

Passing the ISP Exam

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As a former part-time teacher, I thought it would be helpful for future candidates to get tips from those who have already passed the ISP exam. I have contacted all those who took the exam during its initial paper and on-line offerings. I asked what tips they would share with future test takers. I hope you find them both insightful and helpful.

This article was originally written for publication in the January/February 2005 issue of NCMS's newsletter, the *CM Bulletin*. It has been revised to incorporate tips from newly certified ISPs, including people who have taken the on-line version of the test. That is why there are now three parts to the article:



- * General Tips
- * Tips for the Paper Test
- * Tips for the On-Line Test

I would like to encourage everyone who has taken the ISP exam to offer their suggestions.

GENERAL TIPS

FACT: The test consists of 100 multiple choice questions on the main topics and 10 on the electives. The exam is “open book.” 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. *ISP Certification Program Requirements and Application* at

http://www.classmgmt.com/ISP_Certification_Program/brochure.pdf.

FACT: There are nine major areas covered by the test (plus electives). The nine are: security administration and management; document security; information systems security; physical security; personnel security; international security; classification; security education; and audits and self-assessments. *ISP Certification Program Requirements and Application* at http://www.classmgmt.com/ISP_Certification_Program/brochure.pdf.

FACT: Not everyone passes. At the offering in June 2004 in Reno, NV, the pass rate was 75%. That is about what it was during the “beta test” sessions. Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

FACT: The scores were slightly higher in June 2005 Seattle NV and the pass rate was 85% there! Maybe the study sessions paid off. Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

FACT: 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. Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

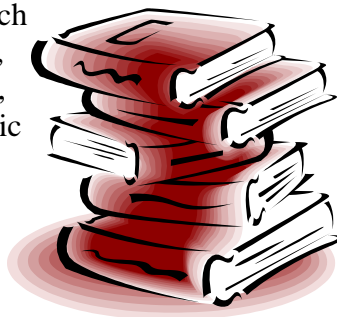
★ **TIP:** THAT TEST WAS HARD! Ray Hair, ISP, ISMSI, Annandale, VA; and Clifford Baughn, ISP, L-3 Communications, San Carlos, CA.

★ **TIP:** Most of the government tests I have taken are pretty easy. Their “distracter” answers are easily eliminated if you know much about the subject. That was not true for this test. It was much better written and, consequently, much tougher. Joseph Reuter, ISP, Northrop Grumman Electronic Systems, Azusa, CA.

★ **TIP:** I would not have been disappointed had I not passed the exam. I gained a tremendous amount of knowledge for myself and my employer - so, at some point, I would have retested and passed it. Dennis L. McCartney, ISP, Northrop Grumman DTRA Field Office, Belgium.

★ **TIP:** Passing the IPS exam represents a grueling two-hour display of knowledge across a wide range of industrial security topics. Even “seasoned” facility security officers [those with at least five years’ of full-time experience] will need to hit the books before taking it! Dianne M. Raynor, ISP, winner NCMS Society Award, The Boeing Company, Vandenberg AFB, CA.

★ **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. Dennis L. McCartney, ISP, Northrop Grumman DTRA Field Office, Belgium.



★ **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. Linda Johnson, ISP, Northrop Grumman Corporation, Pleasant Hill, CA

★ **TIP:** The workbook from the ISP Exam Prep Program was a lifesaver! I had a large number of questions on Chapter 8 when I took the test. That’s an area I don’t work with. Thanks to careful study of the workbook, I scored 10 for 10 on one of those sections. I cannot recommend the workbook strongly enough! Patricia D. Robbins, ISP, Cubic Applications Inc, Lacey, WA.

★ **TIP:** During my first time through the exam, I only marked for review the ones I didn’t know. I wish now I had also marked the ones I wasn’t sure of but was willing to guess on. Because I didn’t waste time, I had addition review time at the end. Kimberly Perry, ISP, Applied Research Associates, Albuquerque, NM.

