Get SET
Practitioner Resource

A Guide to Understanding the Certificate of Qualification Examination Process in Ontario's Apprenticeship Training System

Acknowledgements

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Contents

How to Use This Resource	4
Part 1: Unpacking the Certificate of Qualification	5
1.1 What Is the "Certificate of Qualification" Within Ontario's Apprenticeship System?	6
• Compulsory vs. Non-Compulsory Trades	7
• The Red Seal (Interprovincial Standards) Program	7
1.2 Who Writes the C of Q and Why?	8
1.3 Where and When is the C of Q Written?	10
1.4 How Is the C of Q Structured?	11
• Format	11
• Content Organization on the C of Q: Task Areas	11
• What the Exam Tests	13
Part 2: Considerations Around the Certificate of Qualification	14
2.1 Why are Apprentices Sometimes Unsuccessful on the C of Q?	15
2.2 What Preparation Is Already Available Through the Apprenticeship System?	17
2.3 What Type of Preparation Might Get SET Programs Provide?	19
2.4 What Type of Preparation Is Not Feasible for Get SET Programs to Provide?.	20
Summary	21
References	22

How to Use This Resource

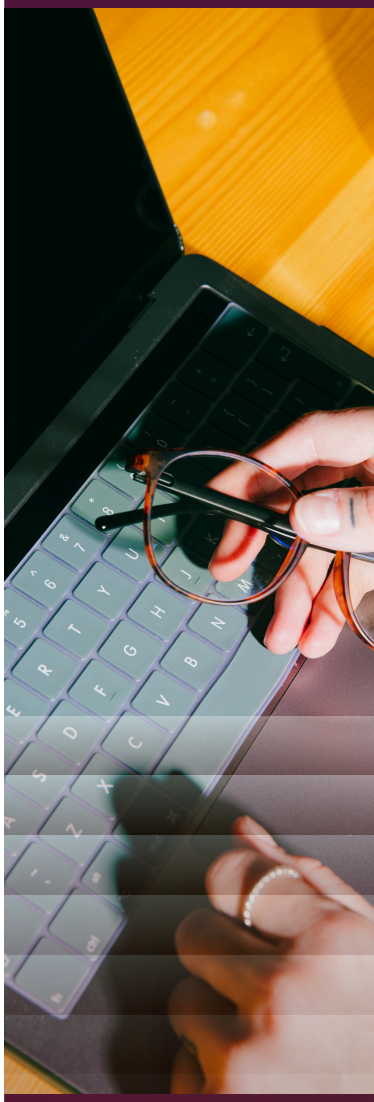
This resource is designed for Get SET (Skills, Education and Training) programs who would like to learn more about the Certificate of Qualification (C of Q) exam process within Ontario's apprenticeship training system.

It does not cover trade-specific information but provides an overview of the C of Q purpose, process, and administration. This resource will help Get SET programs support apprentices in developing exam preparation skills as they are getting ready to write or re-write the C of Q for their chosen trade. Throughout the guide, notes and key insights for Get SET practitioners are included.

The resource is organized in two parts:

Part 1 provides background on the C of Q in Ontario: what it is, who administers it, where and when it is written, and how it is structured. This background supports practitioners in having accurate, confident conversations with apprentices and in understanding the exam context for which they are preparing.

Part 2 explores key considerations around the C of Q: why apprentices are sometimes not successful, what preparation is already available through the apprenticeship system, and what Get SET programs can—and cannot—realistically provide.



Important Scope Note

This resource provides information about the C of Q exam process and ways in which Get SET programs may be able to support apprentices with exam performance readiness. Get SET practitioners are not expected to teach trade content, and this resource does not contain trade-specific information. Apprentices who choose to come to Get SET to improve their exam performance on the C of Q are registered apprentices who already know their trade. Get SET's role is to help them demonstrate that knowledge under exam conditions.

Skilled Trades Ontario (STO) is the official authority for all questions about certification, exam booking, format, and results. Practitioners should direct apprentices to STO for any official information.

