Do I Need a Mentor to Pass the MCI Exam?

Passing the MCI exam on the first attempt is a challenge. However, there are several opportunities available that can improve a candidate’s chances for a first-time pass.

The first opportunity is using a mentor: “I'd guess that maybe 10% pass without (a mentor); 50-60% pass on the first attempt with one.” This comment comes from an effective mentor. We followed up to see why the improvement wasn’t greater. He said: “I’ve had students fail and I think I’m pretty good at mentoring. But, they DID NOT follow my advice and I predicted they would fail. Those that I’ve felt comfortable would pass, did so.”

The second opportunity is obvious: heed your mentor’s input. Good mentors tell their candidates when their skills and knowledge are at Master’s level.

Mock exams provide the third opportunity for candidates to improve their prospects for passing. The MCI exam format, a combined performance and comprehensive oral exam, is an extremely rigorous and often “discombobulating” experience in and of itself. A realistic mock exam offered by qualified MCIs provides an independent assessment of the candidate’s readiness, as well as an exam experience in a learning environment where the candidate can receive needed coaching. Passing a mock exam is an important late-stage stepping stone for candidates.

By taking full advantage of all three opportunities, candidates can swing the odds of passing substantially in their favor.

It’s your choice whether or not to use a mentor, and if so, to determine what kind of mentoring partnership might be most appealing and useful. To help you make these decisions, the Professional Development Committee of the Casting Board of Governors surveyed an international group of successful mentors asking the kinds of questions you might ask about: the importance of mentoring, the types of mentoring which can be effective, and suggestions about how effective mentoring partnerships can work. The participating mentors were: Australia – Brian Henderson; Canada – Dennis Grant; Denmark – Lasse Karlsson; Japan – Tomonori Higashi; Netherlands – William van der Vorst; Tasmania – Peter Hayes; United States – Al Buhr, Chuck Easterling, Gordy Hill, Steve Hollensed, Tim Lawson, Joe Libeu, Bruce Richards, Jim Valle, Jeff Wagner and Rick Williams.

Before you read this article, there are a few things you might find helpful to know:

1. There are two ways to use this article. While we recommend that you read it thoroughly to get the detailed input directly from these expert mentors, some of you may prefer to jump to the Summary at the end of the article which lists the key conclusions.
2. Following the Summary, there are suggestions for locating a mentor.
3. While most mentors do not charge for their service, some mentors make their living as casting instructors and reasonably expect to be compensated. It’s an appropriate question to ask a prospective mentor about costs associated with their services.
4. Most mentors will work with a CI who shows the ability and determination to become an MCI. Due to time constraints, there are mentors who are only able to work with very
advanced CIs who can become exam ready in a short time. Again, it’s an appropriate question to ask a prospective mentor about their time constraints and expectations.

5. In the following, the mentor’s comments are in italics.

**How important is a mentor?** Here’s what our mentors said:

- *I’d guess that maybe 10% pass without one, 50-60% pass on the first attempt with one.*
- *It is of the utmost importance for a candidate to have a mentor*
- *I don’t think there is much point in taking the MCI without first working with a mentor, both on the test requirements and especially the teaching issues.*
- *The ones most likely to pass with ease are those who have had a mentor.*
- *MCIs should be required to be mentored in order to take the test. The failure rate now is roughly 60%, without mentoring it is higher.*
- *It depends on the candidate. Some will be super prepared with exceptional casting and communication skills with a great depth of understanding. A candidate that does not have this depth will require loads of mentoring.*
- *I wouldn’t want to go so far as to say it is mandatory for a candidate to have a mentor; however, as a general rule I think it is foolish and inefficient not to have one, especially in today’s world of YouTube and email connections.*
- *Casters and instructors can grow without mentoring, but he/she can speed it up with mentoring.*
- *I think it is critical. The success rate of candidates I have tested has been directly related to the intensity of their mentoring*

**What form should mentoring take?** Here’s what one mentor said: *As to what level of mentoring to recommend – that seems highly subjective and is subject to the candidate’s needs and motivations.*

Most of the mentors did acknowledge the advantages of having a primary, frequently used mentor. Here are two of the comments:

- *I like to see frequent one-on-one personal attention devoted to the 5 broad topics on the MCI oral exam with emphasis on casting mechanics and teaching.*
- *Very important (to have) high level mentoring, one-on-one.*