★ **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. William L. Uttenweiler, ISP, winner NCMS Information Security Award & NCMS Society Award, The Aerospace Corporation, Cape Canaveral AFS, FL.

★ **TIP:** Answer the questions you know. If you don't know an answer, move on, and come back to that question later on.

Something else in the test may jog your memory. Barbara Taylor, ISP, winner NCMS Society Award, Raytheon Company, El Segundo, CA.

★ **TIP:** When you come to a question that you do not know the answer to, write down the question number, the page number, and the topic. This list will help a lot with time management, and where to find the answers. Debbie L. Young, ISP, Spectrum Astro, Gilbert, AZ.

★ **TIP:** Time management is essential. I was doing fine answering questions but didn't realize how slow I was moving. At the end I took quick guesses, but it wasn't enough. I plan to try again and will pay much closer attention to the clock. Anonymous unsuccessful candidate, June 2005, Seattle, WA.

★ **TIP:** I found that a lot of the questions I had trouble with were related to a few topics. When I grouped those together I could find several answers by reading just one of two sections of my reference materials – another time saver. Patrick W. Dale, ISP, Systems Planning Corp, Lexington Park, MD.

★ **TIP:** Do not use common guessing techniques on answering multiple choice questions, like “pick the most inclusive answer.” They don't work. Jody J. Woenker, ISP, ITT Industries, Fort Wayne, IN.

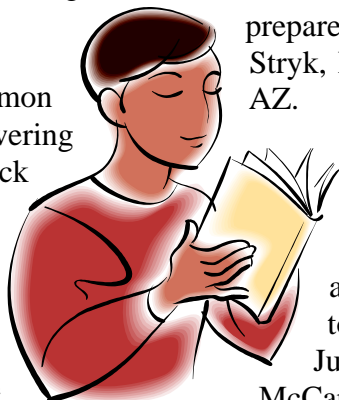
FACT: The NCMS web site provides a complete list of the references for the test at http://www.classmgmt.com/ISP_Certification_Program/references.htm. The page has been reorganized and revised in late summer 2005 to update links and make it more user-

friendly.

★ **TIP:** Study the source material, especially the NISPOM. Another big help was reading the program textbooks from the Defense Security Service Academy: *Essentials of Industrial Security Management* and *Protecting Secret & Confidential Documents*. Jo-Ann C. Webber, ISP, Dynamic Analytics & Test Inc., Arlington, VA.

★ **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. Cynthia Cornelious, ISP, Raytheon Company, Falls Church, VA.

★ **TIP:** During the ISP Exam Preparation Program sessions I stress using the NISPOM as the "Font of Wisdom". The workbook simply highlights certain things in each NISPOM chapter. You still need to read the NISPOM to come up with a workbook answer. I also stress your search methodology. The 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. Bohdan Stryk, ISP, Boandi Corporation, Phoenix, AZ.



★ **TIP:** Start to study early! Some of the references need to be read and re-read again and again. I can remember starting to study in mid-February for the June ISP exam. Dennis L. McCartney, ISP, Northrop Grumman DTRA Field Office, Belgium.

★ **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. They were with me when I took the test. Dennis L. McCartney, ISP, Northrop Grumman DTRA Field Office, Belgium.

★ **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. David Perry, ISP, BBNT Solutions, Cambridge, MA.

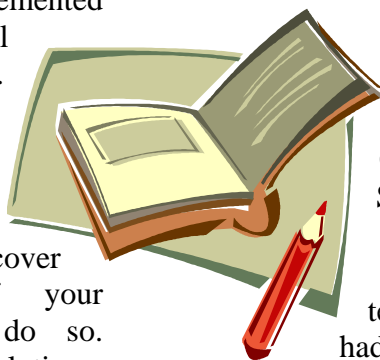
★ **TIP:** Be sure to study the international/foreign security requirements in the NISPOM! My facility does not participate in overseas classified work; therefore, I found that particular section to be difficult and time consuming as I had to take more time than I would have wanted to research the answer. Another area to study is OPSEC. Lisa I. Vaillancourt, ISP, Northrop Grumman Space & Mission Systems, Burlington, MA.

