2015

Exploring the MS Office Specialist Certification in Excel

Brandon Printz
Student of Management Information Systems
PASSING THE EXAM

The following two pages titled “Becoming a Certified Microsoft Office Specialist in Excel” contain “best practices” in passing the Specialist Exam and can stand alone has resources to be given to anyone seeking the Microsoft Office Specialist Certification in Excel. They can be used independently or in conjunction with each other. While the following method is considered a “best practice,” there are many other ways to achieve the necessary skill set and knowledge to pass the Specialist Exam in Excel. Keep this thought in mind as you read through this study, and pay particular attention to the “bottom line” sections of each segment outlined in this work. You may find that you prefer one method over another, but after reading this study you should have a very clear idea of what you will be required to do and have a host of options available to you to help you become a Microsoft Certified Excel Specialist.
EXPLORING THE MS OFFICE SPECIALIST CERTIFICATION IN EXCEL

Brandon Printz

Becoming a Certified Microsoft Office Specialist in Excel

Michelle Excel

Excel 2013 Essentials

Take the course: Microsoft Academy Website

GO TO: Microsoft IT

12.5 Hours

TOTAL:

516 Hours

Buy: Excel 2013 for Dummies

Create a "Fake Data" Excel Spreadsheet

Use the lessons from the book and MS T Academy

Practice the Lessons:

Visit Testing Services at the Lommenson Center

Schedule Exam:

Take Exam:

You Passed

Arrive Five Minutes Early

Go to the Lommenson Center and

2.5 Hours

30 Minutes

30 Minutes

3.5 Hours

2 Hours

8 Hours

211 Minutes

211 Minutes
Becoming a Certified Microsoft Office Specialist in Excel

Being Excel certified can be the difference maker in being chosen as a new hire, or dictate whether a person receives a bonus or not. Without a doubt the $166 outlay for this certification is worth the investment tenfold. Every student of business should have a base level understanding of Excel, and should strive to obtain the Microsoft Certification as a means to demonstrate this understanding to employers on a resume. For more information, including other ways to pass the Excel Exam 77-420, see the full University of Montana study titled “Exploring the MS Office Specialist Certification in Excel.”

Five steps to success:

1. Buy the book from an online vendor: Excel 2013 All-in-one for Dummies ($21)
   - This will serve as your base of knowledge for further lessons.
2. Sign up for the Microsoft IT Academy Online (Free)
3. Train yourself on the Microsoft IT Academy: “Microsoft Excel 2013 Essentials”
   - Create a “Fake Data” spreadsheet in Excel as you train.
4. Buy the MS Office Specialist Exam Voucher from Certiport ($120)
   - Choose the option which includes a retake provision.
5. Schedule and take the exam (77-420) in the Lommasson Center (proctoring fee $25)

The $21 “Dummies” book will serve as a master reference to the lessons taught in the Microsoft IT Academy. Having the book will not only save time, but it will also allow for a deeper understanding of concepts needed to pass the exam. As you work your way through the lesson plan titled “Microsoft Excel 2013 Essentials,” open a blank workbook in Excel and create some “fake data” and practice utilizing the lessons from your training. Doing this will give insight to the material taught on the Microsoft IT Academy and if you fully apply the book’s teachings to your practicing, you will quickly become a master.

Keep in mind, that the one hour exam has a person modify a pre-built workbook in a specific way which is listed in highly defined steps. Passing the test is not about knowing Excel intimately, rather, it’s about using a small number of tools quickly. If a person has very little experience with Excel, I estimate that a total of ten hours of work will be needed to pass the exam. Approximately eight of those ten hours will be spent learning the material from both the Microsoft IT Academy and reading the book; the other two hours will be spent practicing in the Excel environment. The reason that the study requirement is somewhat short is because the Microsoft IT Academy teaches directly to the exam.

The test environment can be intimidating, it is given in a small cubicle behind soundproof glass on a small monitor. However, utilizing the “fake data” practice spreadsheet will mitigate the intimidation dramatically. Using this tool will also produce a more well-rounded education, and more importantly, it will help you develop speed which will be critical in passing the exam.

Certiport.com is a test taker’s website which can be very easily found online. Once registered, a person can buy a “Microsoft Office Specialist Exam Voucher” which works on any of the specialist exams. I highly recommend buying the exam voucher which comes with a retake provision, the cost is twenty dollars extra, but well worth it. After that, simply go to the Lommasson Center’s Testing Center which is near Career Services and schedule a time to take the exam “Excel 77-420;” the 2015 proctoring fee is $25.
Microsoft Office Specialist Exam in Excel (77-420)

INTRODUCTION:

In the world of Information Systems, Excel is easily the most actionable member of the Microsoft Office suite. The level of productivity in data compiling, processing, conversion and presentation can dramatically affect the success or failure of an organization. The use and understanding of both creation and maintenance within the Excel environment is often critical to the daily operations of businesses large and small. Upon reading the many course descriptions within the School of Business Administration, the use of Excel is implied, yet it is not given a strong point of focus and certainly is not main topic of any course within the BMIS program. Therefore, I propose that students use the resources presented here to obtain an official certification from Microsoft as an Excel Specialist.

