



Social Work Licensing Exams

Licensing exams are a crucial component in nearly every licensed profession, and social work is no exception. Throughout the United States and in two Canadian provinces, social workers who are otherwise qualified must pass an examination to become licensed.

The exams provided by the Association of Social Work Boards are used in every U.S. state except California, as well as in the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and British Columbia. More than 36,000 ASWB exams are administered annually.

Social work licensing exams, by the numbers...

- **170** multiple-choice questions
- **20** “pretest” questions, which are not counted toward the score
- **4-hour** time limit
- **200+** testing sites internationally and in the U.S. and Canada, with ongoing testing by appointment
- **\$260** registration fee for the Clinical and Advanced Generalist exams
- **\$230** registration fee for the Bachelors and Masters exams
- **\$35** plus \$3 shipping and handling to purchase a printed study guide from ASWB
- **\$85** to purchase an online, full-length practice test from ASWB (Bachelors, Masters and Clinical only)
- **90-day** wait to retake the test for candidates who do not pass
- **36,000+** exams administered in 2013
- Generally, **93–106** correct answers (out of 150 questions) needed to pass, depending on the exam form; all ASWB exams are pass/fail, and the passing raw score is the same in every state, province or territory

To take the exams:

- Apply for a license in the state, province or territory where you would like to practice.
- Download the Candidate Handbook from the ASWB website (www.aswb.org).
- Once your application is approved and ASWB receives your approval information, register for the exam with ASWB. You can do this online (www.aswb.org) or by phone (888.579.3926).
- After your registration is processed, you will receive an Authorization to Test by email, and you can contact PearsonVUE, ASWB’s testing contractor, to schedule your exam.
- Tests are administered on computers at test centers, and candidates receive an unofficial score report from the test center upon completion of the exam.

Exam category	Intended for	Pass rate (2013) (first-time test-takers only)
Bachelors	BSWs with 0–2 years of experience	77.8%
Masters	MSWs with 0–2 years of experience	82.3%
Advanced Generalist	MSWs with 2+ years of experience in non-clinical settings	75.3%
Clinical	MSWs with 2+ years of experience in clinical settings	77.9%

Exam development

Before any candidate sits down to take a social work licensing exam, ASWB has done its homework. The process begins with the practice analysis, a major survey of the practice of social work. The results of this survey give ASWB a highly accurate profile of social work practice and help the association establish the various categories of the examination offered. The results of the practice analysis are content outlines, also referred to as exam blueprints. These outlines, and the knowledge, skills and ability statements associated with them, can be found on ASWB’s website, www.aswb.org.

These blueprints are used to develop the exams and to generate passing scores. All of ASWB’s exams are pass/fail. In general, test-takers need to answer between 93 and 106 questions correctly to pass the test. The actual number varies depending on the difficulty of the exact version, or *form*, of the exam. Having multiple forms allows ASWB to make sure that any candidate who retakes the test will not see the same set of questions. A psychometric process called *equating* means that the passing score for each form represents a consistent level of difficulty. A passing score is a pass in every jurisdiction where ASWB exams are used.

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ASWB offers two versions of online practice tests for the Bachelors, Masters and Clinical exams.

Printed study guides are available for all exam categories.

Questions for the exams are written by practicing social workers, a group of individuals who are selected to reflect diversity in practice setting, ethnicity, race and geography. Every question is then reviewed by ASWB's Examination Committee, a group of experienced social workers who approve all questions before they appear on the exams.

Every question starts out as a "pretest" question, included among the 170 questions on the exam but not counted toward the passing score. After they've been answered often enough to provide statistically significant data, the pretest questions are evaluated for difficulty as well as for signs of bias. Only after this statistical review is completed can a question become part of the bank of scored items on the exams. Each of the exam categories has its own bank of questions, and they all go through the same process.

Validity, Reliability, and Test Fairness

Validity and reliability are terms used in psychometrics—the study of test-taking. A test that is *valid* measures what it is supposed to be measuring and ensures that minimally competent candidates are passing the exam. A test that is *reliable* is consistent—candidates of similar abilities consistently get similar scores.

Because ASWB's exams are high-stakes tests, validity and reliability are critical to the exams. ASWB ensures validity through the way the test is constructed, from the practice analysis through the analysis of pretest questions. Reliability is established through statistical monitoring of individual test question performance, as well as psychometric techniques used to generate the passing scores and equate different forms.

The social work licensing exams are intended to measure social work knowledge, not reading ability, deductive reasoning, or the values of one culture over another. All exam questions are edited for simplicity and straightforward language; jargon is eliminated as much as possible. Readability tests show that the ASWB exams are written at about a 10th-grade (U.S.) reading level. They're more difficult than a newspaper but less challenging than standard social work texts used in BSW and MSW programs.

ASWB guards against cultural bias by including diverse participants at every phase of exam development. Individual questions are monitored for Differential Item Functioning (DIF), or the tendency for one subgroup of test-takers to answer an item in ways that are disproportionate. When an item demonstrates DIF (usually in the pretest stage), the question is returned to the Examination Committee to determine where the problem might be.

Special testing arrangements

Test-takers with disabilities may request accommodations for the ASWB licensing exams. Candidates requesting accommodations must complete forms documenting their disability and have the accommodations approved before registering to take the test. You can find out more about disability accommodations at www.aswb.org.

Some states, territories, and provinces allow special testing arrangements for candidates whose first language is not English. Typically these arrangements include additional time and the use of dictionaries. Candidates requesting these arrangements must contact ASWB for information about applying at 888-579-3926.