

ARE FAQ--General

Last Revised: **December 13, 2006**. See [revision history](#) below.

Introduction:

This FAQ was compiled of questions that frequently arise on areforum.org. The author has made every attempt to be objective—basing the responses on fact and the consensus of forum regulars, many of whom have passed all divisions and become licensed. Please check here to see if this document answers your question adequately before posting it on the forum.

1.1 How many questions must I answer correctly on a multiple-choice division to pass? Are some questions weighted more heavily than others? Is there a penalty for guessing?

The ARE is graded using a “cut score” or “Modified Angoff Method,” in which a panel of experts periodically determines the appropriate cutoff. The pass threshold is not published. According to forum guru Kevin67, “NCARB has stated - in an [interview \[with\] ArchVoices](#) - that the questions are in fact weighted by difficulty. So it is not a strict percentage issue.” [[Kevin’s original post](#)]

The “Cut Score Study” in which a panel of NCARB-certified architects evaluate the ARE and establish “pass” and “fail” usually occurs every five years^[1], with the last in early 2004. During that study, score reports were delayed and communication between NCARB, State Boards, and candidates was poor to non-existent.

Not knowing how the height of the hurdles is a frustrating aspect of preparing for the ARE, and leaves a candidate with very little to gauge her performance on exam as she walks out of a Prometric center.

There is no penalty for wrong answers, so you should answer every question. Leaving questions “Marked for Review” has no bearing on how they are graded. It is not necessary to unmark all questions at the end of your exam.

See also:

§ ArchVoices, [03.12.04 ARE Score Reporting](#)

§ ArchVoices, [04.30.04 ARE Score Reporting Follow-up](#)

1.2 What are the pass rates for the ARE?

NCARB posts pass rates annually. [[2000-2005 data](#)] Currently they range from 63% to 77%. The pass rate for Lateral Forces was as high as 92% in 2003, but is currently in line with other divisions at 76%. Graphic divisions typically have lower pass rates than multiple-choice divisions. Building

Planning and Building technology were at 63% and 66% in 2005, respectively. Bear in mind that this data is based on all exams including re-takes. First time pass rates are not published.

1.3 How long will I have to wait to find out if I passed a multiple-choice division?

Multiple-choice exams are usually graded by Prometric on Thursday evenings. After Friday, ARE Operations sends results letters to your State or Provincial Board, apparently via FedEx. Then it is up to your board to record your score and forward a letter to you. Some boards are more efficient at this than others. Some Boards have “Direct Registration” arrangements and pass/fail letters are sent directly to candidates from NCARB. States such as Texas and Florida have websites where candidates can view test results.

1.4 What is the “Prometric Trick?”

The Prometric trick was a non-foolproof method to attempt to determine if you passed or failed a division before NCARB officially released results. The trick was possible because of a “back door” in Prometric’s scheduling website which allowed candidates to schedule retakes of failed exams immediately after they were graded. In early November 2006, Prometric changed their eligibility system, and now requires candidates to wait four months after failing a division before they are able to schedule the retake.

If you fail a division, Prometric will send you a new Authorization to Test four months after you initially took the division. Your Candidate ID Number will not change.

1.5 How does the “Prometric Trick” work if I just took my last graphic or multiple-choice exam?

The Prometric trick has been eliminated. See 1.4 above.

1.6 How long will I have to wait to find out if I passed a graphic division? What are “graphic batches?” What is “cut day?”

The short answer is anywhere from three weeks to two months.

Graphic exams usually graded on three-week intervals, though holidays and changes in the test can cause delays. These three-week periods are referred to as batches on the Forum. A single holiday frequently extends the batch by a week. Batches are usually graded and results are sent to state boards two and a half weeks after the batch ends. If you take more than one graphic division in the same batch, you may receive those results in the same envelope, depending on your state board. The last day of a batch is frequently referred to as “cut day” on the ARE Forum.

There are always threads at the top of the general topics forum where candidates share intelligence on the latest batches and grading dates. Candidates also sometimes note the batch and grading dates on the [ARE Forum Calendar](#).