The method by which this independent study was done was quite simple. Firstly, I shopped for and bought learning material for Excel 2013. Then, I studied using various techniques and resources. While studying, I documented my time as well as some of the more useful processes along the way. However, since this document evaluates performance, elaboration on said material was not prudent until after the exam was passed.

PATHWAYS TO PASSING

At first, the thought of passing the Microsoft office specialist exam in Excel was daunting. Ambiguity was certainly the most threatening part, since there is no way of knowing for sure what will be on the test. By a considerable margin, I over prepared for this test in anticipation for something which I consider to be much harder. However, after reading this study you will have a much better understanding than I did, and you will not need to over prepare. In order to pass the specialist exam for Excel, one mustn’t have a fabulous knowledge of Excel, but rather an elementary understanding of the program. Knowing the
below bullet points and usage is key. The following list was taken directly off of the Microsoft website and serves as a complete yet general list of the topics covered on the exam.

**Material Covered on the Exam**: (Microsoft, 2015)

- Create and manage worksheets and workbooks
- Create cells and ranges
- Create tables
- Apply formulas and functions
- Create charts and objects

Each of these topics can have separate books written about them, yet to pass the exam, one mustn’t master these, rather simply have a general understanding of the topics and be able to use the associated tools speed. The URL attached to this document will lead to more detail on each point listed above; at which point one will discover that the content required to learn isn’t extraordinarily deep. I highly recommend utilizing the “Expanded Learning Checklist” list found at the end of this document to ensure that all the necessary material is understood.

**For the Experienced:**

If a person has a strong background in Excel or is just a natural whiz with the software, I suggest carefully reading the section titled “Excel Boot Camp” and utilizing that software in conjunction with book: *Excel 2013 All-in-one for Dummies.* With this combination a student can conquer the study portion of the certification process in about three hours. Having the expanded learning checklist found at the end of this study is a must, and I recommend checking the items off the list while the work is being done. There will certainly be items not taught in the Excel boot camp, and for those, use the book.

**For the Inexperienced**

Naturally, we are not all gifted with Excel skills, and if a student is like me, they may need a bit more time and depth to understand the Excel environment to the level required to pass the exam. Yet those students needn’t despair! I recommend carefully reading the section titled “The Microsoft IT Academy” along with “Excel 2013 All-in-one for Dummies.” There is no need to go beyond these two resources, and the study time is not altogether extremely long. See the resources at the head of this study titled “Becoming a certified Microsoft Office Specialist in Excel” for details on this “best practice” method.
**TIME SPENT ON THIS STUDY:**

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**GRAND TOTAL:** 47

**SHOPPING:**

**AMAZON.COM:**

**Pros:**
- Extremely Broad Content
- Fabulous Layout
- Reviews, Reviews, Reviews!

**Cons:**
- Misleading reviews
- Chat function tough to find

**Total Time Spent:**
- 4 Hours

Searching for the right book led me to Amazon from the start for a good reason. Let’s face it, Amazon.com is one of the best websites ever created. Their layout is the envy of webstores everywhere, their range of products is unbelievable, and their use of various distribution means makes them a superpower on the web. When it comes to books, they’ve got nearly everything, from old used books to digital copies of works released yesterday. Needless to
say, I was delighted when looking through my search results even though many of the results were for older versions of Excel which were useless to this study.

Of course, the books have descriptions written by the seller (usually), and these are quite helpful but not as good as the reviews. Upon choosing reference books, the review function was by far the most useful tool in making my selections. Not only did I find out whether or not the book’s contents matched its description, but I also got recommendations about other books! This “piggybacking” of the reviews led to researching many books which at first, seemed lack-luster. A host of fringe books came into my field of view and before long I found myself off topic chasing the scent of the “master’s tomb of wisdom,” which, as it turns out was right in front of me the entire time. Essentially, the reason that I chose the books I did was because they had been talked about in reviews so positively, and I seemed to find these pockets of positivity in the review sections of other books.