Part 1

Unpacking the Certificate of Qualification (C of Q)

1.1 What Is the "Certificate of Qualification" Within Ontario's Apprenticeship System?

In Ontario, the Certificate of Qualification (C of Q) is a provincial credential that confirms an apprentice has met the certification requirements for a skilled trade. For most trades, this means passing a written examination. The C of Q is issued by Skilled Trades Ontario (STO) and represents the final step in the formal apprenticeship training pathway.

Understanding where the C of Q sits within the larger apprenticeship system helps Get SET practitioners frame their exam preparation support more effectively.

Stages	What Happens	Get SET Relevance
1. **Trade Registration**	Learner registers as an apprentice with STO; a training agreement is established	May have occurred 5 or more years ago; apprentice brings this experience to Get SET
2. **In-School Training**	Apprentice attends periodic training at an approved Training Delivery Agent (TDA), usually a public college but may be a trade union or private trainer	Apprentice may have recently completed their final level of in-school training; trade-specific knowledge should be in place
3. **On-the-Job Hours**	Apprentice accumulates required hours and competencies working under a journeyperson; requirements and hours vary by trade	Apprentice has extensive practical experience—but practical skill does not automatically transfer to exam performance
4. **Eligibility & Exam Booking**	Once hours and levels are successfully completed, apprentice becomes eligible to write the C of Q; they book their exam through STO	Practitioners should confirm apprentice has confirmed their eligibility with STO before developing an exam preparation plan/timeline
5. **C of Q Examination**	Apprentice writes the exam; minimum passing mark is 70%	Developing exam performance skills is the focus for Get SET programs
6. **Journeyperson Certificate of Qualification**	Successful apprentice receives the C of Q credential, recognizing them as a certified journeyperson in their trade	Get SET can help support exam performance by providing exam preparation skills

Compulsory vs. Non-compulsory Trades

Ontario classifies trades as either compulsory or non-compulsory. (In the past, the terms “restricted” and “voluntary” were used to classify trades in Ontario.)

Compulsory trades: Individuals must hold a valid C of Q (or be a registered apprentice) to legally work in the trade. Some examples of compulsory trades include Electrician - Construction and Maintenance, Plumber, Automotive Service Technician and Hairstylist. For compulsory trades, passing the C of Q is a legal and employment requirement.

Non-compulsory trades: Certification is not legally required to work in the trade, but holding a C of Q is valued by employers and may affect wages, advancement, and professional standing. Examples of non-compulsory trades include Horticultural Technician, Retail Meat Cutter, Welder, and many others in the motive power, industrial, and service sectors.

The Red Seal (Interprovincial Standards) Program

Many Ontario trades participate in the federally administered Red Seal Program. A Red Seal endorsement on the C of Q means the holder’s certification is recognized across participating provinces and territories—enabling labour mobility across Canada.

For apprentices, the Red Seal designation adds value to the credential. It also means that the C of Q exam may be developed at a national level and reflect national occupational standards, though STO remains the Ontario point of contact.

Practitioner Note

Use this language with apprentices “Skilled Trades Ontario is your official source for anything about your certification, exam booking, and results. Our work together focuses on how you prepare and how you perform on exam day.”

1.2 Who Writes the C of Q, and Why?

The C of Q exam is written by apprentices who have completed an Ontario apprenticeship program in a trade with a certifying exam. The apprentice must also have received their Certificate of Apprenticeship which verifies that they have completed all required in-school and on-the-job training for their chosen trade.

Apprentices in a compulsory trade must write and pass the C of Q to legally work in their trade as a qualified, licensed journeyperson. Apprentices working in non-compulsory trades may choose to write the C of Q to promote their employability and standing as a skilled trades professional.

The C of Q exam exists to serve several functions:

1. To establish and protect consistent, province-wide certification standards for a trade (and nationally for Red Seal trade)

2. To provide a structured, verifiable way for apprentices to demonstrate journeyperson-level knowledge.

3. To protect public safety and maintain public confidence in the credential—especially in compulsory trades.

Several bodies are involved in the development and administration of the C of Q exams:

Skilled Trades Ontario (STO): The provincial authority responsible for apprenticeship registration, certification, and exam administration in Ontario. Apprentices book their exam, receive results, and obtain their certificate through STO.

