

THE
CrossFit JOURNAL

HOW TO PASS THE CF-L3 EXAM

Steven Wingo explains how to create a study plan that will help you earn the Certified CrossFit Trainer credential.

BY STEVEN WINGO, CF-L3

My experience is important because of who I am not.

I'm not a CrossFit Seminar Staff member or longtime coach from one of the original CrossFit affiliates. Other than the CrossFit courses I've taken, I have not been mentored on a daily basis at any of the well-known boxes teeming with master coaches. I don't have a degree in exercise physiology or kinesiology, and didn't play collegiate sports. I'm not one of the household names you see all the time in CrossFit instructional videos.

Instead, I'm a 47-year-old attorney with a full-time law practice, a wife, two college-age daughters, and a host of other time-consuming and stressful responsibilities wholly unrelated to CrossFit.

And I'm a Certified CrossFit Trainer, CF-L3.

CrossFit Training: L1 to L4

Video: "CrossFit's New Training and Certifications"

Article: "CrossFit Trainer Education and Certification: New Programs and a New Structure"

My CrossFit journey began in earnest in late August 2012, when a box opened close to my home. I was a beat-up, ailing week-end-warrior endurance athlete who showed up with virtually no knowledge of gymnastics or weightlifting. I weighed 132 lb. and could run a mean 5K, and I could ride mountain and road bikes uphill pretty damn well for a middle-aged guy. But from an overall fitness perspective I was in terrible shape.

Like many of you, I quickly fell in love with CrossFit, attending more frequently and starting to see real results. My wife then joined me because she liked the changes she saw in me both physically and mentally. Less than a year after starting, we were on the edge of our seats listening to Chuck Carswell introduce himself as flowmaster at a Level 1 Certificate Course.

In July 2014 I watched a video in which Nicole Carroll, CrossFit Director of Certification and Training, described the new Certified CrossFit Trainer (CCFT/CF-L3) and Certified CrossFit Coach (CCFC/CF-L4) credentials.

There was no hesitation or doubt regarding whether I would pursue the CCFT/CF-L3. I reviewed the requirements that morning and set my plan.

Check the [CrossFit Trainer Directory](#) and you will learn few hold the CCFT credential. That is a shame and a problem I want to help remedy. On social media and message boards, I've heard some discouraging talk that the test is too hard, isn't fair, isn't worth it, is just another way for CrossFit to make money, and so on. None of that is true. CrossFit has provided everything you need to turn yourself into an outstanding coach and earn the CCFT designation [here](#). You are going to have to bust your ass, but it is worth it.

If you have a passion for coaching or own an affiliate, you should pursue the CCFT credential. It is the counterpart to board certification in any other profession. It signifies you have moved beyond the basic requirements to engage in a profession and taken the responsibility to develop a higher level of proficiency.

To help you prepare for and pass the CF-L3 exam, I'll describe how I prepared for it and hopefully offer some guidance. Here is your blueprint.

1. Follow the Plan

Unless you are already a very experienced trainer who has worked at the collegiate or professional level, the path goes through the CrossFit Level 1 and Level 2 courses. Think of it like progressing athletes to a first muscle-up. You don't just stick them on the rings right away and watch them struggle. It is a process, and there are no shortcuts.

The same is true in building your knowledge base and skills as a coach to a level of proficiency sufficient to pass the certification exam. You can't will it to happen overnight. You have to put in the effort, plain and simple.

If you haven't checked recently, understand that CrossFit has continually improved its training materials and procedures over time and has done so through years of experience and feedback. The materials are now outstanding, so if you already have the CF-L1 credential, go back and study the materials again to get ready for the Level 2. If you don't have a Level 1 certificate, that will be your starting point. Once you have the credential, coach for a substantial period of time and learn on the job before attending the Level 2. This is part of the process. Your experience at the Level 2 will be far more rewarding with 500 or more hours of coaching under your belt, and CrossFit recommends candidates complete the Online Scaling Course and acquire at least six months of coaching experience before attending the Level 2.

