

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A CIVIL SERVICE TEST

NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF
CIVIL SERVICE

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Applicants for civil service examinations often ask the Department of Civil Service for help in preparing for the written test. The questions most often asked are: What should I study in advance? What kind of questions will be asked? How will the test be given? How will the papers be graded? What happens then?

As an applicant or prospective applicant for a civil service examination, you may be wondering about some of these things. Our purpose here is to suggest methods which may help you in preparing for a civil service examination and to explain what these examinations are like.

Your chances for success in an examination can be increased if you know how to prepare. Those "pre-examination jitters" can be reduced if you know what to expect.

WHY ARE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS GIVEN?

The New Jersey Constitution states that appointments and promotions in the civil service of the State, and of such political subdivisions as may be provided by law, shall be made according to merit and fitness to be ascertained, as far as practicable, by examination, which, as far as practicable, shall be competitive...

The civil service examination process in its various forms is the instrument by which this constitutional mandate is carried out. Basically, the procedure described applies to the open-competitive process but, in certain areas, it is also applicable to the promotional process. Appointments and promotions are made without consideration of race, color, national origin, sex, religious creed, or political affiliation.

HOW DO I FIND OUT ABOUT CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS?

Opportunities for positions in State government and those local governments operating under Civil Service are announced in the Job Opportunities Bulletin issued at regular intervals. These Bulletins are available at the offices of the Department of Civil Service, in various public buildings throughout the State, libraries, and Division of Employment Security Offices. Announcements of some examinations are advertised in appropriate newspapers as well.

Each announcement contains such information as the title, jurisdiction, salary, residence requirements, a short definition of duties, minimum education and/or experience requirements, and other pertinent data.

HOW ARE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS DEVELOPED?

Examinations are developed by trained technicians and consulting specialists in the field concerned.

These individuals know how to phrase questions so that the problem is clearly stated. Ethics do not permit "trick" or "catch" questions. It is important, however, that you read each question thoroughly. Often, if a person "half" reads a question, a wrong answer may seem right. Also, questions are usually tried out or subjected to statistical analysis to determine their appropriateness.

Written tests are often used in combination with practical-performance tests, comparative ratings of education and experience, or oral tests. All of these combine to help find the right person for each job.

HOW SHOULD I STUDY FOR A WRITTEN TEST?

In order to prepare for civil service examinations, you should know how they differ from other examinations you may have taken. In school you were usually assigned 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 current ability to perform the duties of a position, plus your potential to learn to perform these duties. In other words, a civil service examination attempts to determine how successful you will be on the job.

In public service similar kinds of work in similar positions are placed in a group with a designated title for that group. All positions in the group are paid according to the

salary range for that group or job title. One title covers all the positions in the group and all the positions are tested for by the same examination.

EXAMPLE: *The position of Clerk-Typist may exist in four separate departments. Although the function of each department is different, the duties of the Clerk-Typist are similar regardless of the location. Consequently, the examination would be the same for these positions.*

Outlined below are a few of the steps you can take in preparing for a civil service examination:

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 positions for which you have applied." The examination will test the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to do the work.

A valuable source of information about the position you want is the official examination announcement. This announcement lists the training and/or experience qualifications. Look closely at these minimum education and/or experience requirements and apply only if you think you meet them. You must be precise.

Often the brief description of the position in the examination announcement offers some idea as to the subjects to be covered. Think about the job itself. Review the duties in your mind. Can you perform them or are there some areas in which you are rusty? Attempt to fill in the blank spots in your preparation.

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 have to make a decision whether to concentrate on improving your strong areas or to build some background in areas where you are weak.

3. Determine the Level of the Position—Another way to tell how intensely you should prepare is to understand the level of the job for which you are applying. Is it the entry level? In other words, is this the position in which beginners in a field of work are hired or is it at the intermediate or advanced level? Often this is indicated by such words as "Trainee" or "Senior" in the class title. 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 have an idea about the subjects to be examined and the relative importance of each, you can choose suitable study materials. For beginning-level jobs, or even advanced ones, if you have weakness in some aspects of your training, read a modern, standard textbook in that field. Be sure it is up-to-date and has general coverage. Such books are usually 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 nor too simple. Such questions require careful thought but not advanced training.

If the position for which you are applying is technical or advanced, you should read more advanced material. If you are already

familiar with the basic principles of your field, beginners' textbooks would waste your time. In this case concentrate on advanced textbooks and technical periodicals. Government agencies may furnish you with specific information concerning their laws and regulations.

TESTS OF SKILLS AND ABILITIES

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 special information are essential. Questions which test these skills and abilities may not appear as pertinent for a given position as those questions which test for knowledge and information, yet, they can be 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 general abilities needed in public service positions and to describe some typical questions.

1. Verbal 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 of the civil service tests. You are given a paragraph of written material and asked to discuss its meaning.

2. 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. A graph or chart may be printed in the test booklet for you to use as the basis for answering questions.

3. Following Directions—In many public service positions, the employee must be able to carry out written instructions 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.

4. Manual Skills and Abilities—Performance tests effectively measure some manual skills and abilities. 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 school or high school courses. For many of the other skills and aptitudes, however, no short-time preparation is possible. Skills and abilities natural to you or those which you have developed throughout your lifetime are being tested.

Many of the general questions just described provide all the information you need in order to respond, and merely require that you use your reasoning ability to find the answers. The best preparation for these tests, as well as for tests 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 includes some ideas which occur to us on this subject.