Trade Advisory Committees: Subject matter experts from industry (journeypersons, employers, educators) contribute to the development and validation of exam content based on the trade's Apprenticeship Training Standard. Exam questions reflect what journeypersons are expected to know and apply on the job.

The Red Seal Program / ESDC: For interprovincially endorsed trades, the Red Seal program (supported through Employment and Social Development Canada / ESDC) coordinates national occupational analyses and contributes to exam development standards.

Training Delivery Agents (TDAs): Public colleges and other institutions (trade unions, private trainers) deliver in-school apprenticeship training at each level. The final level of training often includes trade-specific C of Q exam preparation. TDAs are not involved in developing the C of Q exam itself.

1.3 Where and When is the C of Q Written?

Apprentices write the C of Q at approved testing centres, which are typically located at public colleges across Ontario. Exam eligibility and booking are managed through the Skilled Trades Ontario portal.

What to Confirm	Why it Matters for Preparation	Who to Ask
Trade + pathway (e.g., Plumber-306A)	Ensures preparation targets the correct exam	Apprentice confirms with STO / registration documents
First attempt or re-write?	Affects confidence level, pacing needs, and what previous barriers were	Apprentice self-reports; STO retains documentation on previous attempts
Exam date (if booked)	Shapes timeline; determines how many study sessions are realistic	Apprentice confirms booking through STO
Time allowed for the exam	Required to set pacing targets during practice	Apprentice confirms with STO or testing centre
Number of questions	Required to calculate per-question pace	Apprentice confirms with STO or testing centre
Pass threshold	Minimum passing mark on the exam is 70%	Apprentice confirms with STO
Permitted materials (if any)	Most exams are closed book; some may allow reference materials	Apprentice confirms with STO or testing centre
Accommodation status	If apprentice has documented accommodations, these are handled through STO's exam booking process	Apprentice contacts STO directly

1.4 How Is the C of Q Structured?

The following general features apply to the C of Q exams.

Format

- **Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ):** The C of Q is a multiple-choice examination. Items typically present a question stem followed by four options (A, B, C, D). Some trades may include a small number of scenario-based items with longer stems.

- **Question Count:** C of Q exams contain between 90 to 150 items. The exact number varies by trade. Apprentices can confirm through STO.

- **Time Limit:** Exams are 3–4 hours in length. Time pressure can be a significant factor.

- **Pass Threshold:** The minimum pass mark is typically 70%.

Content Organization on the C of Q: Task Areas

Exam content is organized around the Skill Sets identified in the trade's Apprenticeship Training Standard. Each Skill Set corresponds to an area of journeyperson practice and carries a weighted percentage of the total exam.

This weighting is important for strategic preparation: if one skill set accounts for 35% of the exam, directing more practice time toward that area yields a higher return than spending equal time on every section.

Example structure (illustrative, not specific to a particular trade):

Task Area	Example Domain	Approximate Weight
Task Area A	Safety and Environmental Practices	15-20%
Task Area B	Core Technical Knowledge (Trade-Specific)	30-40%
Task Area C	Tools, Equipment, and Materials	15-20%
Task Area D	Trade Regulations and Codes	15-20%
Task Area E	Problem Diagnosis/Applied Judgement	10-15%

Practitioner Note

Practitioners are not expected to know the specific skill set breakdown for each trade. However, apprentices can access the Skill Set breakdown by consulting the Exam Counselling Sheet for their trade (available on the STO site).

What the Exam Tests?

The C of Q tests knowledge application—not just recall. Many items ask apprentices to select the correct procedure, regulation, or response in a described scenario. This means:

Apprentices who have strong hands-on experience may still struggle if they cannot apply that knowledge under within multiple-choice questions.

Reading comprehension and qualifier precision matter enormously—item stems frequently contain words like MOST, LEAST, FIRST, BEST, EXCEPT, and NOT that change the meaning of the question.

Speed-accuracy balance is a real factor: finishing all questions with adequate time to check work requires deliberate pacing practice.

