ISP® Test-Taking Tips

TIP: The test consists of 100 multiple choice questions on the main topics and 10 on the electives. The exam is "open book." Candidates may not reach out to other people during the test, whether in person or by phone, text messages, email, instant messaging, or any other means. You have two hours (120 minutes) to complete it. The two-hour time limit is purposefully designed into the test. It may allow the applicant time to look up only 10-20 questions. You need to know most of the answers.

TIP: There are nine major areas covered by the test (plus your two chosen electives). The nine major areas are: security administration and management; document security; information systems security; physical security; personnel security; international security; classification; security education; and audits and self-assessments.

TIP: Breaks are allowed. You can leave the room to use a restroom or stretch your legs. However, you lose the time, so hardly anyone ever takes one. Take a bathroom break before the exam begins.

 TIP: Even if you are a seasoned security professional, don't just take the exam "cold." Many of the questions require knowledge of how things are done "in the trenches," not just overall policies or best practices. You have many choices in preparing -- 100% independent study, doing the ISP® Exam Preparation Program (EPP) Workbook on your own, or participating completely in the EPP.

TIP: Passing the ISP® exam represents a grueling two-hour display of knowledge across a wide range of industrial security topics. Even "seasoned" facility security officers will need to hit the books before taking it!

TIP: Get management support early on. Somehow you need to promote the ISP® concept to your supervisory chain. For anything to succeed and thrive in an organization, the leaders must be with you. Keep them informed. Explain what NCMS is and does. Sell them on the ISP®. This makes all the difference in the world.

TIP: I went into taking the test with the understanding that you should look things up before giving the answer. This was wrong. If you do that, you'll never complete it! Answer the questions that you can from your own knowledge and experience, then go back and tackle the rest.

TIP: Don't forget that each question is only worth 0.9 points on a 100-point scale. Just reminding yourself of that keeps you from getting bogged down on a single question.

TIP: Once you have set your goal to obtain the prestigious ISP® Certification, the next step is almost certainly to sign up for the Exam Preparation Program. Okay that is the easy part. Then you must complete your assignments in your workbook each week and call in to a session prepared to answer the questions and contribute to discussions relating to the particular subject. This helps you, as well as, the other participants calling in.

TIP: Are your test-taking skills rusty? Considering taking a few computer-based training (CBT) classes like JPAS, USAF Information Security, etc. They are free, give quick feedback, and will help you practice reading the questions carefully. CDSE offers a large number of them that fit in with the ISP® exam content.

TIP: Answer the questions you know. If you don't know an answer, answer it with your best guess, move on, and come back to that question later on. Something else in the test may jog your memory.

TIP: When you come to a question that you do not know the answer to, write down the question number and the topic. This list will help a lot with time management, and where to find the answers.

TIP: Time management is essential. You have 120 minutes to answer 110 questions. Don't waste time on one question. If you don't know the answer and can't find the answer, move on.

TIP: Do not use common guessing techniques on answering multiple choice questions, like "pick the most inclusive answer." They don't work.

TIP: Even if you think you already know the business, it would help if you went through the NISPOM at least once as a refresher. It's amazing what you think you know as opposed to what you really do.

TIP: If you know where stuff is located in the NISPOM you'll do fine. We all know the chapters – but the section and verse are even more important.

TIP: READ the NISPOM! and when you think you just couldn't bear to open its pages again – just do it!!!! You will be so thankful that you KNOW that book. PRACTICE working with The Annotated NISPOM until finding what you want feels comfortable – knowing your NISPOM and being comfortable with it is a lifesaver

TIP: The EPP workbook is sort of like a practice exam. It forces you to look up the answer in the NISPOM. Doing this better prepares you for the real exam.

TIP: Start to study early! Some of the references need to be read and re-read again and again.

TIP: Seek assistance. If you don't understand a security area, there is a wealth of expertise out there. Whether this expertise comes in the form of your co-workers, boss, DSS agents or fellow NCMSers – ask any and all of them if you have questions.

TIP: Check into whether or not your local NCMS chapter has implemented resources to assist you in your goal of attaining the ISP® Certification. Some chapters have created "study groups" or compiled references on media to assist you with your certification. Some chapters will also provide financial assistance to cover the cost of the exam if your company/organization does not do so.

TIP: When going through the EPP workbook, answer the question with the correct words or sentence. No answers in the test are longer than a few words or a single sentence. When taking the Exam Prep Program, most people will answer the workbook questions with paragraph after paragraph of NISPOM. If you do that nothing will sink in when its test time. Answer the question specifically as asked.

TIP: Don't take any area of the content for granted.

TIP: Study the same way to plan to take the test. If you are using the electronic copy of the NISPOM as your reference material, study that way and look up EPP workbook questions using the annotated NISP®OM. If you plan to use a hard copy during the exam, then look up your study questions the same way.

TIP: We have all spoken to the issue of poor time management resulting in the failure to pass the ISP® exam. Just because you have the references available, doesn't mean that you have to look up and verify every answer. If the proper preparation and study has been completed prior to sitting down to test, the answers are there….you must trust your first instinct and save the open references to look up only those questions that are truly in doubt.

TIP: Using The Annotated NISPOM greatly reduces most Candidate's searching time when they are hunting for answers.

TIP: If you bring a laptop, ensure its charged and ensure you've brought the power cable. Plug it in before the exam begins. Check and recheck.

TIP: Organize your reference materials in a fashion that you are familiar with and that you have reviewed.

TIP: Download all the soft copy references and put them on a separate computer on the "desktop view" so you can quickly see each document in its icon view.

TIP: Get or make a "cheat sheet" of major topics and subtopics and where to find that them in the NISPOM or other reference material. That way you will be able to look up a particular topic much more quickly.

TIP: Make your space comfortable and plan out where your reference material will be (if it isn't electronic).

TIP: The test includes the two elective areas you have selected. You must answer five questions from each of the two electives.

TIP: Don't forget to study the electives too.

TIP: If you are down to the last five minutes and you haven't answered all the questions, mark some answer. Any answer is better than no answer.

TIP: Test while the material is still fresh in your memory.

TIP: RELAX! You've presumably studied the NISPOM, ISLs, and electives, gathered and mentally organized your source materials, so now you need to take a deep breath when you walk into your test site and have faith in your preparation.

TIP: If your world crashes upon you as you are about to open the exam – don't take it. Step back and delay the exam. Unless you have opened the exam, you can always postpone it. Don't take the exam unless you are able to focus properly.

TIP: Once the test starts and the door is closed, participants are "locked out." Don't show up late!

TIP: Be prepared for possible noise distractions if you test with a large group.

TIP: When testing, try to have two computers or one computer with two regular sized screens. You can use one for the test and one for the Annotated NISPOM and your other reference material.

TIP: Ensuring complete isolation and quiet during the exam will clear the test-taker's mind to focus totally on the questions and answers for the entire 120 minutes. Any disruptions will definitely throw off the momentum and concentration of the Candidate. Unplug your phone.

TIP: The exam questions are broken into nine "core" areas plus the two electives of which you have already selected. As soon as you finish you can see your results. Not only can you see your overall score, but you can see how many you answered correctly in each section