No website is without error, and in the case of Amazon, there are two big ones. Firstly, the review portion is simultaneously Amazon’s greatest tool and greatest weakness. Reviews are sometimes misleading, as though they are being written by a salesperson, which they sometimes are! Distinguishing between real reviews and fake reviews is often tough, and because of the size and scope of the site, moderating reviews is a monumental task, a task which Amazon has not yet mastered. I found myself being led away from certain books because of particularly negative reviews followed by a positive recommendation, after following the lead, I found that the recommendation was a farce; this happened many times during my search. The only other issue with Amazon.com is that their chat function is hard to find, and tough to initiate, you’ll have to commit to no less than eight “search and clicks,” which takes a minute or two. Once initiated though, Amazon will deliver excellent customer service.

**Bottom Line:**

For this project I found myself trying things on Amazon which I had not done before, some were useful, others were not. Using reviews to “piggyback” leads is what got me to the Dummies reference which I am glad for, and the chat sessions were nice, but not necessary. I took advice from a chat session and bought a book which I didn’t use and I also broke my time into three sessions, which was really not necessary. I recommend using two sessions of Amazon.com when searching for an Excel reference, that way a person can crosscheck the
prices against ebay. Also, I recommend only use the chat sessions if completely lost. (amazon.com, 2015)

EBAY

Pros:
• Great deals
• Obscure and often awesome items

Cons:
• Review system is too new to be useful
• Content is too broad

Total Time Spent:
• 4 Hours

Many regard ebay as the junkyard of the web, yet they have made some major strides since inception, and now it’s foolhardy to ignore the power of this massively user driven leviathan. The best parts of ebay are user driven; both price and content are defined by individuals. The repercussions of the previous statement spells great deals for buyers as well as a host of products which otherwise cannot be found anywhere. However, the user driven paradise is not all sunshine and Lilly pads. A person can often find themselves drowning in a pond of items which don’t fit their searches; descriptions are user driven after all. Also the review system is too fresh to be very good, most items which I searched for had none or perhaps one, and generally they were useless.

My quest on ebay was to find material which I couldn’t get on Amazon.com, or perhaps new material in the form of instructive videos or software. I dug for new content and found much, but the new content seemed very cheesy or inapplicable to my cause of passing the Excel 2013 certification. Many searches produced great prices, but for the wrong version of Excel. Many more offered great items, but for topics completely unrelated to my cause. To end my ebay experience, I decided to shoot for a better deal on books which I had already researched on Amazon. The final word: because the books I needed were newer, I saved money by getting free shipping on Amazon.
Bottom Line:
The junkyard of the internet is actually a really cool place to hang out. Using ebay to get a deal is extremely cool and works well enough to be a staple in any smart shopper’s bookmarks toolbar. However, shopping for late-model reference books or training software can be tedious and for me, useless. It's easy to get lost or distracted on ebay, so be mindful. After searching Amazon.com for a reference book, ebay is worth a look, but not much more than a look. I recommend one session of no more than an hour, and stick to material already searched on Amazon. (ebay, 2015)

STUDY SOFTWARE

MICROSOFT IT ACADEMY
Pros:
- Great content
- Free
- Extremely easy to use

Cons:
- Login can be tricky

Total Time Spent:
- 11 Hours

The Microsoft IT academy is perhaps the most beneficial resource of this study. As you can imagine, this website is designed to create IT professionals within the Microsoft software kingdom, and they do a bang up job of it. First of all, they have courses designed which teach the material to nearly every certification level offered; which is a huge amount. Secondly, the system is free for students of the University of Montana thanks to the ever strengthening relationship that the university has with the immense company. The system is also extremely easy to use. With a filtration system that is as intuitive as scratching your nose, one can never get lost once inside the digital academy. There is however one flaw to the Microsoft IT academy: the login, which I will cover later.
Initially I was a bit intimidated by this system. After stumbling through a rather tedious registration procedure wherein my credentials were checked to verify that I was indeed a student of the University of Montana, I began to grasp the value of this system. Once inside I was impressed by the sheer number of courses offered; a dizzying figure at nearly two thousand! A quick browse of the catalog reveals so much content that it’s hard to fathom the methods by which it was all created and gathered, though the dizziness wore off quickly after using the filtration system. After a few clicks I had my course list narrowed to just a few which made my selection as wonderfully simple. The study process began with a machine voice describing the course which led to the introduction of a real person who, through a series of videos, led interactive exercises which simulated the Excel environment. The course was extremely easy to follow and easy to learn from, surely this was the best resource of the bunch, but it was not without a small issue.

The login system to the Microsoft IT academy has a serious flaw. Without creating a bookmark for the site I simply entered “MS IT Academy” into a search which produced a whole host of results; after clicking on one I discovered a serious problem: my credentials failed! I spent nearly an hour on a chat session with a Microsoft representative trying to figure out what had gone wrong with my login, only to realize that I was on the incorrect URL. As it turns out, there is an instructor side of the academy which is nearly impossible to distinguish from the student side at first. This was a great frustration, but an extremely easily solved issue once identified. Simply find the student version of the login and create a bookmark in your browser.

