Kubernetes certifications: KCNA, CKA, CKAD, CKS and KCSA compared

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Short answer: the Linux Foundation and CNCF offer the main Kubernetes certifications. KCNA and KCSA are entry-level, multiple-choice exams on cloud-native and security concepts. CKA (administrator), CKAD (application developer) and CKS (security specialist) are hands-on, performance-based exams in a live cluster. Take CKAD if you build applications, CKA if you run clusters, and CKS after CKA if you secure them.

TL;DR The short version

- The Linux Foundation and CNCF offer five Kubernetes certifications: KCNA, KCSA, CKA, CKAD and CKS.
- KCNA and KCSA are entry-level multiple-choice exams; CKA, CKAD and CKS are hands-on exams in a live cluster.
- Prepare for the hands-on exams in a real cluster against the clock, and remember Kubernetes is only one part of running systems well.

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The five, at a glance

- **KCNA (Kubernetes and Cloud Native Associate):** concepts, for beginners and non-engineers.
- **KCSA (Kubernetes and Cloud Native Security Associate):** security concepts at entry level.
- **CKA (Certified Kubernetes Administrator):** installing, configuring and troubleshooting clusters.
- **CKAD (Certified Kubernetes Application Developer):** designing, building and running applications on Kubernetes.
- **CKS (Certified Kubernetes Security Specialist):** securing clusters and workloads; the Linux Foundation requires a current CKA.

Which order

1. New to cloud-native: KCNA, or skip it if you already use containers daily.
2. Developers: CKAD.
3. Platform and operations engineers: CKA.
4. Security-focused: CKS after CKA.

How to prepare for performance-based exams

- Practise in a real cluster, against the clock.
- Learn imperative kubectl commands to save time.
- Know where things are in the official documentation; the exam rules say which documentation you may use.
- Practise troubleshooting broken clusters, not only building new ones.

Beyond the cluster

Kubernetes skill is one part of running systems well. Cost, observability and platform design matter as much. See what is Kubernetes, Kubernetes cost allocation, running AI workloads on Kubernetes and best DevOps certifications.

Before you book

Certification bodies rename, update and retire exams often. Check each issuer's own page for current versions, prerequisites and fees before you book.

> Related credential: Cloud Architecture Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Linux Foundation. Training and certification. training.linuxfoundation.org.
2. CNCF. Certification. cncf.io/training/certification.

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