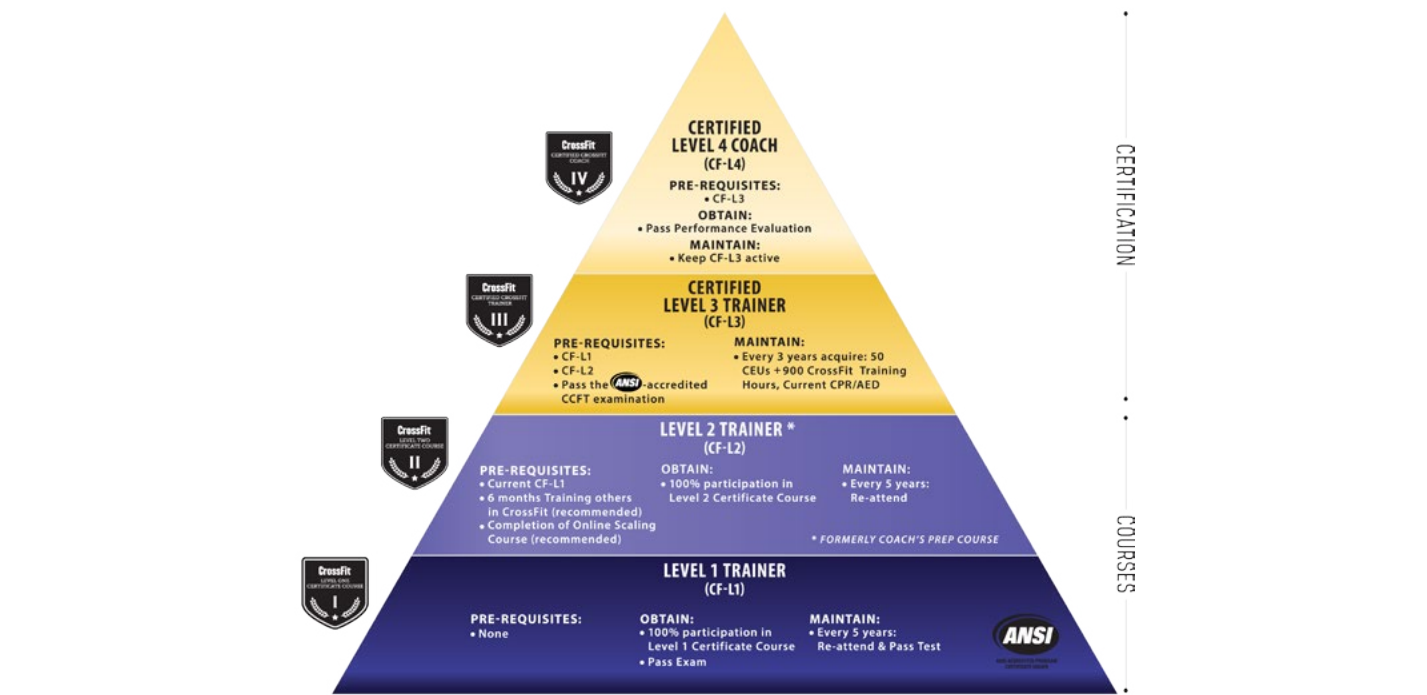
Once you have a Level 2 certificate, don't attempt the CF-L3 test right away unless you've been training athletes for multiple years. Get your butt back to the box to work on the skills you learned at the Level 2.

Those who follow the progressions to prepare for the CF-L3 exam will build the base needed for success, just as an athlete who follows the mechanics-consistency-intensity progression is set up for success.

2. Study the Reference Materials

I've read comments from a discouraged coach who took the test and did not pass even though that coach asserted to have read each article and watched each video twice. Reading or watching is not enough. You must study.

This is where past experience helped me—I spent four years in



The CrossFit Training path includes both certificate courses and certifications.