HOW TO GET IN CONDITION FOR THE TEST

Common sense will help you find procedures to follow to get ready for an exam-

ation. Many of us, however, overlook these sensible measures. Here is a list of reminders:

1. Begin Your Preparation Early—Do not 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. 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—About two weeks before the examination you will have received 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 about the best route to take, and then learn something about the building where the test will be held.

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. Allow Sufficient Time to Get to the Place of the Test—Then unforeseen events, traffic snarls, and unfamiliar buildings will not upset you.

6. Leave Excess Paraphernalia at Home—Shopping bags and odd bundles will get in your way. You need bring only the items mentioned in the official notice sent to you—usually everything else you need is provided. Do not bring reference books to the examination—they will only confuse those last minutes and will be taken from you in the test room.

7. Arrive Somewhat Ahead of Time—If, because of transportation schedules, you must get there early, bring a newspaper or magazine to take your mind off yourself while waiting.

8. 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.

9. Relax and Prepare to Listen to the Instructions.

KINDS OF QUESTIONS

Civil Service tests are usually of the short-answer type. Full instructions for answering these questions will be given to you at the examination. General instructions are on the back cover of the examination booklet, and specific instructions for your examination are on the front page, 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 questions is the "multiple-choice" or "best-answer" question. It can be used, for example, to test for factual knowledge, ability to solve problems, or judgement 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 which 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 which should give you some clues as to the method for choosing the right answer:

When an employee has a complaint about an assignment, the action which will best help to overcome this difficulty is:

- (a) To discuss the difficulty with co-workers.
- (b) To take the problem to the head of the organization.
- (c) To take the problem to the person who made the assignment.
- (d) To say nothing to anyone about the 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 a 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 the problem there 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 what problems an employee is facing, and that the employee is seeking a solution to each.

RECORDING YOUR ANSWERS

Separate answer sheets are normally used. If this separate answer sheet is to be scored by machine—and this is usually the case—it is highly important that you mark your answers correctly in order to get credit.

A data processing scoring machine is used in the Civil Service office because of the speed with which it can score papers. Machine-scored answer sheets must be marked with a pencil which you are asked to bring to the test. 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 point breaks or is otherwise defective, ask the monitor for another pencil.

Since the answer sheet will be going through the scoring machine, be careful not to bend the corners or crumple the paper.

The special answer sheet normally has horizontal columns of numbers with 25 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 circles called bubbles. Bubbles have small letters in them.

Answer your question in the manner shown on the following page.

1. Assume that you are answering question number 32, which is:

32. The capital of the United States is:

- (a) Washington, D.C.
- (b) New York City
- (c) Chicago
- (d) Detroit

2. Choose the answer you think is best.

Washington, D.C. is the capital, so choice (a) is correct.

3. Find the row of bubbles labeled with the same number as the question you are answering.

This question is number 32, so find row number 32.

4. Find the bubble corresponding to the answer you have chosen.

You have chosen (a), so find the bubble marked "a."

5. Make a solid black mark completely filling the bubble. Go back and forth two or three times with your pencil until your mark is clear, but do not let the mark get outside of the lines.

SAMPLE SECTION OF ANSWER SHEET

- | | | | | | |
|-----|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----|
| 31. | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | (B) | (C) | (D) | (E) |
| 32. | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | (B) | (C) | (D) | (E) |
| 33. | (A) | (B) | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | (D) | (E) |
| 34. | (A) | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | (C) | (D) | (E) |
| 35. | (A) | (B) | (C) | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | (E) |
| 36. | (A) | (B) | (C) | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | (E) |

WHAT WILL HAPPEN 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 answers. 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 monitor has a duty to create a situation in which you can be at ease. He/she will give all of the instructions, tell you when to begin, and check to see that you are marking your answer sheet correctly. He/she is there to help you, and will ensure that your competitors do not take unfair advantage.

2. Listen to All Instructions—Do not 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. Read each word of the instructions until you clearly understand the meaning. Study the examples. Listen to all announcements. Follow directions. Ask questions of the monitor if you do not understand what to do.

3. 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.

4. Be Sure Question Number and Answer Sheet Number Agree—If you skip a question in the booklet, be sure to skip the corresponding number on the answer sheet. In any event, check often to be sure that you have not lost your place and that you are marking in the row numbered the same as the question you are answering.

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

6. Review Your Answers—If you finish before time is called, go back to the questions you omitted and the answers which you guessed, to give further thought to them. Review other answers if you have time.

7. Return Your Test Materials—If you are ready to leave before the others have finished, or time is called, raise your hand and when acknowledged, 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 will be grounds for disqualification and possible prosecution.

WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR TEST?

Whether your papers are hand-scored or graded by a data processing scoring machine, they are always graded by number; that is, the person who marks the paper knows only the number—never the name—of the applicant. Not until after 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 education and experience 40 percent.

After the final grade has been determined, the names are placed in grade order, subject to veteran's preference, and an eligible list is established. It is important for you to file your application as early as possible because, in the event of a tie, the earliest applicant may be placed higher on the eligible list in the event other prescribed steps fail to break the tie.

You will be notified of the results of your examination. This will be done as rapidly as possible. Writing or calling the Civil Service office will only slow things down. The notification card will include information advising you of the opportunity to review your examination.

A FINAL WORD

Remember that we are trying to select those employees best fitted for the governmental offices we serve. We want you to show us on this test what you know and what you can do so that your abilities can be accurately measured. That is why we have tried to help you. Good Luck!



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