

The (not-so-)daunting essay question

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The SBE Program of Certification has several different levels that are tailored to varying degrees of experience. In most cases, to obtain SBE Certification an individual must pass an examination to demonstrate his or her knowledge of broadcast engineering. These exams all use a multiple-choice format.

In addition to the multiple-choice test, the exam for Certified Senior Broadcast Engineer also includes an essay question. This essay question is one of the essential parts of the senior exam. It seems that there is some mystery about the essay question. I hope to clarify the importance of the essay question and demonstrate its importance in the senior-level examination process.

Let's review the requirements for senior level certification. An applicant must first have 10 years or more of responsible broadcast engineering or related technology experience. Then the individual must achieve a passing grade on an examination comprised of multiple-choice questions and one essay question.

You may wonder why the senior-level examination includes an essay question. The answer is actually rather simple. When the Senior Broadcast Engineer certification was created, it was felt that an additional element should be added in the exam process to demonstrate the applicant's proficiency in the field of broadcast engineering. An applicant with 10 years or more of experience should be able to more than adequately answer an essay-type question related to a job responsibility that he or she has held. This type of question affords the examinee an opportunity to demonstrate from practical experience his or her knowledge of a subject.

Similar to other SBE certification exams, 50 multiple choice questions are randomly selected from a pool of questions by computer. Each question is worth two points. During this portion of the exam, standard reference texts can be used. While it is important for an individual to know the material by heart, it is just as important to demonstrate that he or she is able to find the correct answer when needed. We can use books and references in our jobs, so it makes sense to allow the same opportunities on the exam. After completing the multiple-choice questions, the examinee then answers an essay question.

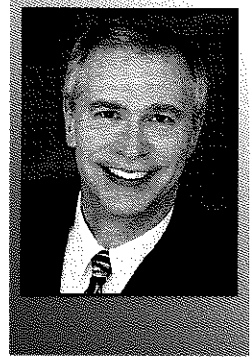
How is an essay question assigned, administered and graded? When an applicant completes the application to take an examination for the senior level, he or she will be asked to provide a record of experience of their last 10 years. Many applicants also attach a biography or resume that provides further experience details. The certification director at the SBE National Office then assigns a member of the SBE National Certification Committee the task of reviewing the application. Upon approving the application, the committee member selects three essay questions from a question pool. The question pool covers various topics related to radio and television. The committee member selects three questions based on the experience information submitted by the applicant.

On the day of the examination, after the examinee answers the 50 multiple-choice questions, the examinee then chooses one of the three essay questions selected for him or her to answer. Unlike the multiple choice question portion of the exam, reference texts are not allowed to be used while answering the essay question.

A passing score of at least 84 is required for an individual to obtain certification on the senior level. The essay question may contribute up to 20 points towards this 84-point total. Doing the math, a person must score a minimum of 64 points on the multiple-choice questions and score a perfect 20 on the essay question to pass. Additionally, an examinee must score at least 10 points on the essay question in order to pass. As you can see, there is considerable worth placed on the essay question.

Once the multiple-choice questions have been graded, and it has been determined that an individual has scored at least 64, the essay question response is then sent to three members of the National Certification Committee to be graded. The three members independently grade the essay and return their scores to the SBE National Office. The National Office averages the three scores to obtain a single score for the essay response. Again, the single score for the essay must be at least a 10 for the individual to pass - regardless of what was scored on the multiple-choice question portion of the examination. If the averaged essay score is a 10 or greater, the essay score is added to what was achieved on the multiple choice questions. This becomes the total score for the examination and must be 84 or greater to achieve a passing grade.

So how do you prepare for the essay question? Because I have graded several essay responses, I will offer my own thoughts and observations that I feel could help you to prepare to take the essay portion of the senior examination.



1. Submit an accurate application. Be specific on your application and other documents you attach as to your work experience and responsibilities. This greatly assists the committee member assigning your essay questions to assign those questions that are in line with your experience.
2. Neatness counts. On the essay response, be neat in any drawings you provide and ensure your writing is legible. The committee person assigned to grade your question is a grader and not a prophet. Messy drawings and handwriting may work against you if the grader can't follow or understand what you have written. (Hint: A small straight-edge ruler with no formulas or notes on it may be useful for any supporting drawings you may need to provide.)
3. Be detailed. Provide appropriate supporting detail on any drawings or explanations. Think of this in terms of preparing something that would be reviewed by your peers, boss or other industry professionals.
4. Be thorough. Ensure that all the items mentioned in the essay question are answered fully. Read the question carefully. It may be worth making a checklist to ensure you address all the areas required. Once your essay answer is complete, reread the question to verify that all the elements are included.

I hope this helps you understand the importance of the essay question and the process used to assign and grade it. Don't let the essay question intimidate you from obtaining the senior level of certification that you deserve. As you answer the essay question, let your experience "do the talking" and let those creative juices flow. I know from experience as I took the senior exam and passed.