The mentors also recognized that there are many viable alternatives:

- *MCI level mentoring is good but preparation together with another CI works fine too.*
- *A single mentor in the classical sense is not absolutely needed. Instead, a candidate can seek counsel via lessons and other opportunities from several MCI’s and then process the new knowledge gleaned from each … to formulate his or her own model of casting and teaching*
- *In addition to a mentor, the “complete” MCI candidate will have contacted other MCI’s, CBOG’s and still other experts in various fly casting disciplines to gain other perspectives and teaching techniques*
- *Bottom line is this…1) quality mentoring is always helpful; 2) it is optimal if the candidate can work with more than one MCI; … 3) pretests are extremely important and should be given the highest priority by the candidate.*
Most of my mentees are not local so we do most of our work via phone and/or e-mail. At some point we need to get together to do the casting part, I have people coming in from the east coast and Chile so far in 2013.

Dr. Gordy Hill’s excellent online MCI study group is an important preparation resource which would work well in conjunction with whatever other mentoring resources a candidate chooses to use.

**What do mentors expect of themselves and the candidates?**

As a candidate there are several background factors you should consider when asking someone to serve as a mentor.

First, many candidates who sought a mentor didn’t complete the program:

- I try to gauge how serious the candidate is about pursuing the MCI... few realize the gulf in expertise that one must leap between the CI and the MCI, and the level of commitment and practice required to cross that gulf. I see a fairly high level of attrition after my initial meetings and lessons.

Second, if you as a candidate are committed, the mentor will be making a large commitment too; this is not a quick process:

- I try not to predict how long it will take a candidate to get ready for the MCI exam, but it is typically 6 months to 2 years, depending upon initial skill level and their level of practice and commitment to working toward the exam prep.
- The candidate should be willing to commit to at least a couple of years preparing. This should include many hours of actual teaching of fly casting many of which should be under an experienced MCI or CBOG.
- The candidate should seek out and ask if someone has the time to mentor, this is a huge responsibility and it is up to the candidate not to abuse the relationship. That requires the candidate to actively pursue the mentor’s direction and recommendations regarding casting, reading, etc.

Third, there is a big difference in the casting skills required of CIs and MCIs. Very few CIs cast as well as is required for MCIs. While many mentors expect to work on improving the candidate’s casting, that sentiment is not universal:

- I am personally not too interested in mentoring anyone who has not first come to me with exceptional rod tip control and a super smooth loading move.

Some mentors avoid candidates with casting issues because sufficient improvement can be time consuming:

- It is usually dependent on casting with the candidate to see if there are fundamental casting flaws that need to be corrected. This can slow things down considerably but is absolutely necessary.

Fourth, candidates should be aware that some mentors charge for their services others do not. If fees would be an important consideration, they should be discussed early in the mentor selection process.

Once the commitment level, time requirement, casting, and fee issues have been addressed, the Mentor – Mentee partnership can focus on the body of knowledge and the teaching proficiency required for a
The following comments from mentors should give you an idea of the wide variety of approaches different mentors take and what they provide in the process. It will be important to seek a mentor whose approach makes sense given your situation.

- I work to provide the path to learn the skills within a MCI exam, not to teach how to pass the test itself. In order to continue in the process: the candidate must show improvement in casting skill and do homework. For homework I have them to create a “Casting Book”; I provide questions and issues for them to resolve and organize in their casting book. The book becomes a tool they use to build their approach to casting instruction. Each candidate needs time to understand and develop skill through solo learning. By the time we finish a candidate should attain 110% to 120% of test expectation prior to the actual test.

- The process will likely begin by developing a study and practice plan. Be available at any time within reason for phone consultation; answering all questions and asking some probing difficult questions. Make whatever time is required available for one on one casting sessions. At all times provide the most accurate information and feedback possible. Not to make the candidate feel good but to be honest and push the candidate beyond the basic requirements. This will definitely include a preliminary practice exam including both the performance and oral exam. Throughout the process continue to inspire and encourage. I expect the candidate to practice, and read and eventually try the test.

