink “enough” water, but not too much. You can visit the restroom during the exam, but it uses up some of your allotted time for finishing the exam.

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You won't be able to bring anything into the exam that could help you answer questions. You will need to place them into a locker or other storage when you check in for the exam. You should be given a white board and markers at the exam site, and we encourage you to use them during the exam.

We advise for all certification exams that you do a "brain dump" at the start of the exam. Write down key terms, mnemonics, formulae, lists, and sequences. This will help to clear your brain, relieve some test anxiety, and serve as a reference for you during the exam. Recent candidates report that the items written down were somewhat helpful but writing them down relieved some exam anxiety.

The CBAP exam has 120 and the CCBA exam has 130 multiple-choice questions. Intensive exams like these will typically challenge you with difficult questions at the beginning. Don't get intimidated by this! Skip any difficult questions until you find one you are confident of, even if that means skipping the first five or ten. Better to skip the hard ones at first than devote 20 minutes to one, which one person we know did. You have 3.5 and 3 hours, respectively, for all the questions on the CBAP and CCBA exams, so there is plenty of time to go back and review any questions you skipped. Review any of the questions throughout the exam and add answers to the questions you skipped after you've built some confidence and momentum.

Summary

If you are like most BA professionals, you haven't taken a major exam like this in a long time, if ever. With the cost of the exam, the amount of time needed to study, and the pressure to pass, you want to make sure you succeed. This article laid out a foolproof plan for passing the CBAP or CCBA exam in seven steps:

Step 1: Obtain and Skim the BABOK

Step 2: Apply for the Exam

Step 3: Read the Entire BABOK

Step 4: Absorb the BABOK

Step 5: Take Practice Exam Questions

Step 6: Do Final Preparation

Step 7: Relieve Test Anxiety, then Pass the Exam

If you follow these 7 steps and devote the 80-100+ hours of study time needed, you will greatly increase your odds of passing. Above all, try to enjoy the "journey." Obtaining a professional certification is an enriching experience, and one to be savored. Well, now that you have your plan, it's time to get started and become CBAP or CCBA certified!

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About Watermark Learning

Watermark Learning has delivered training, coaching, and certification preparation in Business Analysis, Agile, Project Management, and related areas since 1992. We are recognized thought leaders in these fields, having uniquely contributed to both the BA and PM Bodies of Knowledge. We provide a unique blend of teaching industry standards with a practical application.

Our instructors energize and prepare people to solve business problems and achieve certification success. We have trained over 60,000 students in our live, virtual online, and AnyTime Learning classes. Our training features real-life workshops, and students leave class immediately able to apply new skills. We also provide certificate programs with Auburn University in all our core topics.

5001 W. American Blvd

Minneapolis, MN 55437

(+1) 952-921-0900

www.WatermarkLearning.com