

# HOW TO TAKE A TEST

## **I. YOU MUST PASS AN EXAMINATION**

### **A. WHAT EVERY CANDIDATE SHOULD KNOW**

Examination applicants often ask us for help in preparing for the written test. What can I study in advance? What kinds of questions will be asked? How will the test be given? How will the papers be graded?

As an applicant for a civil service examination, you may be wondering about some of these things. Our purpose here is to suggest effective methods of advance study and to describe civil service examinations.

Your chances for success on this examination can be increased if you know how to prepare. Those “pre-examination jitters” can be reduced if you know what to expect. You can even experience an adventure in good citizenship if you know why civil service examinations are given.

### **B. WHY ARE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS GIVEN?**

Civil service examinations are important to you in two ways. As a citizen, you want public jobs filled by employees who know how to do their work. As a job seeker, you want a fair chance to compete for that job on an equal footing with other candidates. The best-known means of accomplishing this two-fold goal is the competitive examination.

Examinations are widely publicized throughout the nation. They may be administered for jobs in federal, state, city, municipal, town, or village governments or agencies.

Any citizen may apply, with some limitations, such as the age or residence of applicants. Your experience and education may be reviewed to see whether you meet the requirements for the particular examination. When these requirements exist, they are reasonable and are applied consistently to all applicants. Thus, a competitive examination may cause you some uneasiness now, but it is your privilege and safeguard.

## **C. HOW ARE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS DEVELOPED?**

Examinations are carefully written by trained technicians who are specialists in the field known as “psychological measurement,” in consultation with recognized authorities in the field of work that the test will cover. These experts recommend the subject matter areas or skills to be tested; only the knowledge or skills important to your success on the job are included. The most reliable books and source materials available are used as references. Together, the experts and technicians judge the difficulty level of the questions.

Test technicians know how to phrase questions so that the problem is clearly stated. Their ethics do not permit “trick” or “catch” questions. Questions may have been tried out on sample groups, or subjected to statistical analysis, to determine their usefulness.

Written tests are often used in combination with performance tests, ratings of training and experience, and oral interviews. All of these measures combine to form the best-known means of finding the right person for the right job.

## **II. HOW TO PASS THE WRITTEN TEST**

### **A. NATURE OF THE EXAMINATION**

To prepare intelligently for civil service examinations, you should know how they differ from school examinations you have taken. In school you were assigned certain definite pages to read or subjects to cover. The examination questions were quite detailed and usually emphasized memory. Civil service examinations, on the other hand, try to discover your present ability to perform the duties of a position, plus your potentiality to learn these duties. In other words, a civil service examination attempts to predict how successful you will be. Questions cover such a broad area that they cannot be as minute and detailed as school examination questions.

In the public service similar kinds of work, or positions, are grouped together in one “class”. This process is known as “position-classification”. All the positions in a class are paid according to the salary range for that class. One class title covers all these positions, and they are all tested by the same examination.

## **B. FOUR BASIC STEPS**

- 1.** Study the Announcement.—How, then, can you know what subjects to study? Our best answer is: “Learn as much as possible about the class of position for which you have applied”. The examination will test the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to do the work.

Your most valuable source of information about the position you want is the official announcement of the examination. This announcement lists the training and experience qualifications. Check these standards and apply only if you come reasonably close to meeting them.

The brief description of the position in the examination announcement offers some clues to the subjects that will be tested. Think about the job itself. Review the duties in your mind. Can you perform them, or are there some in which you are rusty? Fill in the blank spots in your preparation.

Many jurisdictions preview the written test in the examination announcement by including a section called “Knowledge and Abilities Required”, “Scope of Examination”, or some similar heading. Here you will find out specifically what fields will be tested.

- 2. Review Your Own Background.**-- Once you learn in general what the position is all about, and what you need to know to do the work, ask yourself which subjects you already know fairly well and which need improvement. You may wonder whether to concentrate on improving your strong areas or on building some background in your fields of weakness. When the announcement has specified “some knowledge” or “considerable knowledge”, or has used adjectives such as “beginning principles of . . . .” or “advanced . . . . methods”, you can get a clue as to the number and difficulty of questions to be asked in any given field. More questions, and hence broader coverage, would be included for those subjects that are more important in the work. Now weigh your strengths and weaknesses against the job requirements and prepare accordingly.

3. **Determine the Level of the Position.**—Another way to tell how intensively you should prepare is to understand the level of the job for which you are applying. Is it the entering level? In other words, is this the position in which beginners in a field of work are hired? Or is it an intermediate or advanced level? Sometimes this is indicated by such words as “Junior” or “Senior” in the class title. Other jurisdictions use Roman numerals to designate the level: Clerk I, Clerk II, for example. The word “Supervisor” sometimes appears in the title. If the level is not indicated by the title, check the description of duties. Will you be working under very close supervision, or will you have responsibility for independent decisions in this work?
  
