CSLB C-33 Painting and Decorating Contractor Practice Test

20 original practice questions for the California contractor license exam, with an answer key and explanations.

Format
Multiple choice, 4 options, one best answer

Topics
Grouped by the published CSLB topic areas

Question bank
Last updated: November 2026

How to use this test

1. Answer all 20 questions without notes — the CSLB exam is closed-book.
2. Check the answer key at the end and read the explanation for every miss.
3. Take the same test online for instant explanations and a result by topic: test2pro.com/free-practice-tests/c33-painting-and-decorating-contractor

Scan to take it online

Exam topic areas and approximate weights

Planning and Estimating	28%
Substrate Repair and Surface Preparation	30%
Application of Paint, Wallcoverings, and Finishes	21%
Safety	21%

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Questions

1 SAFETY

After wiping oil-based stain on kitchen cabinets, a painter has a pile of stain-soaked rags. Where should they be put?

(A) In a loose pile in a corner of the room
(B) In a plastic trash bag in the dumpster
(C) In an open plastic paint bucket
(D) In a metal oily-waste can with a self-closing lid

2 SAFETY

A painter sets an extension ladder to climb onto a flat roof. How far must the ladder's side rails extend above the roof edge?

(A) At least 36 inches
(B) At least 12 inches
(C) At least 60 inches
(D) At least 48 inches

3 SAFETY

A painter is cleaning up dust from work that disturbed lead-based paint. What kind of filter must the vacuum have?

(A) Standard shop-vacuum cartridge filter
(B) Washable foam filter
(C) HEPA filter
(D) Cloth dust bag

4 SAFETY

A painter wants to know how toxic a new solvent-based primer is, which chemical hazards it carries and how to handle and store it safely. Which document is the primary source for this information?

(A) The product's technical data sheet (TDS)
(B) The finish schedule in the project specifications
(C) The safety data sheet (SDS)
(D) The employer's Cal/OSHA Form 300 injury log

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5 SUBSTRATE REPAIR AND SURFACE PREPARATION

Before painting, which material is used to seal the small gaps where an interior window casing meets the drywall?

(A) Glazing compound
(B) Two-part wood filler
(C) Paintable acrylic latex caulk
(D) Drywall taping compound

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6 SUBSTRATE REPAIR AND SURFACE PREPARATION

Which tape is made for masking rough brick, stucco and concrete block before spraying?

(A) Stucco tape
(B) Multi-surface painter's tape
(C) Delicate-surface tape
(D) Duct tape

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7 SUBSTRATE REPAIR AND SURFACE PREPARATION

Which set of tools is normally used to strip a paper-backed wallpaper hung with water-soluble paste?

(A) A heat gun, a putty knife and a drop cloth
(B) A belt sander, a dust mask and a shop vacuum
(C) Hot water in a sprayer, a sponge and a wide knife
(D) Mineral spirits, a rag and coarse steel wool

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8 SUBSTRATE REPAIR AND SURFACE PREPARATION

Which primer is the usual choice for sealing a dried water stain on a ceiling so it will not bleed through the new paint?

(A) PVA (vinyl acrylic) drywall primer
(B) Standard acrylic latex primer
(C) Flat latex ceiling paint, two coats
(D) Alkyd (oil-based) stain-blocking primer

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9 SUBSTRATE REPAIR AND SURFACE PREPARATION

When pressure washing lap siding before painting, which practice should be avoided because it forces water behind the boards?

(A) Aiming the spray upward under the laps
(B) Keeping the spray pointed downward
(C) Holding the tip at a safe distance
(D) Using a wide fan tip at low pressure

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10 SUBSTRATE REPAIR AND SURFACE PREPARATION

A painter inspecting old exterior paint wants a quick field check for chalking. What is the usual method?

- (A) Rubbing the surface with a finger or dark cloth
- (B) Applying a small test coat of new paint
- (C) Using a chemical spot-test kit
- (D) Spraying the surface with water

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11 APPLICATION OF PAINT, WALLCOVERINGS, AND FINISHES

After rolling a wall, the painter sees a darker band along the ceiling line and corners where the edges were brushed first. What is this defect called?

- (A) Flashing
- (B) Picture framing
- (C) Lap marks
- (D) Holidays

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12 APPLICATION OF PAINT, WALLCOVERINGS, AND FINISHES

While you cut in a window casing with latex paint, a few drips land on the client's unprotected, finished wood sill. What should you do right away?

- (A) Wipe them up with a clean, damp rag
- (B) Even them out with a heat gun
- (C) Scrape them off with a 5-in-1 tool
- (D) Sand the spots smooth

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13 APPLICATION OF PAINT, WALLCOVERINGS, AND FINISHES

The walls and corners of an old house are badly out of square. What should a paperhanger use to set the first strip truly vertical?