**Bottom Line:**

The Microsoft IT Academy is the crown jewel of this study. The course which I had taken was called “Microsoft Excel 2013 Essentials” and was perfect for the Microsoft Office Specialist exam which I took. The course does need supplementation of some kind, and for that I recommend using the “Dummies” reference book which is discussed in this study. Yet even without the book a person can absolutely pass the Excel certification exam through taking this course and supplementing the lessons with further reading online. For me, this study would have been much less entertaining and likely less complete had I not gone through the Microsoft IT Academy. The course seems designed to teach directly to the test and the course can be completed in a fairly short amount of time. I estimate that if equipped with the “Dummies” reference, within five hours of studying most college students would be totally prepared for the exam.
EXCEL BOOT CAMP

Pros:

- Real world learning tool
- Wide range covered
- Shortcut Keys

Cons:

- Too little depth

Total Time Spent:

- 4 Hours

The Excel boot camp was given by Dr. Firth in his consulting class (BMIS 479) as a singular assignment during the regular semester. Taken from Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC), this many-sheet Excel workbook gave me a natural learning environment based on topics used on a very regular basis in the consulting world, and it shows. Not only did the data sets seem realistic, but so did the instruction method. Within a few hours a student can complete this assignment and have some basics crammed into their heads, though quick, exposure is achieved. I believe that exposure is the true goal of this assignment, though mastery of the tools taught in the Excel boot camp take much more time to acquire.

Generally, I found the Excel boot camp to be a solid win. I loved the that the tools are actually heavily used in the workplace, and the fact that it had the brand recognition of PwC. It teaches the student much, and I feel that a few more class periods given to this topic would be worthy, and possibly all that a student would need to pass the Excel Certification exam. Certainly, if students were required to build a custom workbook in Excel based on the material taught over the course of two lab based class periods, no more training would be needed to pass the exam. As it stands, Dr. Firth’s Excel Boot Camp is a good start on the path to learning, though without a doubt, more than this is needed to become an Excel Specialist.

Bottom Line:

Dr. Firth’s Excel Boot Camp may well be the only external material a student needs to pass the Excel certification exam. Not only would a student need to study this material very closely, but they would also need some help through web searches or streaming video. That being said, taking the “Boot Camp to Success” route is not a bad way to go. Actually, if a
person is already confident with Excel, I might recommend this route, simply because of the speed at which this course can be completed. Again, one would need to go beyond the course to achieve full proficiency, but not much beyond. I anticipate that after a student completes the “Boot Camp” course, all they would need to do is run down the detailed checklist found at the end of this study and fully test their skills against each point made on the list. In short, if the “Boot Camp” were pared with the detailed checklist along with the Dummies reference, there should be nothing stopping the student from achieving a passing score on the exam. (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2015)

**TABLEAU**

**Pros:**
- Neat displays of data

**Cons:**
- Not applicable to Excel Certification

**Total Time Spent:**
- 1 Hour

Tableau is enterprise software used to display content based in Excel. Opening the software gives the user a feel for the direct link to Excel workbooks. The drag and drop functionality creates infinite possibilities to display charts, graphs and scatter plots. Tableau is especially good at creating ad hoc pivots of various data, but it has a serious disadvantage. At first, it seems like this software could help a student understand different display types found within the Excel environment, though upon completing the instruction I found that this software is completely unique. Though powerful and useful on its own, this isn’t relatable to the Excel environment and did not help me prepare for the Excel certification at all.

**Bottom Line:**

Tableau is great software. I can see a thousand uses for something like this; but not here. As it applies to the Excel certification exam, don’t waste your time on Tableau. There is nothing within the training video, help files, or class narrative which will add to a person’s ability to manipulate Excel. (Tableau, 2015)
EXCEL 2013 ALL-IN-ONE FOR DUMMIES

Pros:
- Depth, depth, depth!
- Street language
- Extraordinary Layout
- Price: $21

Cons:
- Black and white
- No hardcover available

Total Time Spent:
- 10 Hours

I’ve been using the Dummies reference books for 20 years, starting with the ground floor of their program: DOS for Dummies. As a kid I loved the funny little pictures and the fact that I could actually read it. Back then, the books helped me install video games or fix things I had digitally broken, but now I see the books in a whole new light. This book was spectacular! Call me biased, but honestly, my biggest gripe with this book is that it’s not available in a hardcover; I know I’ll use this book until the thing falls apart!