4. **Choose Appropriate Study Materials.**—Now that you know the subjects to be examined and the relative amount of each subject to be covered, you can choose suitable study materials. For beginning level jobs, or even advanced ones, if you have a pronounced weakness in some aspect of your training, read a modern, standard textbook in that field. Be sure it is-to-date and has general coverage. Such books are normally available at your library, and the librarian will be glad to help you locate one. For entry-level positions, questions of appropriate difficulty are chosen – neither highly advanced questions, nor those too simple. Such questions requires careful thought but not advanced training.

If the position for which you are applying is technical or advanced, you will read more advanced, specialized material. If you are already familiar with the basic principles of your field, elementary textbooks would waste your time. Concentrate on advanced textbooks and technical periodicals. Think through the concepts and review difficult problems in your field.

These are all general sources. You can get more ideas on your own initiative, following these leads. For example, training manuals and publications of the government agency that employs workers in your field can be useful, particularly for technical and professional positions. A letter or visit to the government department involved may result in more specific study suggestions, and certainly will provide you with a more definite idea of the exact nature of the position you are seeking.

### III. KINDS OF TESTS

Tests are used for purposes other than measuring knowledge and ability to perform specified duties. For some positions, it is equally important to test ability to make adjustments to new situations or to profit from training. In others, basic mental abilities not dependent upon information are essential. Questions that test these things may not appear as pertinent to the duties of the position as those that test for knowledge and information. Yet they are often highly important parts of a fair examination. For very general questions, it is almost impossible to help you direct your study efforts. What we can do is to point out some of the more common of these general abilities needed in public service positions and describe some typical questions.

### **1. General Information**

Broad, general information has been found useful for predicting job success in some kinds of work. This is tested in a variety of ways, from vocabulary lists to questions about current events. Basic background in some field of work, such as sociology or economics, may be sampled in a group of questions. Often these are principles that have become familiar to most persons through “exposure” rather than through formal training. It is difficult to advise you how to study for these questions; being alert to the world around you is our suggestion.

### **2. Verbal Ability**

An example of an ability needed in many positions is verbal or language ability. Verbal ability is, in brief, the ability to use and understand words. Vocabulary and grammar tests are typical measures of this ability. “Reading comprehension” or “Paragraph Interpretation” questions are common in many kinds of civil service tests. You are given a paragraph of written material and asked to find its central meaning.

### **3. Numerical Ability**

Number skills can be tested by the familiar arithmetic problem, by checking paired lists of numbers to see which are alike and which are different, or by interpreting charts and graphs. In the latter test, a graph may be printed in the test booklet that you are asked to use as the basis for answering questions.

### **4. Observation**

A popular test for law-enforcement positions is the observation test. A picture is shown to you for several minutes, and then taken away. Questions about the pictures test your ability to observe both details and larger elements.

## **5. Following Directions**

In many positions in the public service, the employee must be able to carry out written instructions dependably and accurately. You may be given a chart with several columns, each column listing a variety of information. The questions require you to carry out directions involving the information given in the chart

## **6. Skills and Aptitudes**

Performance tests effectively measure some manual skills and aptitudes. When the skill is one in which you are trained, such as typing or shorthand, you can practice. These tests are often very much like those given in business schools or high school courses. For many of the other skills and aptitude, however, no short-time preparation can be made. Skills and abilities natural to you or that you have developed throughout your lifetime are being tested.

Many of the general questions just described provide all the data needed to answer the questions and ask you to use your reasoning ability to find the answers. Your best preparation for these tests, as well as those of facts and ideas, is to be at your physical and mental best. You, no doubt, have your own methods of getting into an exam-taking mood and keeping "in shape." The next section lists some ideas on this subject.

# **IV. KINDS OF QUESTIONS**

Only rarely is the "essay" question, which you answer in narrative form, used in civil service tests. Civil service tests are usually of the short-answer type. Full instructions for answering these questions will be given to you at the examination. But in case this is your first experience with short-answer questions and separate answer sheets, here is what you need to know.

## **1. Multiple-Choice Questions**

Most popular of the short-answer question is the “multiple-choice” or “best-answer” question. It can be used, for example, to test for factual knowledge, ability to solve problems, or judgment in meeting situations found at work.

**A multiple-choice question is normally one of three types:**

(1) It can begin with an incomplete statement followed by several possible endings. You are to find the one ending which *best* completes the statement, although some of the others may not be entirely wrong.