Example graphic batch: June 8 through June 28, 2006:

Grading was delayed to July 21 because of the July 4th holiday. A candidate who took a graphic exam on June 8th would expect results in the mail no sooner than July 26 (nearly eight weeks after taking the exam).

1.7 If I fail, will NCARB tell me the areas in which I was deficient?

Yes. If you fail, the front of the letter from NCARB will list the Content Areas (multiple choice) or Vignettes (graphic) in which your performance was “marginal”. If you were “below minimal competence” in any areas, they will be listed with an asterisk. No other information is provided. Therefore, beyond the asterisk, you don’t know how close you were to passing. [[Sample fail letter](#)]

1.8 How are graphic divisions graded?

According to NCARB:

There have been many common misconceptions about the ARE. One of the biggest was that the paper-and-pencil vignettes were graded using "subjective" criteria. In the past, NCARB developed very specific objective grading criteria and trained the architects who volunteered to grade exams in using this objective criteria. NCARB never allowed the graders to apply their own subjective criteria to exams. With computer grading, the only real change is that committees of architects have already determined the objective grading criteria, and that criteria has been transferred to a computer program instead of human graders.

The computer-delivered vignettes, like the paper-and-pencil vignettes, are designed to allow for many correct answers. There is no one right answer, with the exception of some very technical Site Planning vignettes, such as laying out setbacks. Just as in the paper-and-pencil versions, the vignette scoring procedures allow for errors to occur without automatically assigning a failing score. The scoring engines evaluate the solutions to the vignettes in a holistic manner where minor errors are compensated for by overall compliance with the programmatic and technical aspects of each

[2]
vignette.

On the issue of quality control, NCARB states:

Members of select NCARB committees establish the grading standards for each vignette. Throughout the year, randomly selected solutions are reviewed by these committees of architects to ensure that the software accurately reflects the professional judgment of this group of practitioners.

[3]

It is unclear how frequently and how many vignettes are reviewed under this process. [\[4\]](#)

1.9 What is the “Rolling Clock?”

The “rolling clock” went into effect January 1, 2006, and requires candidates to pass all divisions of the ARE within five years. Some states (notably Pennsylvania) have had their own “rolling clocks” and have their own transitional rules. The ARE guidelines provide three grandfather clauses for the implementation of the “rolling clock:”

§ *For applicants who have passed all divisions of the ARE by January 1, 2006, regardless of the time taken, such applicants will have passed the ARE.*

§ *For applicants who have passed one or more but not all divisions of the ARE by January 1, 2006, such applicants will have five years from the date of the first (non-exempt) passed division to pass all remaining divisions. [Exams passed prior to January 1, 2006, are exempt and will NOT have to be retaken.] If a candidate fails to pass all remaining divisions within the initial five-year period, the candidate is given a new five-year period from the date of the second oldest passed division. The five-year period shall commence after January 1, 2006, on the date when the first passed division is administered.*

§ *For applicants who have passed no divisions of the ARE by January 1, 2006, such applicants shall be governed by the above five-year requirement. The five-year period shall commence on the date when the first passed division is administered.* [\[5\]](#)

1.10 Is my older edition of an ALS/Kaplan study guide adequate?

Architectural License Seminars published review material from 1986 to 2004, when [Kaplan](#) acquired ALS. As of 2006, Kaplan has published this material in three editions, with the cover art and the addition of sustainable design information being the only major changes. Study guides for some divisions that had previously been published in two volumes were combined to a single volume in the 2006 editions. The actual content of the books is largely unchanged, and many books are poorly edited and have typographical errors and discontinuities [\[6\]](#). The largest change to the content occurred after the 2004 editions, when sustainability and LEED topics were incorporated. Kaplan published an amendment to the 2004 editions, which is available from the [ARE Forum FTP site](#). As these guides are not readily affordable (list prices around \$75 per division for the study guide), candidates usually find that earlier editions on loan from AIA chapters or other libraries or purchased second hand are sufficient.