★ **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. Lawrence Mustonen, ISP, General Dynamics Information Systems, Bloomington, MN.

★ **TIP:** [One viewpoint] I brought in binders full of paper references. I was surprised that others brought them on laptops. Not a bad idea – as long as you have plenty of battery life at your disposal! Sandra J. McKenzie, ISP, Jacobs Sverdrup

Naval Systems Group, Camarillo, CA.

★ **TIP:** [A different viewpoint] It wasn't any more beneficial to use the online NISPOM or other resources. It took just as long to complete. Lawrence Mustonen, ISP, General Dynamics Information Systems, Bloomington, MN.



★ **TIP:** [Yet a third] Bring both! Lisa I. Vaillancourt, ISP, Northrop Grumman Space & Mission Systems, Burlington, MA.

★ **TIP:** At the 2005 testing in Seattle, WA, NCMS had the hotel provide power strips so we didn't have to rely on our batteries. Sounds good, right? I plugged my laptop in and was computing/testing happily until about 1.5 hours in the test. Then I realized my battery was down to 21% power! Why wasn't the power strip working? Answer: It was installed turned off and I hadn't noticed. Lesson: Check and recheck. William L. Uttenweiler, ISP, winner NCMS Information Security Award & NCMS Society Award, The Aerospace Corporation, Cape Canaveral AFS, FL.

★ **TIP:** Organize your reference materials in a fashion that you are familiar with and that you have reviewed. Debbie L. Young, ISP, Spectrum Astro, Gilbert, AZ.

★ **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. Barbara Taylor, ISP, winner NCMS Society Award, Raytheon Company, El Segundo, CA.

★ **TIP:** Two tips for improving your

searches if you use the “soft” copy materials. First, be sure you have the most recent version of Adobe Acrobat Reader. Second, check the block so that your search criteria for “whole words.” That improves results. Candidate Janice Kolts, The Boeing Company, Kent, WA.

FACT: The material includes four elective sections. You must answer from two of them. The elective categories are: intellectual property; COMSEC/ TEMPSET; counterintelligence; and operations security (OPSEC). The original idea of having SAP/SCI proved unworkable – each program was different and much of the material was classified. COMSEC and TEMEST, being so closely related, were combined. Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

★ **TIP:** Thinking about choosing the OPSEC questions? Consider taking (or retaking) the Interagency Support Staff’s (IOSS) computer-based course OPSE 301, Fundamentals of OPSEC. It’s an excellent review of the material. It includes specifics on definitions and applying the principles – and excellent introduction or review. William L. Uttenweiler, ISP, winner NCMS Information Security Award & NCMS Society Award, The Aerospace Corporation, Cape Canaveral AFS, FL.

FACT: The question bank is 500 and it will be updated every year. Different tests will have a significant percentage of different questions, so memorizing the answers will not get you a pass. We also will mix the order of the questions. We gave the same examination to everyone in 2004 so we could validate the test. At the 2005 sitting we passed out two

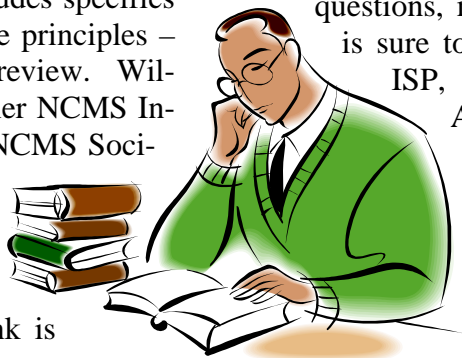
different versions. When we go on-line in mid-2005, every test will be slightly different. Also we randomize the answers, so don’t expect the correct answers to weight heavily toward “a,” “b,” “c” or “d.” Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

★ **TIP:** Don’t forget to study the electives too. I missed six out of the 10 elective questions. Fortunately, I had done well enough on the core questions to get a passing grade overall. James W. Curran, ISP, Applied Signal & Image Technology Inc., Linthicum, MD.