Standardized test format itself may be unfamiliar—many apprentices have not written a formal, closed-book, timed multiple-choice exam in years.

Part 2

Considerations Around the Certificate of Qualification

2.1 Why are Apprentices Sometimes Unsuccessful on the C of Q?

The table below organizes common barriers into categories. Note that content knowledge gaps (Category 1) are outside Get SET's scope—the remaining categories are where Get SET support is relevant.

Category	Description	Get SET Role
1.Content Knowledge Gaps	Apprentice does not have sufficient trade knowledge to answer correctly. This may reflect incomplete training, gaps from earlier levels, or a trade area the learner has less hands-on experience in.	Out of scope for Get SET. Refer to TDA, union resources, or trade study guides.
2.Multiple-Choice exam Mechanics Deficits	Apprentice does not know how to read and process MCQ items effectively. Falls for distractors, misreads qualifiers (MOST, EXCEPT, FIRST), or selects the first plausible-looking answer rather than the best one.	Support apprentices to improve their strategies for approaching MCQ exams specifically and test-taking strategies in general.
3.Reading Comprehension Demands	Item stems and options require precise reading of academic and technical language. Apprentices with lower literacy levels, or those reading in an additional language, may struggle with the linguistic load regardless of trade knowledge.	Support apprentices to improve reading skills related to MCQ exams through item-level strategies, vocabulary work, and practice with complex stems.
4.Inadequate Study System	Apprentice studies passively (re-reading notes) rather than actively (retrieval practice, error review, spaced repetition). They may study intensively close to exam without systematic preparation over time	Support apprentices with activities related to study skills, memory techniques, etc.
5.Test Anxiety and Performance Regulation	Apprentice experiences significant anxiety that interferes with performance—freezing on hard items, rushing, blanking under time pressure, or confidence collapse after a few wrong answers	Support apprentices to recognize and manage their test anxiety and related stress.

Category	Description	Get SET Role
6.Pacing and Time Management	Apprentice runs out of time before completing the exam or wastes time on items they cannot answer instead of moving on and returning. End-of-exam time collapse is a common pattern.	Support apprentices with activities related to pacing and managing time during an exam.
7. Unfamiliarity with Standardized Testing	Many apprentices have not written a formal, timed, closed-book exam in years—sometimes decades – if ever. The format itself is unfamiliar, and exam-day logistics (what to bring, timing, centre protocols) add stress.	Support apprentices by providing short, sample MCQ tests (not necessarily related to trade content) to simulate exam conditions.
8. Language and Literacy Barriers	English is an additional language; or the apprentice's reading level affects their ability to navigate complex item stems under time pressure. This is distinct from content knowledge.	Support apprentices with activities to improve reading and vocabulary skills, especially related to MCQ exam format.
9. Logistical and Preparation Barriers	Apprentice waited too long to book the exam; did not understand the format; lacked access to practice materials; had no structured study plan or accountability.	Support apprentices in developing an overall plan to address both the exam process and exam preparation.

Key Practitioner Insight

Most apprentices who come to Get SET for exam readiness support have the trade knowledge—they have completed their on the job and in-school training and accumulated their required hours. The barriers that Get SET can address are almost entirely in Categories 2–9 above. The core message to learners is: "You know your trade. Our work together is about making sure you can show what you know under exam conditions."

2.2 What Preparation Is Already Available Through the Apprenticeship System?

Apprentices who enter Get SET for exam preparation may have already been exposed to some resources through their in-school training and/or through Skilled Trades Ontario, trade unions, industry associations, etc. Practitioners benefit from knowing what exists so they can build on it—not duplicate it.