After reading through some of the early chapters in the book, it quickly became clear that the basics were a bit too elementary for me. This book offers depth enough to (likely) pass the highest level of Excel certification offered, which is quite advanced indeed. One of the biggest benefits of this book comes in the form of the “street language” in which the book was written. To me, the simple vocabulary and common expressions made this book easier to pay attention to. Unlike many other reference books which kill a person with esoteric vernacular and a lack of graphics, this book gave some excitement to whatever topic came next and had a way of invoking my inner dork to the extreme. But this is a bit of a double edged sword however, because after much scanning and flipping, I found myself engrossed in a segment of the book which I had not expected to learn and indeed did not need to learn for
the exam. As I wrestled myself back on track I found that this book had much more depth than I needed, and the chore became: knowing when to stop.

The layout was also spectacular, and came with an index rich enough to make a librarian shed a tear. As I worked my way through this study, the Excel for dummies book became my go-to reference; absolutely every time I used this book, it resounded a solid performance. On top of all that, this book was half the price of its best competitors, many in this tier of quality demanded five times the price for a similar reference. Needless to say, after knowing what this book offers, I am blown away at the whole package. Regardless of the method by which a person seeks the knowledge necessary to pass the Microsoft Office Specialist Exam in Excel, this book is worthy starting point. Whether used alone or in conjunction with a study course, the usage of this book will bring nothing but thoroughly positive results.

As with anything, this book is not perfect, the flaws though few, are there. Firstly, it was a bit odd navigating the graphics at times because there is no color save for the cover and back flap. This was odd mainly because the Excel environment is so color rich and often colors are needed in graphical displays of data. I feel conditioned to look for colors in menus that I’m familiar with and unfortunately, this was simply not available. Also, the book is only offered in a paperback cover. As a student I find myself floating from table to table, from computer to computer and having a hardcover would have made it easier to prop the book up while reading, and of course, would have made it much tougher. As I plan to keep this book for a long time, durability is a factor, which this book does not deliver to my satisfaction.

**Bottom Line:**

Beware: there are a few ‘Dummies’ books available for the 2013 version of Excel, I highly recommend the “all-in-one” version. With this book one can learn everything on the exam and in fact, if a person has a copy of the detailed checklist found at the end of this study, they could easily look up each part in this book, read the lessons, practice the lessons in Excel, and pass the exam. The detail is fabulous, the book is easy to use, and the way the book is written is very comforting and encouraging. During my exam preparations, the Dummies book got used more than any other reference, and it was also the most interesting portion of this study! I recommend using this book along with either the Microsoft IT Academy for total success. If a person is already a confident user of Excel, then the “Excel Boot Camp” course will serve as a wonderful guide in using this book. Either method will lead to success if the “Excel 2013 All-In-One” book is used as the foundation. (Harvey, 2013)
Office 365: Migrating and Managing Your Business in the Cloud

Pros:

- Very detailed

Cons:

- Excel not a main topic
- Highly technical language
- Black and white
- Price: $40

Total Time Spent:

- 3 Hours

I bought this book because I thought that it would be highly useful in learning to use external data, a topic which I knew would be on the exam. In the back of my mind, I also had fear that the Office 365 applications would have some difference from the classic ‘offline installations’ used in the exam setting. As the book became known to me, my fears were replaced with regret; regret for buying the book.

To start on a positive note, this book really does have a lot of detail. Much can be learned from the material presented within the exhaustive tome, though one should have a clearly defined purpose beforehand. The majority of my time was spent in later chapters which left me confused and uninterested. Excel was hardly mentioned and I was drowned in terms and acronyms which required my already fading brain to work even harder to compute. The book also gives all of its screenshots in low resolution black and white photos which are boring at best and difficult to interpret. After two sessions with this book I set it down never to be picked up again, it was a complete waste of time, money, and effort.

Bottom Line:

This reference book is useless when it comes to passing the Excel certification exam. Excel is certainly a part of Microsoft Office 365 and having it correctly set-up is important, but, let’s face it, none of the material covered in this book is on the exam, and it’s not a great reference as it is. I recommend avoiding this book completely. (Katz & Crawford, 2014)
OTHER RESOURCES

MICROSOFT.COM:

Pros:

- Visually Pleasing
- Contains good sales pitches
- Extreme range of topics available
- Link to Certiport

Cons:

- Content overload, overload, overload!
- Search function is sub-par
- Menus are too deep

Total Time Spent:

- 5 Hours

The Microsoft website is revered by many as a jewel of the web, and rightly so. When one enters the website it’s clear that this juggernaut of software has got some things figured out. The graphics are very pleasing and clean, the sales pitches are broad yet catchy, and the topics to explore are seemingly endless. But this masterpiece is far from perfect, and perhaps the title ‘masterpiece’ is a bit too strong. For starters, the content comes spilling out of the seams; this website is ready to burst from overload. Also, I have some gripes with the search engine returning weak values, and within many subpages it takes on a very different form; one which is too cluttered to be considered terribly valuable. Finally, the menus stack and stack and stack on top of each other making navigation tenuous at times.