1.11 The six-month wait to retake is totally unfair. Shouldn't we petition NCARB?

NCARB states two reasons for the six-month wait:

First, the exams are not a test of luck. It is important to spend the time between test administrations gaining additional knowledge and experience in the particular areas being tested. Second, NCARB is developing a large library of test questions and vignettes, but the library is not of sufficient size to offer each division of the exam more than once every six months. [\[7\]](#)

For a colorful discussion of this issue be sure to read “[Lobbying NCARB for 6 month penalty](#)”

[relaxation](#).” The bottom line is that NCARB is a big ship to sink (or even sway), and your effort is probably better spent focusing on the re-take.

1.12 In what order should I take the exams?

Since everyone has differing academic and professional backgrounds, learning styles, and test-taking abilities, there’s no ideal game plan. Some of the strategies are: grouping exams with similar content, starting with more focused exams (such as GS, LF or CD) and working toward more general exams (PD, MM), or starting with general and working toward the specific.

Because the graphic divisions use a CAD interface that is unlike any commercial CAD software, it is a good idea to take these divisions concurrently so you won’t have to re-learn the interface. Since score reporting takes longer for graphic divisions (see 1.6 above), you may have an agonizing wait if your last exam is a graphic division.

A good overview of exam strategies is [EricB’s “Fin” post](#).

1.13 Can I contest a division I have failed?

The short answer is, “Depends on your state, and it would be costly and detrimental to future reciprocity.” According to forum regular Kevin67:

There are only a few states that allow challenges or reviews. "Review" means allowing you to see your test for a limited period of time, on a laptop, with an NCARB representative present - though they don't tell you what it is that you did wrong. "Challenge" means asking the state to consider changing the result. Some states allow review only, some allow challenge only, a very small number allow both, and about 75% of all states don't allow either.

NCARB will not accept a "pass" that is the result of a challenge to a "fail" on a graphic exam. The impact of that is that if you did happen to be in a state that allowed a challenge, and if you were successful in getting your state to pass you, you'd be considered to have passed only in that state! If you wanted to get NCARB certified and/or get reciprocity in most other states you'd still have to take and pass the test again to NCARB's satisfaction. [The implementation of the “rolling clock” (see 1.9) would further complicate your eligibility.]

Besides, it costs \$300 even to look at your failed test, in the states that [\[8\]](#) allow this.

See NCARB’s State [Registration Requirements](#) to determine if your state allows review or challenge.

1.14 What do I need to read to pass [PD / GS / LF / ME / MM / CD]?

Since everyone has differing academic and professional backgrounds, learning styles, and test-taking abilities, there's no big red "easy button" as in the Staples television ads. NCARB states that the ARE "is a practice-based exam and not a test of book knowledge or material learned in the academic environment. There is no substitute for a well-rounded internship to help prepare you for the ARE [\[9\]](#)." You will likely read very different opinions from different candidates regarding which sources they found helpful and relevant to each division. The bottom line is that only you know what your strengths and weaknesses lie.

Also complicating this issue is the many questions in the pool that may appear on an exam. Candidates taking the same division on the same day may have very different opinions as to topics that were emphasized on that division. Some candidates have expressed that the NCARB Study Guides have sample questions that more representative of those on the actual exam than other sources. ("Study Guide" may be a misnomer, as they contain only sample questions and answers.)

Most forum regulars recommend being familiar with the primary sources (as cited in the [ARE Guidelines](#)) in addition to reviewing with study guides such as those published by Kaplan or PPI.

1.15 Do I have to apply through NCARB to be eligible for the ARE?

No. In some states you may apply directly to the state, and document your internship without an NCARB record. See NCARB's State [Registration Requirements](#).

1.16 Do I need a NAAB accredited degree to be eligible for the ARE?

No. Some states accept a four-year and other degrees, but require more documented experience. There are thirteen states that currently accept a high-school diploma with significantly more experience. See NCARB's State [Registration Requirements](#).

1.17 Is the ARE the only exam I need to pass to become licensed?

No. Some states have additional requirements, ranging from straightforward take-home exams on State Laws, to California's Supplemental Exam, or CSE, a lengthy oral exam with a pass rate of around 50%. See the specifics for your state in NCARB's State [Registration Requirements](#).