At CrossFit Level 1 and Level 2 certificate courses, Seminar Staff coaches ensure trainers acquire the tools they need to improve fitness.



Develop your coach's eye by watching movement and reviewing the points of performance. Spot errors and create a strategy for correcting them.



Technical knowledge isn't enough. Great trainers are also masters of group management who inspire their clients daily.

college and three years in law school, and I had to study for the bar exam and many other tests. If you have a degree or degrees, particularly in a rigorous program, you know how to study. Those who haven't had that experience might be surprised just how much work is required when really studying.

What does it look like to really study? Download every written article referenced in the [Study Material Reference List](#), including the “[CrossFit Level 1 Training Guide](#)” and the “[Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook](#).” You can print them or read and highlight the PDF documents on the computer.

Reading or watching the reference materials is not enough. You must study them.

You might be shocked at the volume of material—more than 100 written articles. You are not going to read and study them in a fortnight.

You should also save a hard copy of the Study Material Reference List so you can systematically make your way through all the videos.

Once you have gathered and organized the materials, my recommendation is to peruse every article—even those read previously—and underline key passages. I did this, then went back and reviewed every article a second time, always striving for a greater understanding of the material. In this pass I created typewritten notes of the critical points in each article.

I watched every single video—most of them multiple times—and created typed notes for those videos that addressed movements or issues for which I needed reminders. Don't fool yourself into thinking you can skip supposedly “easy” things such as a foundational movement. If you think any movement is easy, treat that as a warning sign that you are missing something.

Admittedly this is a lot of work. It took me about eight months, and I had to make the time to study. My routine was to read and underline articles every day at lunch, some weekday evenings and on weekends. I watched videos primarily at home on the weekends. When it came time for my final preparation after I had scheduled my exam date, I went through and read the underlined portions of the articles again and reviewed my own typewritten notes multiple times.

This is what it looks like to study. If you are a genius or already a master trainer, maybe just reading everything will be enough. But 98 percent of us will need to study the materials as I did, not

just read and watch them.

3. The Six + Eight Rule

There is no Six + Eight Rule in CrossFit. I made this up as your most critical study tool. I believe the Six + Eight rule should always be at the top of your mind in your coaching, your development as a coach and your preparation for the CF-L3 exam, at least until it becomes second nature.

The Six: teaching, seeing, correcting, group management, presence and attitude, demonstration.

The Eight: midline stabilization, core-to-extremity movement, balance about the frontal plain, posterior-chain engagement, sound hip function, active shoulders, full range of motion about a joint, effective stance and/or grip.

These six critical areas of competency and eight common themes of quality functional movement serve as the crux of the “Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook.” They are also introduced as key parts of the “Level 1 Training Guide” and are the heart and soul of improving as a coach. These elements should serve as your guideposts when studying for the exam—and in your everyday efforts as a coach.

Merely memorizing the Six + Eight and their exact definitions will get you nowhere. Effective coaching—and passing the exam—is mostly about applying the Six + Eight in real coaching situations. Some pure memorization is necessary, but being able to apply the Six + Eight to coaching situations is the real key.

With every movement you study, athlete you coach, article you read and video you watch, keep the Six + Eight top of mind. You must be able to teach each movement—meaning clearly explain all the points of performance. You must be able to see movement faults—any violations of the Eight—and understand why they are faults. You must be able to correct faults in many simple but effective ways. You must be able to demonstrate movement or at least see and understand movement well enough to know whom to use as your example. You need to develop the presence and attitude to accomplish all this in an engaging, positive manner and be able to organize a class and group of athletes so you can keep them engaged and see all of them. In everything you do, always consider the Six + Eight.

How does this apply in your studying and coaching? Let's take one example movement: the push-up. Where should an athlete's hands be positioned? Should the athlete apply any forces with the arms, hands or fingers to create a safe and solid base for pushing? Where should the elbows be positioned throughout the movement? What does a good hollow body really look like? What part of the body should touch the deck first? What specifically constitutes full range of motion at the finish position? How do you scale down or up?