(2) It can also be a complete statement in the form of a question that is answered by choosing one of the statements listed.

(3) It can be in the form of a problem – again you select the best answer. Here is an example of a multiple-choice question with a discussion that should give you some clues as to the method for choosing the right answer.

**SAMPLE QUESTION:**

When an employee has a complaint about his assignment, the action that will *best* help him overcome his difficulty is

- (A) to discuss his difficulty with his co-workers
- (A) to take the problem to the head of the organization
- (B) to take the problem to the person who gave him the assignment
- (D) to say nothing to anyone about his complaint

In answering this question you should study each of the choices to find which is best. Consider choice (A). Certainly an employee may discuss his complaint with fellow employees, but no change or improvement can result, and the complaint remains unsolved. Choice (B) is a poor choice since the head of the organization probably does not know what assignment you have been given, and taking your problem to him is known as “going over the head” of the supervisor. The supervisor, or person who made the assignment, is the person who can clarify it or correct any injustice. Choice (C) is, therefore, correct. To say nothing, as

in choice (D), is unwise. Supervisors have an interest in knowing the problems employees are facing, and the employee is seeking a solution to his problem.

## **2. True-False Questions**

The “true-false” or “right-wrong” form of questions is sometimes used. Here a complete statement is given. Your problem is to decide whether the statement is right or wrong.

### **SAMPLE QUESTIONS:**

A person-to-person long-distance telephone call costs less than a station-to-station call to the same city.

This question is wrong, or “false,” since person-to-person calls are more expensive.

This is not a complete list of all possible questions forms, although most of the others are variations of these common types. You will always get complete directions for answering questions. Be sure you understand *how* to mark your answer – ask questions until you do.

## **V. RECORDING YOUR ANSWER**

For an examination with very few applications, you may be told to record your answers in the test booklet itself. Separate answer sheets are much more common. If this separate answer sheet is to be scored by machine – and this is often the case – it is highly important that you mark your answer correctly in order to get credit.

An electric test-scoring machine is often used in civil service offices because of the speed with which papers can be scored. Machine-scored answer sheets must be marked with a special pencil, which will be given to you. This pencil has high graphite content which responds to the electrical scoring machine. As a matter of fact, stray dots may register as answers, so do not let your pencil rest on the answer sheet while you are pondering the correct answer. Also, if your pencil lead breaks or is otherwise defective, ask for another.

Since the answer sheet will be dropped in a slot in the scoring machine, be careful not to bend the corners or get the paper crumpled.

The answer sheet normally has five vertical columns of numbers, with 30 numbers to a column. These numbers correspond to the question

numbers in your test booklet. After each number, going across the page, are four or five pairs of dotted lines. These short dotted lines have a “T” and “F” above the letters. This indicates that the first two pairs only are to be used if the questions are of the true-false type. If the questions are multiple-choice, disregard this “T” and “F” completely, and pay attention only to the small number or letters.

Answer your questions in the manner of the sample that follows. Proceed in the sequential steps outlined below. Assume that you are answering questions 32, which is:

The largest city in the United States is:

- A. Washington, D.C.      B. New York City      C. Chicago  
 D. Detroit                      E. San Francisco

1. Choose the answer you think is best.  
 New York City is the largest, so choice B is correct
2. Find the row of dotted lines numbered the same as the question you are answering.  
 This is question number 32, so find row number 32.

- |    |   |    |     |     |             |
|----|---|----|-----|-----|-------------|
| 3. | Find the pair of dotted lines corresponding to the answer you have chosen. You have chose answer B, so find the pair of dotted lines marked “B”.  | 29 | T   | F   |             |
|    |   |    | A   | B   | C D E       |
|    |   |    | { } | { } | { } { } { } |
|    |   | 30 | { } | { } | { } { } { } |
| 4. | Make a solid black mark between the dotted lines. Go up and down two or three times with your pencil so plenty of graphite rubs off, but do not let the mark get outside or above the dots. | 31 | { } | { } | { } { } { } |
|    |   | 32 | { } | ■   | { } { } { } |
|    |   | 33 | { } | { } | { } { } { } |

## VI. BEFORE THE TEST

Common sense will help you find procedures to follow to get ready for an examination. Too many of us, however, overlook these sensible measures. Indeed, nervousness and fatigue have been found to be the most serious reasons why applicants fail to do their best on civil service tests. Here is a list of reminders.

1. **Begin Your Preparation Early**

Don't wait until the last minute to go scurrying around for books and materials or to find out what the position is all about.

**2. Prepare Continuously**

An hour a night for a week is better than an all-night cram session. This has been definitely established. What is more, a night a week for a month will return better dividends than crowding your study into a shorter period of time.