To start the Excel certification process, I began with a tour of the Microsoft website. The graphics pulled me in tightly and kept me warm as I glided the mouse over the countless menus and eventually found myself completely off topic shopping for a tablet. It was embarrassing to have been taking so fully by surprise by the sales techniques used on this website; the encouraging language and fabulous photos made my head turn and my mouse click - yet I got no closer to finding anything about the Excel certification. Deciding to use the search function was the right move. A quick search for “Excel certification” quickly
produced a link to the “Learning” webpage which contains information about all of the certifications offered by Microsoft. The pages contain bulleted information about each exam including a good amount of detail about each topic listed. Links to Certiport can also be found on each certification’s page. A chat option makes itself available through a popup, which I took advantage of and the customer service was fantastic! After a quick chat and review of the page in front of me, I was well on my way to taking the next steps in achieving the certification I desired.

Let’s cover some of the negative aspects of the site. Firstly, I started at the homepage and navigated to my best ability, yet found no connection to the Excel certification via the endless stream of menus. Clicking a header menu item would change the footer menu, or worse, it would switch to a different website completely. The content overload was frustrating at best, and the deep menus only added insult to the already worsening injury. To make matters worse, a search for study material fell flat on its face, producing three different webpages for three similar results; the graphics on the search were also lame and just as the weak number of returns, and there were so search suggestions. Needless to say, I was disappointed. All-in-all, I found the Microsoft website to be a fun place to surf around, but not great to get “the whole package” for the Excel certification.

**Bottom Line:**

The site is intoxicating; half of my time was spent on things which were completely useless. There are little annoyances everywhere which, over the course of an hour, add up! In the end, it’s worth using the search function to find the page containing information about Microsoft Office Certifications, but avoid the menus like the plague. I recommend getting the bulleted checklist of material needed to pass the exam and get out of there, don’t look back. Besides gathering basic information about the exam, this website is not worth the time.

(Microsoft, 2015)
**YOUTUBE.COM**

**Pros:**
- Advanced Search
- Reviews
- Comments
- Channels

**Cons:**
- Unrelated content
- Commercials
- User error

**Total Time Spent:**
- 2 Hours

It’s extremely hard to avoid YouTube these days. The power of the google search engine paired with a river of user content makes this site a wonderland of mischief and education. The content and comments which people leave makes the site feel very dynamic but can also be very distracting. The dark side of YouTube is an ever-present theme as well. Fabulously irrelevant content rears its head constantly, commercials abound, and human error is rampant. When cruising this site, one had better take a focused mind, a grain of salt, and a night-stick. Clicking a video could be perfect, or perfectly wrong!

More is more when it comes to videos. The days of watching three hours of scheduled programming have gone; now one will watch two minutes of video at a time for three hours instead! In earnest, YouTube.com is one of the best resources on the web, the ‘advanced search’ function creates a fantastic set of results to choose from, many of which are helpful. With a quick glance at the reviews, one can estimate a video’s worth and weed-out the losers before even watching them. The comments section of each video can lead to lively discussion with question and answer dialog being particularly useful especially when trying to learn something new. Channels on YouTube are also amazing resources. Finding the right channel loaded with content on a particular subject could be very beneficial; for the Excel exam, I would look for something with the words “Excel Basics” in the title, otherwise it may not be worth the time. With all this goodness listed, I’ll say that I didn’t get very much out of this site; which I will cover below.
Pranksters love to prank, and YouTube is rife with this madness. A “Rick Roll” is when a person clicks into a video only to discover that they have been misguided to a lame-duck music video; this prank has made itself known broadly within the pages of YouTube, and it’s no fun. Even worse is to experience long, unavoidable commercials only to be followed by a “Rick Roll” style prank, it can drive a person mad! Speaking of commercials, they don’t just come in the form of ads which the user can’t click out of; they are also there in the form of invisible popup windows within the embedded video player itself. Clicking one of these will send a user off-page to wherever the deceiver wants them sent, and that can be a headache at times. The biggest issue with YouTube though, is its content being user generated. Sometimes, a user will rush through a lesson or beat around the bush trying to explain something that they aren’t too sure of; or maybe they have a thick accent and are, for all intents and purposes, unintelligible. Regardless of the type of error, one must understand that using YouTube.com as a learning tool has its many flaws and must be used with caution.

**Bottom Line:**

Though unnecessary, YouTube.com will almost certainly be used by many of those studying for the Excel certification exam. While true that it’s nice to be able to watch somebody do a process within the Excel environment, I find that reading about the process creates a deeper understanding. That being said, I don’t believe that YouTube.com is totally useless and actually, some may find that they prefer watching videos to reading, though I believe using that YouTube.com alone is not be enough for to pass the exam.