Resource/ Channel	What it Provides	Practitioner Notes
Skilled Trades Ontario (STO) skillstradesontario.ca	Official information on exam booking, preparation, results, accommodations. Some trades have STO-linked study resources or practice opportunities.	Direct all logistics questions to Skilled Trades Ontario. Use STO's materials as a source of content practice items (where available) for MCQ.
Red Seal Program red-seal.ca	National occupational analyses, exam blueprints, and practice examinations for Red Seal trades. Freely available online. Organized by task area with approximate weightings.	This is an excellent source of practice items for MCQ drills. Practitioners do not need to know the content—the apprentice uses these as raw material for routine and pacing practice.
TDA Final-Level Exam Prep	Many TDAs (colleges and trade unions) include trade exam prep in the final level of in-school training. Apprentices may have recently completed this.	Ask apprentice: "Did your final level include any C of Q review or preparation?" This helps set baseline and identify what's already been covered.
Trade-Specific Study Guides	Many industry associations, unions, and commercial publishers produce trade-specific study materials—review guides, question banks, flashcard sets.	Encourage apprentices to bring any materials they have. These become the raw content for Get SET strategy practice.

Resource/ Channel	What it Provides	Practitioner Notes
Union or Industry Prep Programs	Some trades unions run pre-exam prep sessions for their members, sometimes including practice exams.	Ask apprentices if they have access to union resources. These may provide useful practice sets.
Online Communities and Peer Study	Trade-specific forums and social media groups where apprentices share study tips and experiences.	Acknowledge the existence of these resources; note that peer advice on exam content varies in reliability.

2.3 What Type of Preparation Might Get SET Programs Provide?

Get SET programs are well-positioned to provide exam performance readiness support. The following describes the scope of appropriate and defensible Get SET support:

MCQ strategy instruction: Teaching apprentices how to read, process, and respond to multiple-choice items using a structured routine.

Study system development: Supporting apprentices in building an effective, sustainable study system using retrieval practice, spaced review, and error-driven targeting.

Error pattern analysis: Helping apprentices identify recurring error types and develop specific fix strategies to prevent repeat mistakes.

Pacing and time management: Teaching time management within timed exams, including the two-pass strategy and scheduled time checks.

Performance regulation: Supporting apprentices in recognizing and managing test anxiety and stress responses through a practised reset routine.

Initial assessment and goal setting: Administering an intake process to identify dominant barriers and set measurable, realistic goals.

Literacy-integrated support: Addressing reading demands of MCQ items within the OALCF, particularly Competency A (Find and Use Information) and Competency E (Manage Learning).

Accountability and planning: Supporting apprentices in maintaining a structured study plan, tracking progress, and adjusting as needed.

2.4 What Type of Preparation Is Not Feasible for Get SET Programs to Provide?

Clarity on scope protects practitioners, programs, apprentices, and learners. The following is outside the Get SET mandate for C of Q preparation:

Outside Get SET Scope	Why	Boundary Language for Practitioner
Teaching trade technical content	Get SET practitioners are not trade experts. Teaching trade content is the role of TDAs and the apprenticeship system.	"Our focus is on how you study and how you write—not on teaching you the trade content. That's what your apprenticeship training is for."
Providing or predicting exam questions	Actual C of Q questions are confidential. Prediction of what will appear on any specific exam is not possible or appropriate.	"I can't tell you what's going to be on the exam, but I can help you build strategies that work on any MCQ exam."
Booking, administering, or scoring exams	These are Skilled Trades Ontario (STO) functions exclusively.	"All of the official pieces—booking, timing, results—goes through Skilled Trades Ontario."
Approving accommodations	Accommodation decisions are made through STO's official process. Get SET can support apprentices in self-advocacy but cannot make or guarantee accommodation decisions.	"We can help you organize documentation related to your accommodations. The formal accommodation process is through STO."
Guaranteeing exam outcomes	Get SET support improves performance readiness; it does not guarantee passing or improving on past results	"Our work together builds your readiness. You bring the knowledge—we help you show it."

Summary

This resource has been developed for Get SET practitioners seeking knowledge of the Certificate of Qualification (C of Q) examination process within Ontario's apprenticeship training system.

Although trade-specific content is not included (because it is out of scope for Get SET providers), this guide offers an overview of the C of Q's purpose, procedures, and administration. It is intended to support Get SET programs to assist apprentices in developing exam preparation skills as they prepare to write—or re-write the C of Q for their respective trade.

Get SET practitioners who would like more information about the C of Q process specifically, and the apprenticeship training system more broadly, can consult the Skilled Trades Ontario website.

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