**3. Locate the Place of the Examination**

You have been sent a notice telling you when and where to report for the examination. If the location is in a different town or otherwise unfamiliar to you, it would be well to inquire the best route and learn something about the building.

**4. Relax the Night Before the Test**

Allow your mind to rest. Do not study at all that night. Plan some mild recreation or diversion; then go to bed early and get a good night's sleep.

**5. Get up Early Enough** to make a leisurely trip to the place for the test, so that unforeseen events, traffic snarls, unfamiliar buildings, will not upset you.

**6. Dress Comfortably**

A written test is not a fashion show. You will be known by number and not by name, so wear something comfortable.

**7. Leave Excess Paraphernalia at Home**

Shopping bags and odd bundles will get in your way. You need to bring only the items mentioned in the official notice sent to you; usually everything you need is provided. Do not bring reference books to the examination. They will only confuse those last minutes and will be taken away from you when in the test room.

**8. Arrive Somewhat Ahead of Time**

If because of transportation schedules you must get there very early, bring a newspaper or magazine to take your mind off yourself while waiting.

**9. Locate the Examination Room**

When you have found the proper room, you will be directed to the seat or part of the room where you will sit. Sometimes you are given a sheet of instructions to read while you are waiting. Do not fill out any forms until you are told to do so; just read them and be ready.

**10. Relax and Prepare to Listen to the Instructions**

If you have any physical problem that may keep you from doing your best, be sure to tell the test administrator. If you are sick, or in poor health, you really cannot do your best on the test. You can come back and take the test some other time.

## **VII. AT THE TEST**

The day of the test is here and you have the test booklet in your hand. The temptation to get going is very strong. Caution! There is more to success than knowing the right answer. You must know how to identify your papers and understand variations in the type of short-answer question used in this particular examination. Follow these suggestions for maximum results from your efforts:

### **1. Cooperate with the Monitor**

The test administrator has a duty to create a situation in which you can be as much at ease as possible. He will give instructions, tell you when to begin, check to see that you are marking your answer sheet correctly. He is not there to guard you, although he will see that your competitors do not take unfair advantage. He wants to help you do your best.

### **2. Listen to All Instruction**

Don't jump the gun! Wait until you understand all directions. In most civil service tests you get more time than you need to answer the questions. So don't get in a hurry. Read each word of instruction until you clearly understand the meaning. Study the examples. Listen to all announcements. Follow directions. Ask questions if you do not understand what to do.

### **3. Identify Your Papers**

Civil service examinations are usually identified by number only. You will be assigned a number; you must not put your name on your test papers. Be sure to copy your number correctly. Since more than one examination may be given, copy your exact examination title.

### **4. Plan Your Time**

Unless you are told that a test is a "speed" or "rate-of-work" test, speed itself is not usually important. Time enough to answer all the questions will be provided. But this does not mean that you have all day. An overall time limit has been set. Divide the total time (in minutes) by the number of questions to get the approximate time you have for each question.

### **5. Do Not Linger Over Difficult Questions**

If you come across a difficult question, mark it with a paper clip (useful to have along) and come back to it when you have been through the booklet. One caution if you do this – be sure to skip a number on your answer sheet too. Check often to be sure that you have not lost your

place and that you are marking in the row numbers the same as the question you are answering.

**6. Read the Questions**

Be sure you know what the question asks! Many capable people are unsuccessful because they failed to read the questions correctly.

**7. Answer All Questions**

Unless you have been instructed that a penalty will be deducted for incorrect answers, it is better to guess than to omit a question.

**8. Speed Tests**

It is often better *not* to guess on speed tests. It has been found that on timed tests people are tempted to spend the last few seconds before time is called in marking answers at random – without even reading them – in the hope of picking up a few extra points. To discourage this practice, the instructions may warn you that your score will be “corrected” for guessing. That is, a penalty will be applied. The incorrect answers will be deducted from the correct ones, or some other penalty formula will be used.

**9. Review Your Answer**

If you finish before time is called, go back to the questions you guessed or omitted to give further thought to them. Review other answers if you have time.

**10. Return Your Test Materials**

If you are ready to leave before others have finished or time is called, take all your materials to the monitor and leave quietly. Never take any test material with you. The monitor can discover whose papers are not complete, and taking a test booklet may be grounds for disqualification.

**VIII. EXAMINATION TECHNIQUES**

1. Read the *general* instructions carefully. These are usually printed on the first page of the examination booklet. As a rule, these instructions refer to the timing of the examination; the fact that you should not start work until the signal and must stop work at a signal, etc. If there are any special instructions, such as a choice of questions to be answered, make sure that you note this instruction carefully.