Sporadic results created frustration and knowledge gaps. It’s likely that there are training programs on certain YouTube channels which could have all the required teaching content within, but I’m not aware of such a channel. For this study I used YouTube on a lark a few times and ended up watching videos which didn’t help much. I recommend using YouTube as little as possible, it’s too easy to get lost or distracted and there are much better resources available elsewhere. (YouTube, 2015)
CERTIPORT

Pros:

- Easy to use

Cons:

- Vouchers are awkward
- No online booking

Total Time Spent:

- 3 Hours

Certiport is the branch of Pearson Vue which is partnered with Microsoft, HP, Adobe, Intuit, and others. As the name suggests, they are a port wherein a person can become certified in a myriad of different disciplines and skills. As a necessary component of the Microsoft Office Specialist Certification in Excel, one had better cozy up to this website, but that’s not too hard to do.

After getting registered one can use the ‘Shop’ tab to navigate to a page where they can choose the exam they’d like to take. A user performs the “drill down” method to get the exact exam chosen and then a few voucher options are made available to purchase. Once purchased, a user receives a voucher code which MUST be written down so that it can be brought into the testing center. Ideally the voucher information would be attached to the user’s profile but alas, it is not. After the purchase, one can drift back to the Certiport homepage and use the ‘Testing Centers’ tab to find the nearest port. Sadly, one cannot schedule the test on the website but rather, must call the testing center and book it live over the phone. All-in-all, this site is easy to use but it has a few snags.

Bottom Line:

The site is not glamorous, nor is it full of knowledge rather, it’s a necessary component to passing the exam. I recommend avoiding this site’s “test resources” as much as possible, they are extremely flawed compared to the Microsoft IT Academy or the Excel Boot Camp. When it comes to vouchers, I recommend the option with the retake; and my reasoning is simple: the test itself can be used as a training method if a retake is available. With an additional cost of $20, this seemed highly logical. The total cost of my exam voucher with the retake was $120. There also exists a voucher with a retake and practice test which was
$150. In general, I recommend using this website as little as possible; simply register, buy the voucher and get the phone number to call the testing center. (Certiport, 2015)

THE TESTING CENTER

Pros:

- On Campus
- Computers Work
- Silent

Cons:

- No Items Allowed
- Monitors are Small

Deep in the bowels of the Lommasson Center of the University of Montana is a quiet little room with a few computer desks locked behind a sound proof door. Outside is a small office with a set of lockers and a desk attendant who serves as a proctor and booking agent. When one walks in they hand a photo ID to the desk attendant and the name is checked against the testing schedule. After the proctoring fee is paid, a person is required to remove all of their personal items and stuff them into one of the available lockers. This caught me off guard because I was disallowed the use of everything down to my watch and my coffee mug; and the caffeine would have been nice! I was ushered into the quiet little room where a few students were clicking away at their keyboards working intensely with concerned expressions. I sat down and the proctor logged into the computer, and then I logged into my Certiport account. I was then asked to enter in my exam voucher information which I had written on a piece of paper. That sheet was then taken from me as I donned the ‘hearing protection ear muffs,’ and got started. My computer worked well, but the monitor was a bit small.

Bottom Line:

The testing center is not glamorous in any way, but it works. Nothing is allowed in and the environment is a bit stressful. The proctoring fee is $25 for regular tests and $5 if the test is for a class. I recommend taking a tour of the Lommasson center before the test just to create familiarity; it would be terrible to get lost before the exam.
THE TEST: NOTES TAKEN AFTER I PASSED THE EXAM

Pros:

- Easy
- 100% Given in Excel

Cons:

- Lots of Work
- Graded by Computer
- Glitches

A good set of instructions are given on multiple pages before clicking the start button which launches the testing program. To my relief there were no multiple choice or T/F questions, rather, the test was completely within the Excel environment yet had no access to help (F1). A little window could be found down below the Excel window which gave instructions on the 33 parts of the exam. Each listed item had a check box next to it though checking the boxes did not impact the score. Some of the items listed were things like, “Bold the text in the column labeled “French Racers” and increase the font to size 16.” Others were a bit more complex like, “Create a chart based on the information in columns M-R.” There was also a reference image for each of the three worksheets which I was required to work on. Some parts of the exam took much more time than others and admittedly, I did use all fifty minutes to complete this exam.

As I worked through each of the 33 steps I found that I had over prepared by a large margin. The more material I studied, the more my confidence increased, yet much of that study time was unnecessary. Total understanding of the tools and functions of Excel is not necessary to pass, for me it was speed which mattered most. Yet I found that my steady pace won out and I did not need to rush. Some frustrations did emerge however, and my score was dramatically affected due to conditions outside of my control.