- (A) The adjoining wall corner
- (B) A carpenter's framing square
- (C) A plumb bob and chalk line
- (D) The edge of the door casing

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14 APPLICATION OF PAINT, WALLCOVERINGS, AND FINISHES

A natural-finished mahogany front door faces full afternoon sun. Which clear finish is formulated for that kind of exposure?

- (A) Interior oil-based polyurethane
- (B) Dewaxed shellac
- (C) Nitrocellulose lacquer
- (D) Marine spar varnish

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15 PLANNING AND ESTIMATING

Why should every roll of wallpaper for one room carry the same run (batch) number?

(A) So the whole order can be billed as one item
(B) So the rolls cost less per bolt
(C) So the paste dries at the same rate on every strip
(D) So the color and shading match from strip to strip

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16 PLANNING AND ESTIMATING

Where in a set of construction drawings does a painting estimator find the paint types, sheens and colors assigned to each room's walls, ceilings and trim?

(A) The site plan
(B) The room finish schedule
(C) The exterior elevations
(D) The structural general notes

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17 PLANNING AND ESTIMATING

One gallon of paint covers 375 sq ft. How many gallons must be bought for 4,850 sq ft, adding a 10% waste allowance and rounding up to whole gallons?

(A) 13 gallons
(B) 14.23 gallons
(C) 14 gallons
(D) 15 gallons

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18 PLANNING AND ESTIMATING

A caller asks for a price to paint "a 5,250 sq ft house with 18 ft ceilings" but offers no plans, finish schedule or walk-through. What should the contractor do?

(A) Quote $10,500 ($2.00 per floor sq ft)
(B) Get plans or a walk-through before pricing
(C) Quote $5,250 ($1.00 per floor sq ft)
(D) Quote $15,750 ($3.00 per floor sq ft)

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19 PLANNING AND ESTIMATING

On a plan drawn at 1/8" = 1'-0", a wall measures 4-5/8 inches. What is its actual length?

(A) 18-1/2 ft
(B) 40 ft
(C) 37 ft
(D) 74 ft

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20 PLANNING AND ESTIMATING

On a standard red-yellow-blue color wheel, which color is the complement of green?

(A) Red
(B) Violet
(C) Blue-green
(D) Yellow

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Answer key and explanations

#	ANSWER	WHY
1	**D**	Drying oils in stains and finishes give off heat as they oxidize, and a pile or bag of soaked rags can trap that heat until it ignites by itself. Title 8 §1736(h) requires oily rags and solvent waste to be kept in fire-resistant covered containers until they leave the site, and the California Fire Code (304.3.1) requires a listed disposal container, such as a metal oily-waste can with a self-closing lid. Rags may also be spread flat outdoors to dry or sealed in a metal container filled with water before disposal.
2	**A**	Title 8 §3276(e)(11) requires the side rails of a portable ladder used to reach an upper landing to extend at least 36 inches above that landing, giving a handhold for stepping on and off. Where that extension is not possible, the ladder must be secured at the top and a grab rail or similar handhold provided. The ladder is also set at a pitch of about 1 ft out for every 4 ft of working length (§3276(e)(9)).
3	**C**	Lead dust is fine enough to pass through ordinary vacuum filters and be blown back into the room. Title 8 §1532.1(h)(4) requires vacuums used for lead cleanup to be equipped with HEPA filters, and the EPA lead-safe booklet and RRP rule likewise call for HEPA vacuums followed by wet wiping. A HEPA filter is at least 99.97 percent efficient for particles of 0.3 micron.
4	**C**	Under the hazard communication standard (Title 8 §5194(g)), manufacturers and importers must obtain or develop a safety data sheet (SDS, formerly MSDS) for every hazardous chemical, and distributors must supply it with the first shipment. Its sections cover hazard identification, composition, first aid, firefighting, handling and storage, exposure controls and protective equipment, and toxicology. A technical data sheet gives application data such as coverage, drying time and thinning; the finish schedule lists products and colors; the Form 300 log records injuries.
5	**C**	Joints between painted wood trim and a painted wall are sealed with a paintable acrylic (latex) caulk: it stays flexible as the materials move, cleans up with water and takes paint. PCA P11 defines painter's caulk as paintable acrylic/latex or urethane-modified caulk in joints of 1/8 in or less between wood trim and wall surfaces. Glazing compound beds glass in sash, wood filler fills holes in wood, and taping compound is rigid and cracks in a moving joint.
6	**A**	Stucco tape is a polyethylene tape with a high-tack adhesive that conforms to rough, porous surfaces such as stucco, brick, block and concrete, holds plastic sheeting against wind, and is made to come off without leaving residue within its rated time. Its colour varies by brand. Painter's tapes made for smooth or delicate surfaces do not stick to rough masonry, and duct tape is not a masking tape: its adhesive transfers and tears off in pieces, especially after sun exposure.
7	**C**	Water-soluble paste softens when soaked, so the paper is wetted with hot water from a sprayer or sponge (a little detergent or enzyme remover helps), allowed to soak, and lifted off with a wide (broad) knife; the wall is then washed and rinsed to remove all paste residue, as PCA P16 requires. Heat guns scorch the paper and wall, sanding leaves paste on the wall instead of removing it, and mineral spirits does not dissolve a water-based paste.
8	**D**	Water stains contain water-soluble deposits; a water-based coating redissolves them and carries them up to the surface, so the stain shows through again. A solvent-based stain blocker, such as an alkyd (oil-based) or shellac-based primer, seals the stain without redissolving it. PVA primer is made for sealing new drywall, and ordinary latex primer or extra coats of latex ceiling paint let the stain bleed through.