2. When you are ready to start work on the examination, that is as soon as the signal has been given, read the instructions to each questions booklet, underline any key words or phrases, *such as least, best, outline, describe*, and the like. In this way you will tend to answer as

requested rather than discover on reviewing your paper that you listed without describing, that you selected the worst choice rather than the best choice, etc.

- 3.** If the examination is of the objective or so-called multiple-choice type, that is, each question will also give a series of possible answers: A, B, C, or D, and you are called upon to select the best answer and write the letter next to that answer on your answer paper, it is advisable to start answering each question in turn. There may be anywhere from 50 to 100 such questions in the three or four hours allotted and you can see how much time would be taken if you read through all the questions before beginning to answer any. Furthermore, if you come across a question or a group of questions that you know would be difficult to answer, it would undoubtedly affect your handling of all the other questions.
- 4.** If the examination is of the essay-type and contains but a few questions, it is a moot point as to whether you should read all the questions before starting to answer any one. Of course if you are given a choice, say five out of seven and the like, then it is essential to read all the questions so you can eliminate the two which are most difficult. If, however, you are asked to answer all the questions, there may be danger in trying to answer the easiest one first because you may find that you will spend too much time on it. The best technique is to answer the first question, then proceed to the second, etc.
- 5.** Time your answers. Before the examination begins, write down the time it started, then add the time allowed for the examination and write down the time it must be completed, then divide the time available somewhat as follows:

  - (a)** If 3 ½ hours are allowed, that would be 210 minutes. If you have 80 objective-type questions, that would be an average of 2 ½ minutes per question. Allow yourself no more than 2 minutes per question, or a total of 160 minutes, which will permit about 50 minutes to review
  - (b)** If for the time allotment of 210 minutes, there are 7 essay questions to answer, that would average about 30 minutes a question. Give yourself only 25 minutes per question so that you have about 35 minutes to review.
- 6.** The most important instruction is to read each question and make sure you know what is wanted. The second most important instruction is to time yourself properly so that you answer every question. The third most important instruction is to answer every question. Guess if you have to but include something for each question. Remember that you will

receive no credit for a blank and will probably receive some credit if you write something in answer to an essay question. If you guess a letter, say “B” for a multiple-choice question, you may have guessed right. If you leave a blank as the answer to a multiple-choice question, the examiners may respect your feelings but it will not add a point to your score.

## **7. Suggestions**

### **a. Objective-Type Questions**

- (1) Examine the questions booklet for proper sequence of pages and questions.
- (2) Read all instructions carefully.
- (3) Skip any question that seems too difficult; return to it after all other questions have been answered.
- (4) Apportion your time properly; do not spend too much time on any single question or group of questions.
- (5) Note and underline key words – all, most, fewest, least, best, worst, same, opposite.
- (6) Pay particular attention to negatives.
- (7) Note unusual option, e.g., unduly long, short, complex, different or similar in content to the body of the question.
- (8) Observe the use of “hedging” words – probably, may, most likely, etc.
- (9) Make sure that your answer is put next to the same number as the question.
- (10) Do not second-guess unless you have good reason to believe the second answer is definitely more correct.
- (11) Cross out the original answer if you decide another answer is more accurate; do not erase.
- (12) Answer all questions; guess unless instructed otherwise.
- (13) Leave time for review.

### **b. Essay-Type Questions**

- (1) Read each question carefully.

- (2) Determine exactly what is wanted. Underline key words or phrases.
- (3) Decide on outline or paragraph answer.
- (4) Include many different points and elements unless asked to develop any one or two points.
- (5) Show impartiality by giving pros and cons unless directed to select one side only.
- (6) Make and write down any assumptions you find necessary to answer the question.
- (7) Watch your English, grammar, punctuation and choice of words.
- (8) Time your answers; don't crowd material.

**8. Answering the Essay Question**

Most essay questions can be answered by framing the specific response around several key words or ideas. Here are a few such keys words or ideas:

M's: manpower, materials, methods, money, management;

P's: purpose, program, policy, plan, procedure, practice, problems, pitfalls, personnel, public relations

**a. Six Basic Steps in Handling Problems**

- (1) Preliminary plan and background development
- (2) Collect information, data and facts
- (3) Analyze and interpret information, data and facts
- (4) Analyze and develop solutions as well as make recommendations
- (5) Prepare report and sell recommendations
- (6) Install recommendations and follow up effectiveness

**b. Pitfalls to Avoid**

- (1) *Taking things for granted*

A statement of the situation does not necessarily imply that each of the elements is necessarily true; for example, a complaint may be invalid and biased so that all that can be taken for granted is that a complaint has been registered.