1.18 What is a Direct Registration state?

Some states participate in the Direct Registration Program, in which NCARB "manages all candidate eligibility and score reporting processes."^{[\[10\]](#)} Each state appears to have different arrangements with NCARB. In some states, exam results are mailed directly from Washington DC, in others (such as Colorado) results are sent to the state board and then forwarded to the candidate.

After you have passed all exams in a Direct Registration state, NCARB forwards all your records to your state board. Then it is up to the state to issue your license. Some states have other requirements in addition to the ARE. (See 1.18)

NCARB lists Direct Registration states with an asterisk inside the back cover of the [ARE Guidelines](#).

1.19 What calculators are allowed on the exam? Do I need a calculator for all the divisions?

You should bring a basic scientific calculator to every division, even the graphic divisions—which have an on-screen calculator available. You wouldn't want to miss a question because you had to use an unfamiliar calculator. It is also a good idea to make sure your calculator is dual power (solar and battery). Some candidates have found light levels at the testing stations inadequate to power a solar calculator. You may also want to bring a copy of the [ARE Guidelines](#) with you, in case the proctor checking you in is unclear on NCARB's calculator guidelines.

Recently, debate over foot/inch construction calculators has arisen, and though their guidelines don't specifically prohibit them [\[11\]](#), NCARB has said they are not permitted. You will probably find only a few problems on each exam that require foot/inch conversions, and that a construction calculator won't save you much time in the long run.

1.20 Do all the questions on a multiple choice exam count toward my score? What are "pretest" questions?

You will likely encounter some questions on the exam that NCARB is testing, and they won't count toward your score. According to NCARB:

In order for NCARB to know the average difficulty of a test, each question must have been administered to a large number of candidates.

These "pretest" questions are scattered throughout each test so that statistical information can be collected on the questions for use in future exams. These questions do not count toward your final score. [\[12\]](#)

1.21 I had a computer glitch during my exam. Where do I report this?

It is important that you report any computer malfunctions promptly. If the test center is unable to remedy the situation, you should notify ARE Operations in writing by mail or fax. NCARB will not consider malfunctions that were reported more than ten days after taking the test. Be sure to read all the information under "Reporting Test Concerns" on pages 26 and 27 of the [ARE Guidelines](#).

1.22 What is the "areforum.org FTP site?" How do I access it? How do I upload materials?

The FTP site is a server where candidates can share **non-copyrighted** materials. Documents in this area are frequently referred to as "the FTP documents" or "the FTP." You can access the FTP material by clicking the FTP button at the top of any forum area and following the instructions.

Revision History:

2006.08.17: First posted to <http://www.areforum.org/>

2006.12.13: Updated to reflect the closure of the “Prometric Trick” loophole. Removed item regarding exam confidentiality.

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- [1] NCARB. [ARE Guidelines](#), Version 3.1. Page 29.
 - [2] NCARB. ARE Study Guide: Graphic Divisions, Version 3.1. Pages 10-11.
 - [3] NCARB. [ARE Guidelines](#), Version 3.1. Page 29.
 - [4] ARE Forum. [“Graphics Test Scores – NADA”](#)
 - [5] NCARB. [ARE Guidelines](#), Version 3.1. Page 8.
 - [6] ARE Forum. [“Kaplan books full of typos, errors, omissions”](#)
 - [7] NCARB. ARE Study Guide: Graphic Divisions, Version 3.1. Page 11.
 - [8] ARE Forum. ["ARE Reviews/Challenges"](#) and [“Review and Challenge of Graphics Exams”](#)
 - [9] NCARB. ARE Study Guide: Graphic Divisions, Version 3.1. Page 5.
 - [10] NCARB. [ARE Guidelines](#), Version 3.1. Page 14.
 - [11] NCARB. [ARE Guidelines](#), Version 3.1. Page 3.
 - [12] NCARB. ARE Study Guide: Graphic Divisions, Version 3.1. Page 6.