- Spending time with the candidate providing undivided attention while going over material such as casting mechanics, fly casting theory, etc. Casting with the candidate through a broad range of casting techniques not limited to the casting tasks on the performance exam. Concentrating on making fault diagnoses using more than one system. Going over multiple ways of correcting casting problems which may appear when teaching students. The candidate must, I feel, be proactive by contacting his mentor at appropriate intervals as needed in between personal contacts. I prefer a “high level” of mentoring: phone sessions weekly, casting sessions if possible monthly. In my opinion the candidate should NOT be in a rush to take the exam, with a willingness to spend the time for a long journey of learning.

- Developing a time line, task outlines, teaching outline. Doing the research, reading, meeting and then practicing at a minimum of once every two weeks if local. If the candidate does not move ahead and does not practice and submit material, we have a “sit down” about sincerity and the wasting of my time. I require a minimum of 3 pretests with me and other qualified MCIs.

- I am committed to spend the time to make them successful. We construct an Individual Develop Plan (IDP) and take the time to complete it – an IDP is a tool that I use to build a personalized curriculum for the candidate.

- I believe I am committing to help the person become a Master Instructor, as opposed to merely agreeing to help them prepare for the MCI exam. The two require different mindsets – one is narrow and focused exclusively on the exam; the other is open, that of a student, willing to learn and curious, knowing that a slower track through the learning will actually prepare them better for the teaching and orals part of the exam and make them better instructors for their current and future students. Toward that end, the more the candidate commits to becoming a student of fly casting, the more I will give to them of my time and knowledge. I don’t have a formal
mentoring process. Consequently, I don’t usually lay down any strict prescriptions about how we will work or my expectations, other than that enough practice should occur between sessions so that progress continues. Without this, it is not really worth either my or the candidate’s time.

- I commit to: 1) spend time with the candidate on the casting field 2) spend generous amounts of time with them on computer or phone and 3) seriously consider how to help the candidate the most, each candidate is different. I expect the candidate to: 1) practice, 2) read, 3) teach, 4) think independently and 5) commit to a timeline for taking the test.

- I try to grow a thinker, not a follower. In order to achieve that goal I am ready to share everything I have. I ask them to make periodical meetings in the casting field. They have to follow my (reasonable) request on what to do, main tasks of which is cast frequently, think about it and read a lot.

- I make myself available, develop goals for the candidate, and provide realistic evaluations of progress. I expect the candidate to practice and read. I’m willing to help anybody who makes an effort, but I’m real good at detecting lack of commitment.

- First I have questions for myself before I agree: How is this person with other people? What’s his/her level at this point? Are they ready and what is their motivation to become a MCI? If I think everything is fine, I will go for it but only if they keep their training up to date. I expect them to train and study every week if they want to continue this journey. And Pay me.

Summary
1. MCI preparation is typically a large, complex task with three essential components: casting skills/knowledge, teaching skills/experience, and broadly based angling knowledge. Keep your strengths and weaknesses firmly in mind as you seek a mentor. They need to be strong where you are weak.

2. Use your mentor to help break the large preparation process into bite-sized chunks which can be organized into an appropriate study and practice plan. Recognize that this is an extended, time-consuming process; typically of six months to two years duration. Make sure there is enough room in your lifestyle to accommodate the plan.

3. You are primarily responsible for maintaining reasonable progress; that usually means weekly progress. Your mentor is an important asset; make sure you are using their time wisely.

4. In addition to a primary mentor, it is helpful to utilize additional resources: a casting buddy, the online MCI study group, consultations with additional MCIs.

5. Even if you have unusual circumstances, e.g. you are only able to study during certain times of the year or you live in an area where there are no mentors, it is usually possible to find an effective mentor who is willing to work with you. Utilizing e-mail correspondence and/or videos can be effective for those that do not live near a mentor.

6. Successful completion of one or more mock exams is an important ingredient in successful preparation.

7. Regular access to a mentor, someone who has already navigated the process successfully, is valuable; most candidates say: “priceless”.

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How to find a mentor?
Please visit the IFFF’s website at:

http://www.fedflyfishers.org/Resources/Locate/CastingInstructors.aspx

Use the dropdown box to select the type of mentor you are seeking Fly Casting – Masters Mentor or Fly Casting – Two-Handed Mentor. A list of the casting instructors who have indicated a willingness to mentor will be displayed. You can narrow the search to a particular geographic area if desired.