**(2) *Considering only one side of a situation***

Whenever possible, indicate several alternatives and then point out the reasons you selected the best one.

**(3) *Failing to indicate follow-up***

Whenever your answer indicates action on your part, make certain that you will take proper follow-up action to see how successful your recommendations, procedures, or actions turn out to be.

**(4) *Taking too long in answering any single question***

Remember to time your answers properly.

**IX. AFTER THE TEST**

Scoring procedures differ in detail among civil service jurisdictions although the general principles are the same. Whether the papers are hand-scored or graded by the electric scoring machine we have described, they are nearly always graded by number. That is, the person who marks the paper knows only the number – never the name – of the applicant. Not until all the papers have been graded will they be matched with names. If other tests, such as training and experience or oral interview ratings have been given, scores will be combined. Different parts of the examination usually have different weights. For example, the written test might count 60 percent of the final grade, and a rating of training and experience 40 percent. In many jurisdictions, veterans will have a certain number of points added to their grades.

After the final grade has been determined, the names are placed in grade order and an eligible list is established. There are various methods for resolving ties between those who get the same final grade: probably the most common is to place first the name of the person whose application was received first. Job offers are made from the eligible list in the order the names appears on it.

You will be notified of your grade and your rank order as soon as all these computations have been made. This will be done as rapidly as possible.

People who are found to meet the requirements in the announcement are called “eligible.” Their names are put on a list of eligibles. An eligibles’

chance of getting a job depends on how high they stand on the list and how fast agencies are filling jobs from the list.

When a job is to be filled from a list of eligibles, the agency asks for the names of people on the list of eligible for that job.

When the civil service commission receives this request, it sends to the agency the names of the three people highest on the list. Or, if the job to be filled had specialized requirements, the office sends the agency, from the general list, the names of the top three persons who meet those requirements.

The appointing officer makes a choice from among the three people whose names were sent to him. If the selected person accepts the appointment, the names of the others are put back on the list to be considered for future opening.

That is the rule in hiring from all kinds of eligible lists, whether they are for typist, carpenter, chemist, or something else. For every vacancy, the appointing officer has his choice of any one of the top three eligibles on the list. This explains why the person whose name is on top of the list sometimes does not get an appointment when some of the persons lower on the list do. If the appointing officer chooses the No. 2 or No. 3 eligible, the No. 1 eligible does not get a job at once, but stays on the list until he is appointed or the list is terminated.

## **X. HOW TO PASS THE INTERVIEW TEST**

The examination for which you applied requires an oral interview test. You have already taken the written test and you are now being called for the interview test – the final part of the formal examination.

You may think that it is not possible to prepare for an interview test and that there are no procedures to follow during an interview. Our purpose is to point out some things you can do in advance that will help you and some good rules to follow and pitfalls to avoid while you are being interviewed.

### **A. WHAT IS AN INTERVIEW SUPPOSED TO TEST?**

The written examination is designed to test the technical knowledge and competence of the candidate; the oral is designed to evaluate intangible qualities, not readily measured otherwise, and to establish a list showing the relative fitness of each candidate, *as measured against his competitors*, for the position sought. Scoring is not on the basis of “right” or “wrong,” but on a sliding scale of values ranging from “not passable” to “outstanding.” As a matter of fact, it is possible to achieve a relatively low score without a single “incorrect” answer because of evident weakness in the qualities being measured.

Occasionally, an examination may consist entirely of an oral test – either an individual or a group oral. In such cases, information is sought concerning the technical knowledge and abilities of the candidate, since there has been no written examination for this purpose. More commonly, however, an oral test is used to supplement a written examination.

#### **B. WHO CONDUCTS INTERVIEWS?**

The composition of oral boards varies among different jurisdictions. In nearly all, a representative of the personnel department serves as chairman. One of the members of the board may be a representative of the department in which the candidates would work. In some cases, “outside experts” are used, and frequently, a business man or some other representative of the general public is asked to serve. Labor and management or other special group may be represented. The aim is to secure the services of experts in the appropriate field.

However the board is composed, it is a good idea (and not at all improper or unethical) to ascertain in advance of the interview who the members are and what groups they represent. When you are introduced to them, you will have some idea of their backgrounds and interests, and at least you will not stutter and stammer over their names.

#### **C. WHAT TO DO BEFORE THE INTERVIEW**

While knowledge about the board members is useful and takes some of the surprise element out of the interview, there is other preparation that is more substantive. It is possible to prepare for an oral – in several ways:

**1. Keep a Copy of Your Application and Review it Carefully Before the Interview**

This may be the only document before the oral board, and the starting point of the interview. Know what experience and education you have listed there, and the sequence and dates of it. Sometimes the board will ask you to review the highlights of your experience for them; you should not have to hem and haw doing it.