Three Errors on my Test:

1. A syntax error caused a regular formula (=AVERAGE(range)) to return garbled data which translated across all three worksheets.
2. A color theme which I was required to use was not available.
3. When I documented these errors on each worksheet I was docked many points.
Had my test been graded by a person, I would not have lost points for any of the above mentioned items, yet because the test was graded by computer, my score was ravaged. In some ways my ignorance is to blame for the points missed due to adding information but the other two had nothing to do with me. It was disappointing to complete the test having known that I performed very well, only to see a passing score which reflected average performance. Nevertheless an email was sent to Certiport to have the issue rectified. I also spoke with the desk attendant about the issue, who revealed to me that I was the only person in years to take the Excel certification exam, and that it was possible that the installation of Excel could be faulty. She made a note of the errors and confidently sent me on my way with assurance that the program would be fixed for future test takers.

**Main Test Items from My Version of the Exam:**

- Conditional formatting with icons used to signify high, medium, and low
- Formatting like changing text, adding new text, naming ranges and hiding rows
- Filter, and perform a 2 dimensional sort in a table
- Some functions used were sumif, sum, average, max, min, right
- Using the FX button near the formula bar was invaluable
- Reference cells in separate worksheets
- Hyperlink to a specific cell in another worksheet
- 3d pie chart
- Photo cropping to a certain shape
- Import data into a new worksheet from a text file
EXPANDED LEARNING CHECKLIST (Microsoft, 2015)

Create and manage worksheets and workbooks

- Create worksheets and workbooks
  - Creating new blank workbooks; creating new workbooks using templates; importing files; opening non-native files directly in Excel; adding worksheets to existing workbooks; copying and moving worksheets
- Navigate through worksheets and workbooks
  - Searching for data within a workbook; inserting hyperlinks; changing worksheet order; using Go To; using Name Box
- Format worksheets and workbooks
  - Changing worksheet tab color; modifying page setup; inserting and deleting columns and rows; changing workbook themes; adjusting row height and column width; inserting watermarks; inserting headers and footers; setting data validation
- Customize options and views for worksheets and workbooks
  - Hiding worksheets; hiding columns and rows; customizing the Quick Access toolbar; customizing the Ribbon; managing macro security; changing workbook views; recording simple macros; adding values to workbook properties; using zoom; displaying formulas; freezing panes; assigning shortcut keys; splitting the window
- Configure worksheets and workbooks to print or save
  - Setting a print area; saving workbooks in alternate file formats; printing individual worksheets; setting print scaling; repeating headers and footers; maintaining backward compatibility; configuring workbooks to print; saving files to remote locations

Create cells and ranges

- Insert data in cells and ranges
  - Appending data to worksheets; finding and replacing data; copying and pasting data; using AutoFill tool; expanding data across columns; inserting and deleting cells
- Format cells and ranges
  - Merging cells; modifying cell alignment and indentation; changing font and font styles; using Format Painter; wrapping text within cells; applying Number format; applying highlighting; applying cell styles; changing text to WordArt
- Order and group cells and ranges
  - Applying conditional formatting; inserting sparklines; transposing columns and rows; creating named ranges; creating outline; collapsing groups of data in outlines; inserting subtotals
Create tables
- Create a table
  - Moving between tables and ranges; adding and removing cells within tables; defining titles
- Modify a table
  - Applying styles to tables; banding rows and columns; inserting total rows; removing styles from tables
- Filter and sort a table
  - Filtering records; sorting data on multiple columns; changing sort order; removing duplicates

Apply formulas and functions
- Utilize cell ranges and references in formulas and functions
  - Utilizing references (relative, mixed, absolute); defining order of operations; referencing cell ranges in formulas
- Summarize data with functions
  - Utilizing the SUM function; utilizing the MIN and MAX functions; utilizing the COUNT function; utilizing the AVERAGE function
- Utilize conditional logic in functions
  - Utilizing the SUMIF function; utilizing the AVERAGEIF function; utilizing the COUNTIF function
- Format and modify text with functions
  - Utilizing the RIGHT, LEFT and MID functions; utilizing the TRIM function; utilizing the UPPER and LOWER functions; utilizing the CONCATENATE function

Create charts and objects
- Create a chart
  - Creating charts and graphs; adding additional data series; switching between rows and columns in source data; using Quick Analysis
- Format a chart
  - Adding legends; resizing charts and graphs; modifying chart and graph parameters; applying chart layouts and styles; positioning charts and graphs
- Insert and format an object
  - Inserting text boxes; inserting SmartArt; inserting images; adding borders to objects; adding styles and effects to objects; changing object colors; modifying object properties; positioning objects
BIBLIOGRAPHY