FACT: While there is no guessing penalty, you can only afford to miss 25% of the questions; therefore, guessing should be a last resort. Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

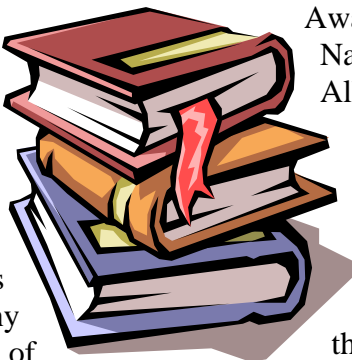
★ **TIP:** If you are down to the last five minutes and you haven’t answered all the questions, mark some answer. A blank is sure to be wrong. Dotti S. Bitner, ISP, winner NCMS Society Award, Rockwell Scientific LLC, Thousand Oaks, CA.

★ **TIP:** I completed the ISP Exam Preparation Program in June 2006 and waited over a month and a half before I took the exam on-line. I passed but with a lower score than I’d hoped for. I hadn’t cracked a book since the telecons completed, and that was a huge mistake! Test while the material is still fresh in your memory. Elizabeth A. Bostick, ISP, Batelle Memorial Institute, Columbus, OH.



FACT: The test fee is \$200 for NCMS members; \$300 for non-members. *ISP Certification Program Requirements and Application* at <http://www.classmgmt.com/ISP Certification Program/brochure.pdf>.

★ **TIP:** That represents a \$100 savings – a great benefit for NCMS members. Also, NCMS members get a \$50 discount when registering for the annual National Training Seminar. Since the combined entrance fee and first year’s member only cost \$105, it’s like joining NCMS for free! Any non-member who is thinking of becoming a certified ISP should take advantage of this GREAT opportunity! William L. Uttenweiler, ISP, winner NCMS Information Security Award & NCMS Society Award, The Aerospace Corporation, Cape Canaveral AFS, FL.



★ **TIP:** Round pegs for round holes. Square pegs for square holes. Pick and choose which of these tips/techniques work best for you. William L. Uttenweiler, ISP, winner NCMS Information Security Award & NCMS Society Award, The Aerospace Corporation, Cape Canaveral AFS, FL.

TIPS FOR THE PAPER TEST

★ **TIP:** I flew to Reno NV on the morning of the exam. My plane arrived late, I felt rushed and hassled, etc. If you can, I’d recommend arriving at the conference the day before. That way you can be settled and well rested before the test. Cheryl K. Pelton, ISP, two-time winner NCMS Society Award, Sonatech Inc., Santa Barbara, CA.

FACT: Candidates who take the exam at the National Training Seminar are given

the questions on all four elective areas and can look at them before making their choice. (On-line candidates must select their two elective areas in advance.) That is one of the advantages of taking the test at the seminar. Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

FACT: Each elective category presents 12 possible questions. **Answer five and only five!** If you mark more than five, the first five will be the ones graded. Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

★ **TIP:** Do not just charge into the elective sections. Look at the questions in each of the four elective content areas to see which two have the five questions that you feel most comfortable answering. Cheryl K. Pelton, ISP, two-time winner NCMS Society Award, Sonatech Inc, Santa Barbara, CA.

★ **TIP:** If you plan on taking the ISP Exam at one of the National Training Seminars, you should make sure that you get a lot of rest and remain "clear headed" before the exam. We are all tempted to use our "free time" in the hotel to socialize and catch up with friends. A lack of sleep or a lack of focus will surely impact your final score. David Perry, ISP, BBNT Solutions, Cambridge, MA.

FACT: Once the test starts and the door is closed, participants are “locked out.” Don’t show up late! Dr. James N. Hickok, NCMS National President, winner NCMS Society Award, Department of Energy National Training Center, Albuquerque, NM.