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#	ANSWER	WHY
9	**A**	Water driven upward under the lap of each board gets behind the siding and into the wall, where it soaks the back of the boards and the sheathing; paint then blisters and peels, and the wood can decay. The USDA Forest Products Laboratory advises keeping the water stream pointed down and the pressure low when washing siding. A wide fan tip, low pressure and a proper standoff distance clean without gouging the wood.
10	**A**	Chalking is the weathering of a paint's binder at the surface, which leaves loose, powdery pigment that rubs off easily. It is checked by rubbing the surface with a finger or a dark cloth (or pressing tape on it, as in ASTM D4214) and looking at how much powder comes off. Heavy chalk must be washed off and the surface primed or conditioned before repainting, because new paint, especially water-thinned paint, adheres poorly to it.
11	**B**	Picture framing is a visible border around a wall where the cut-in paint looks different from the rolled field, usually because the brushed band dried before rolling or was applied at a different thickness or texture. It is prevented by cutting in a small area at a time, rolling close to the edges while the cut-in is still wet, and keeping a wet edge. Flashing is a patchy sheen difference over repairs, lap marks are stripes where rolled passes overlap after drying, and holidays are skipped or missed spots.
12	**A**	Wet latex paint is water-based, so drips come off a finished surface with a clean rag dampened with water, before they start to dry. Scraping, sanding or heating would damage the existing finish and are only for paint that has already dried.
13	**C**	A plumb bob hangs truly vertical under gravity no matter how the walls, corners or trim run, so a chalked plumb line gives a reliable reference for the first strip, and every later strip follows it. Corners, casings and walls are seldom plumb, and a square only repeats the angle of whatever edge it is set against. PCA P6 lists wallcovering installed plumb or square among its acceptance criteria.
14	**D**	Spar varnish was developed for wooden boats: it is a long-oil varnish that stays flexible as the wood moves and usually carries UV absorbers, so it is the clear finish made for exterior wood in direct sun. Even so, it needs renewing more often than paint. Interior polyurethane and lacquer become brittle and break down in sunlight, and shellac has little water resistance outdoors.
15	**D**	Each printing run uses its own batch of inks and ground colors, so rolls from different runs can differ slightly in color and shading. Side by side on a wall, strips from two runs show a visible difference, so the paperhanger checks that every roll carries the same run number before cutting. Billing, price and paste drying time have nothing to do with the run number.
16	**B**	The room finish schedule is a table, usually in the architectural sheets or the specifications, that lists each room with the finish for its floor, base, walls and ceiling, often with paint type, sheen and color codes. The site plan shows the lot and building location, the elevations show the outside faces of the building, and the structural notes cover materials and loads.
17	**D**	Divide the area by the coverage, add the waste allowance, then round up: G = dfracAc × 1.10 = dfrac4,850375 × 1.10 ≈ 14.23 where G is gallons, A the area in sq ft and c the coverage per gallon. Paint is bought in whole gallons, so 14.23 rounds up to 15 gallons. 13 gallons leaves out the waste allowance, 14.23 is not a purchasable quantity, and 14 gallons rounds down and comes up short.
18	**B**	A painting price depends on the actual surfaces to be coated (walls, ceilings, trim, doors and their areas), the condition and preparation they need, the products and number of coats specified, and access. Floor area and ceiling height alone do not give any of that; PCA P10 bases painting estimates on the measured surface area of the work to be painted. The contractor should get plans and specifications or walk the job before bidding; a floor-area price is a guess that can lose money or the job.

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#	ANSWER	WHY
19	**C**	At 1/8" = 1'-0", every 1/8 in on the drawing is 1 ft, so count the eighths: 4-5/8 in = 37/8 in, which is 37 eighths, or 37 ft. In decimals: L = dfrac4.6250.125 = 37 ft 18-1/2 ft comes from reading the plan at 1/4-inch scale, 74 ft from 1/16-inch scale, and 40 ft from rounding the measurement up to 5 in.
20	**A**	Complementary colors sit directly opposite each other on the color wheel: red and green, yellow and violet, blue and orange. Placed side by side they make each other look more intense, and mixed together they neutralize toward gray or brown. Green is the secondary color made from blue and yellow, so its complement is the remaining primary, red.

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