**2. Study the Class Specification and the Examination Announcement**

Usually, the oral board has one or both of these to guide them. The qualities, characteristics, or knowledge required by the position sought are stated in these documents. They offer valuable clues as to the nature of the oral interview. For example, if the job involves supervisory responsibilities, the announcement will usually indicate that knowledge of modern supervisory methods and the qualifications of the candidate as a supervisor will be tested.

If so, you can expect such questions, frequently in the form of hypothetical situations which you are expected to solve. Never go into an oral without knowledge of the duties and responsibilities of the job you seek.

**3. Think through Each Qualification Required**

Try to visualize the kind of question you would ask if you were a board member. How well could you answer them? Try especially to appraise your own knowledge and background in each area, measured against the job sought, and identify any areas in which you are weak. Be critical and realistic – do not flatter yourself.

**4. Do Some General Reading in Areas in Which You Feel You May be Weak**

For example, if the job involves supervision and your past experience has not, some general reading in supervisory methods and practices, particularly in the field of human relations, might be useful. Do not study agency procedures or detailed manuals. The oral board will be testing your understanding and capacity, not your memory.

## **5. Get a Good Nights Sleep and Watch Your General Health And Mental Attitude**

You will want a clear head at the interview. Take care of a cold or other minor ailment, and, of course, no hangovers.

### ***D. WHAT TO DO THE DAY OF THE INTERVIEW***

Now comes the day of the interview itself. Give yourself plenty of time to get there. Plan to arrive somewhat ahead of the scheduled time, particularly if your appointment is in the fore part of the day. If a previous candidate fails to appear, the board might be ready for you a bit early. By early afternoon an oral board is almost invariably behind schedule if there are many candidates, and you may have to wait. Take along a book or magazine to read, or your application to review. But leave any extraneous material in the waiting room when you go in for your interview. In any event, relax and compose yourself.

The matter of dress is important. The board is forming impressions about you – from your experience, your manners, your attitudes, and from your appearance. Give your personal appearance careful attention. Dress your best, but not your flashiest.

Choose conservative, appropriate clothing, and be sure it and you are immaculate. This is a business interview, and your appearance should indicate that you regard it as such. Besides, being well-groomed and properly dressed will help boost your confidence.

Sooner or later, someone will call your name and escort you into the interview room. This is it. From here on you are on your own. It is too late for any more preparation. But, remember, you asked for this opportunity to prove your fitness, and you are here because your request was granted.

### ***E. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GO IN?***

The usual sequence of events will be as follows: the clerk (who is often the board stenographer) will introduce you to the chairman of the oral board, who will introduce you to each other member of the board. Acknowledge the introductions before you sit down. Do not be surprised if you find a microphone facing you or a steno typist sitting by. Oral interviews are usually recorded, in the event of an appeal or other review.

Usually the chairman of the board will open the interview by reviewing the highlights of your education and work experience from your application – primarily for the benefit of the other members of the board,

as well as to get the material into the record. Do not interrupt or comment unless there is an error or significant misinterpretation; if so, do not hesitate. But do not quibble about insignificant matters. Usually, also, he will ask you some question about your education, your experience, or your present job – partly to get you started, to establish the interviewing “rapport.” He may start the actual questioning, or turn it over to one of the other members. Frequently each member undertakes the questioning on a particular area, one in which he is perhaps most competent. So you can expect each member to participate in the examination. And because the time is limited, you may expect some rather abrupt switches in the direction the questioning takes. Do not be upset by it. Normally, a board member will not pursue single line of questioning unless he discovers a particular strength or weakness.

After each member has participated, the chairman will usually ask whether any member has any further questions, then will ask you if you have anything you wish to add. Unless you are expecting this question, it may floor you. Or worse, it may start you off on an extended, extemporaneous speech. The board is not usually seeking more information. The question is principally to offer you a last opportunity to present further qualifications or to indicate that you have nothing to add.

So, if you feel that a significant qualification or characteristic has been overlooked, it is proper to point it out in a sentence or so. Do not compliment the board on the thoroughness of their examination – they have been sketchy, and you know it. If you wish, merely say, “No thank you, I have nothing further to add.” This is a point where you can “talk yourself out” of a good impression or fail to present an important bit of information. Remember, you close the interview yourself. The chairman will then say, “That is all, Mr. Smith, thank you.” Do not be startled; the interview is over, and quicker than you think. Say, “Thank you and good morning,” gather up your belongings and take care. Save your sigh of relief for the other side of the door.