When you can answer all these questions, and when you can see and correct subtle faults when working with an athlete, you are developing the depth of understanding and attention to detail it takes to be a superior coach who can pass the CF-L3 exam.

That is an example with one movement. Your task is to develop a similar depth of understanding for every movement you come across in the reference materials.

4. Strive for Excellence Every Day

Something became obvious to me during the Level 2 seminar: If you can't spot a fault or an area for improvement for virtually every movement for every athlete at your box, you must get better at seeing movement. And you are probably not yet ready for the CF-L3 exam.

The focus of the weekend was learning to spot movement faults and cue athletes to correct those faults, and even though all attendees at the Level 2 were Level 1 trainers, most with substantial experience as athletes and coaches, the Seminar Staff trainers were able to pick our movement apart. Most of us had trouble doing so at that stage of our development. Obvious faults were not apparent when watching our fellow coaches. But the staff trainers saw subtle—and not so subtle—faults all over the place and cued every single one of us. It was a humbling wake-up call.

If you can't spot a fault or an area for improvement for virtually every movement for every athlete at your box, you must get better at seeing movement.

When preparing for the CF-L3 exam, I made an effort to use what I was learning about the finer points of movement every single day at the box. My focus was trying to improve my ability to see movement faults. Assessing movement is now so ingrained in me that I can no longer watch any athlete without automatically critiquing his or her movement.

If you don't see something that can be improved when watching an athlete, ask yourself what you're missing. Think through the eight themes of quality functional movement. Use the tools acquired at the Level 2 to help your athletes and improve as a

coach. When you can walk by every athlete and identify a cue to help each one, you are approaching readiness for the test.

5. Assess Your Own Weaknesses

Although I had no formal training, I came to CrossFit with extensive knowledge of exercise physiology and nutrition/dietary issues. As a runner and mountain biker/cyclist, I read dozens of books on training and nutrition, so these subjects were clear strengths for me. I did not take them for granted and made sure to read and watch all the related reference materials, but I knew I didn't need to devote extra time to those areas.

My weakness was clear: seeing movement faults. It is damn hard to see subtle faults in dynamic movement, and I'd suggest seeing movement faults will be a critical area for most taking the CF-L3 test due to the simple fact that it takes hours upon hours of watching and coaching to develop a great eye. So that is where I spent my time: studying and working on my ability to see movement.

For all my reading, underlining and note taking, my most important preparation was just flat-out busting my ass at the box trying to become a better coach. For a long time I felt I could never develop the expertise of Seminar Staff trainers. I'm still not at their level. But with work, conscious effort every day at the box, video study, and constant focus on the Six + Eight with every movement you study and coach, you can develop a great coaching eye and become a damn-good CrossFit coach—good enough to become a CCFT.

One way to address your identified weaknesses is to attend an appropriate CrossFit specialty course. I had put the Weightlifting and the Gymnastics courses on my short list after the Level 2 and was fortunate enough to have the latter come up just an hour's drive from my home, so I signed up. What a stroke of luck that turned out to be.

Going in, I had no clue just how much the course would help me learn to understand and spot very subtle faults in movement. Back at the box, I began coaching a twice-weekly gymnastics class featuring basic CrossFit body-weight movements. My coaching eye started to really come alive.

I doubt I would have benefitted from the course so much if I had taken it three weeks after the Level 1, but combined with the work and struggle I had put in up to that point, the Gymnastics Trainer Course proved critical for me. My trainers from the gymnastics course, Chuck Bennington and Sean Velas, received a heartfelt thank-you message the morning after I passed the CF-L3 exam.

Actively look for opportunities—any opportunity—to address your weaknesses.



Once a flaw has been spotted, great trainers use a combination of visual, verbal and tactile cues to correct it.