★ **TIP:** Bring a few small “stickles” to mark the pages where you skipped an answer. This makes it easy to go back and find them. Cheryl K. Pelton, ISP, two-time winner NCMS Society Award, Sonatech Inc., Santa Barbara, CA.

★ **TIP:** I marked a plus sign “+” by each questions whose answer I looked up. That way, when I reviewed my work, I knew I didn’t need to worry about double-checking those. William L. Uttenweiler, ISP, winner NCMS Information Security Award & NCMS Society Award, The Aerospace Corporation, Cape Canaveral AFS, FL.

★ **TIP:** Pay close attention when you fill in your answers. The answer sheet was separate and I caught myself filling in the wrong bubble even though I knew the correct answer. Jody J. Woenker, ISP, ITT Industries, Fort Wayne, IN.

★ **TIP:** At the 2004 test session in Reno NV, we were seated two people per table. That made it easy to spread the reference materials out. Cheryl K. Pelton, ISP, two-time winner NCMS Society Award, Sonatech Inc., Santa Barbara, CA.



TIPS FOR THE ON-LINE TEST

FACT: On-line test takers get questions from the same test bank as those who take it on paper. They have 100 core questions and five questions chosen from two of the four elective areas. The questions are presented on the computer screen one at a time. Candidates can “bookmark” questions they want to come back to review at the end. Sharon Tannahill, Executive Director, NCMS Inc., Wayne, PA.

★ **TIP:** I came into work on a Saturday to take the exam. No one interrupted me and the office provided a reliable, high-speed connection. I’m glad I didn’t try to take it at home. Michael J. Davis, ISP, The Boeing Company, Huntsville, AL.

★ **TIP:** I came into the office early, closed my door, and took the test. Jeffrey Qualkenbush, ISP, E G & G Technical Services, Holloman AFB, NM.

★ **TIP:** I stayed after work to take the test. I was fine while taking it, but once I was finished I discovered how tired I was! Jeanette Y. Alderete, ISP, Aegis Research Corporation, Albuquerque, NM.

★ **TIP:** One of my ISP Exam Prep Program Mentors mentioned that it could be confusing and to be careful not to accidentally close the on-line test. This made me think about my buddy’s computer at work that has two screens. I kept the references on one monitor and the test on the other. That worked well for me. Jeffrey W. Bennett, ISP, Dynetics Inc., Madison, AL.

★ **TIP:** I have a large CRT on my computer. Instead of taking in two computers (a laptop of the NISPOM and my desktop for the test), I put the exam on one side of the screen and the test on the other. That worked well for me. Joseph Reuter, ISP, Northrop Grumman Electronic Systems, Azusa, CA.

★ **TIP:** The keyboards for my laptop (for the electronic copy of the references) and my desktop (for the test) were so close together than once and a while I realized I

was typing on the wrong one! Also, the keyboard for the desktop is an ergonomic style and the one from the laptop is a straight one so moving between them was a little awkward. Kimberly Perry, ISP, Applied Research Associates, Albuquerque, NM.

★ **TIP:** The clock counting down from two hours to the end was very helpful. It helped me avoid spending too much time on any single question. Gary Doss, ISP, E G & G Technical Services, Holloman AFB, NM.

★ **TIP:** For some reason, when I took the test I couldn't see the countdown clock and couldn't spot the list of questions I had marked for further review. Fortunately I knew when I started. Also, I had answered all the questions first time through. I had 13 minutes left, so what I should have done was to review the questions from start to finish. (Instead I clicked on "finish." But I passed; that's the important thing.) Patricia Robbins, ISP, Cubic Applications, Lacey, WA.

FACT: The on-line exam questions are broken into nine "core" areas plus the electives (which you must choose before starting the exam). 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. You will also get an e-mail confirming your results quickly and written confirmation within 7-10 business days. Sharon Tannahill, Executive Director, NCMS Inc., Wayne, PA.

★ **TIP:** The instantly feedback of knowing I'd passed was fantastic. Jeffrey Qualkenbush, ISP, E G & G Technical Services, Holloman AFB, NM.