**F. HOW TO PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD**

Throughout all this process, you may feel that the board individually and collectively is trying to pierce your defenses, to seek out your hidden weakness, and to embarrass and confuse you. Actually, this is not true. They are obliged to make an appraisal of your qualifications for the job you are seeking, and they want to see you in your best light. Remember, they must interview all candidates and a non-cooperative candidate may become a failure in spite of their best efforts to bring out his qualifications. Here are fifteen (15) suggestions that will help you:

**1. Be Natural. Keep your Attitude Confident, But Not Cocky**

If you are not confident that you can do the job, do not expect the board to be. Do not apologize for your weaknesses, try to bring out your strong points. The board is interested in a positive, not a negative presentation. Cockiness will antagonize any board member, and make him wonder if are covering up a weakness by a false show of strength.

**2. Get Comfortable, But Don't Lounge or Sprawl**

Sit erectly but not stiffly. A careless posture may lead the board to conclude you are careless in other things, or at least that you are not impressed by the importance of the occasion to you. Either conclusion is natural, even if incorrect. Do not fuss with your clothing, or with a pencil or an ashtray. Your hands may occasionally be useful to emphasize a point; do not let them become a point of distraction.

**3. Do Not Wisecrack or Make Small Talk**

This is a serious situation, and your attitude should show that you consider it as such. Further, the time of the board is limited; they do not want to waste it, and neither should you.

**4. Do Not Exaggerate Your Experience or Abilities**

In the first place, from information in the application, from other interviews and other sources, the board may know more about you than you think; in the second place, you probably will not get away with it in the first place. An experienced board is rather adept at spotting such a situation. Do not take the chance.

**5. If You Know a Member of the Board. Do Not Make a Point of It, Yet Do Not Hide It.**

Certainly you are not fooling him, and probably not the other members of the board. Do not try to take advantage of your acquaintanceship – it will probably do you little good.

**6. Do Not Dominate the Interview**

Let the board do that. They will give you the clues – do not assume that you have to do all the talking. Realize that the board has a number of questions to ask you, and do not try to take up all the interview time by showing off your extensive knowledge of the answer to the first one.

**7. Be Attentive**

You only have twenty minutes or so, and you should keep your attention at its sharpest throughout. When a member is addressing a problem or a question to you, give him your undivided attention. Address your reply principally to him, but do not exclude the other members of the board.

**8. Do Not Interrupt**

A board member may be stating a problem for you to analyze. He will ask you a question when the time comes. Let him state the problem, and wait for the question.

**9. Make Sure You Understand the Question**

Do not try to answer until you are sure what the question is. If it is not clear, restate it in your own words or ask the board member to clarify it for you. But do not haggle about minor elements.

**10. Reply Promptly But Not Hastily**

A common entry on oral board rating sheets is “candidate responded readily,” or “candidate hesitated in replies.” Respond as promptly and quickly as you can, but do not jump to a hasty, ill-considered answer.

**11. Do Not Be Peremptory in Your Answers**

A brief answer is proper – but do not fire your answer back. That is a losing game from your point of view. The board member can probably ask questions much faster than you can answer them.

**12. Do Not Try To Create the Answer You Think the Board Member Wants**

He is interested in what kind of mind you have and how it works – not in playing games. Furthermore, he can usually spot this practice and will usually grade you down on it.

**13. Do Not Switch Sides in your Reply Merely to Agree With a Board Member**

out Frequently, a member will offer a contrary position merely to draw you and to see if you are willing and able to defend your points of view. Do not start a debate, yet do not surrender a good position. If a position is worth taking, it is worth defending.

**14. Do Not Be Afraid to Admit an Error in Judgment If You Are Shown to Be Wrong**

The board knows that you are forced to reply without any opportunity for careful consideration. Your answer may be demonstrably wrong. If so, admit it and get on with the interview.

**15. Do Not Dwell at Length on Your Present Job**

The opening question may relate to your present assignment. Answer the question but do not go into an extended discussion. You are being examined for a new job, not your present one. As a matter of facts, try to phrase all your answers in terms of the job for which you are being examined.

**G. BASIS OF RATING**

Probably you will forget most of these “do’s” and “don’ts” when you walk into the oral interview room. Even remembering them all will not insure you a passing grade. Perhaps you did not have the qualifications in the first place. But remembering them will help you to put your best foot forward, without treading on the toes of the board members.

Rumor and popular opinion to the contrary notwithstanding, an oral board wants you to make the best appearance possible. They know you are under pressure – but they also want to see how you respond to it as a guide to what your reaction would be under the pressures of the job you seek. They will be influenced by the degree of poise you display, the personal traits you show, and the manner in which you respond.