Elite coaches work to improve their presence and attitude, knowing they have the ability to motivate athletes to accomplish great things.



Ruby Wolff/CrossFit Journal

Learning never stops: Watch other coaches and athletes to see what they can teach you.



Michael Brian/CrossFit Journal

Strive for excellence in every class. Did your athletes improve?



Isabelle Victoria Photo

Steven Wingo, CF-L3.

6. Be Passionate About Learning

Those who are likely to be successful with the CF-L3 exam are the ones who have a passion for learning and coaching. There is a reason CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman incorporates an excellence-based business model directly into CrossFit’s foundational materials and methodology.

If his videos on the pursuit of excellence and his 2005 CrossFit Journal article “[Fundamentals, Virtuosity and Mastery: An Open Letter to CrossFit Trainers](#)” strike a chord with you, you’ve probably got what it takes to turn yourself into a great trainer. If you are not interested in learning, in pursuing excellence, in being the absolute best you can be, I suggest you are missing some of the most critical lessons CrossFit teaches us and are not likely to be successful with the certification exam.

The bottom line is there are tens of thousands of you out there with the necessary passion, and based on that passion, there should be many, many more CF-L3s than we currently see.

Dedicate, or rededicate, yourself to excellence in your coaching journey.

How do you strive for excellence and virtuosity on a day-to-day basis? For me, in addition to busting my ass at the box, striving for excellence has always meant trying to learn and absorb everything I can. Shortly after taking up CrossFit and falling in love with it, my morning ritual became checking out [CrossFit.com](#) to review the workout of the day and see what new CrossFit Journal article/video/news link was up.

I researched movement and coaching videos to learn about movements giving me trouble, and I read books written by CrossFit specialty gurus and experts outside CrossFit. Studying CrossFit, different programming and human movement became a passion—something fun and rewarding.

Become passionate about improving your own air squat and how well you coach the air squat. Really work on it. Remember Glassman’s advice: “Training will improve, clients will advance faster, and you will appear more experienced and professional and garner more respect if you simply recommit to the basics.”

Don’t just recommit to the basics—become passionate about them, too.

Coaching CrossFit has become a source of fulfillment and meaning for me, and I have developed a passion for coaching as a result of what I have seen in CrossFit. If you have that passion, ask yourself if you want to be an average coach or an excellent one.

Dedicate, or rededicate, yourself to excellence in your coaching journey—and in everything else you do.

7. Enjoy the Process

When I first signed up for the CF-L3 test, I had a very strong fear of failure. That was a good thing. I did not take the test lightly, and I studied my ass off. But when it finally came time to schedule my exam and take it, my outlook had changed dramatically. Having put in the time, I went to the exam with the satisfaction and comfort of knowing I was a far better coach than when I first began preparing.

In most respects, my mission had already been accomplished. Sure, I very much wanted that passing score and to see the CCFT/CF-L3 designation by my name. That was still important, but it was no longer so important. I had put in the work and knew the journey had been worth it.

Conclusion

There is one point where I disagree with Carroll’s comments in that initial video on the new CrossFit Training hierarchy. She said CrossFit put the path there not as a necessity but so that those who wanted to demonstrate a higher credential could do so.

Having gone through the process, I would say all coaches should in fact pursue the CCFT/CF-L3. The reason is that doing so is the perfect road map in your endeavor to strive for excellence as a coach. CrossFit should expect nothing less from each and every one of us. More importantly, as CrossFit coaches, we should expect nothing less from ourselves.

Fortunately, things worked out for me when I sat for the exam. If you have the passion and are willing to put in the work and use my suggested blueprint as a guide, I believe it will work out for you, too. ■

About the Author: Steven Wingo, CF-L3/CCFT, is an attorney with a solo practice in Ocala, Florida. He trains and coaches at [CrossFit Iron Legion](#), and he has discovered that coaching other athletes is even more rewarding than pursuing his own fitness goals. You may reach him at [stevenwingouf91@gmail.com](#).