

PREPARING FOR A CIVIL SERVICE EXAM
HOW TO PREPARE FOR A CIVIL SERVICE EXAM (IN GENERAL)
... DOING YOUR BEST

BEFORE YOU START TO STUDY:

- Read the announcement. Somewhere on it will be the topics or items which will be tested.
- Know what the test is intended to cover. Don't waste your time studying something that won't be on the exam.
- You may also want to look at the particular job description, duties description, or classifications standard. Contact your Personnel Office.

SCHEDULE YOUR STUDY:

- Determine your most productive time - are you a morning person, afternoon person, or evening person? Plan your study time during your "best" time.
- Set a definite schedule and stick to it. Practice regular mental workouts; they are as important as regular physical workouts.
- Start building your concentration skills. Concentration is a skill which you can develop and which you need during study time as well as during the exam. Start practicing now.

CONCENTRATE:

- Study without distractions to the best of your control. Some examples are:
 - External distractions - noise (people, TV, radio, etc.), poor lighting, poor work area, interruptions
 - Internal distractions - that irresistible urge to munch and snack, daydreaming, personal problems.
- Be sure you are getting enough sleep, good diet, and exercise. An exam can be very disruptive to your life and therefore, be very stressful. Make sure you are in the best health possible.
- Motivate yourself. Stimulate your interest. If you need more than self-achievement as a motivating factor, plan a periodic reward for yourself.

STUDY:

- Start early. Allow yourself one month to prepare. Or better yet, begin as soon as the exam is announced!
- Avoid the last minute cramming confusion. Cramming does not work unless:
 - You are one of those few who really function best under pressure; or
 - You have no prior knowledge of the subject.
- By planning ahead, you can study a little each day.
- Be systematic. Spread your study practice sessions out to two to three times weekly.
- Study alone. You may want to plan a mock exam or a question and answer session with a friend who is taking the same exam. Be careful, however, not to let those sessions turn into mere social events. Use your time wisely.
- If you will be using a calculator, practice with it so that you become accustomed to using it.

SOME SPECIFIC HINTS:

- Develop careful reading habits. For example, rephrase each question, to yourself, in your own words to make sure you understand what is being asked.
- Don't try to memorize sample, preparatory questions. Your experience and confidence will come from analyzing techniques you use to answer questions.
- Concentrate on your weaker areas. It may be more fun to study subjects with which you are already comfortable, but you should extend your focus to those topics which may make you uncomfortable or unsure.
- Take notes while studying. You can use the last few days before the exam to review those notes rather than to study new materials.

PLAN YOUR TEST TAKING STRATEGIES:

- This type of planning means to decide in advance how you are going to handle the difficult questions, how to narrow the numbers of possible answers, how to answer those questions which leave you completely in the dark. Methods are discussed in further detail under the section titled "Answering the More Difficult Questions."

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE EXAM:

- Don't schedule anything mentally or emotionally intense except a short review.

- Cramming at this stage will probably not help you and may, in fact, hurt you.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Don't plan anything for immediately after the exam. If you're meeting someone afterward, leave the time open-ended. Otherwise, you are likely to feel time-pressured and rush the exam. You must be able to spend all the time you are allowed without having to worry about someone waiting for you or worry about having to get some place at a set time!

THE DAY OF THE EXAM:

- Get up early enough so that you don't have to rush.
- Eat a good - but not heavy - breakfast. Protein is important.
- If you have not already checked out the exam site, leave early enough to get a place to park and find your way around. Even so, it's a good idea to plan to get to the site an hour early - find a parking place and take a walk.
- One-half hour before the exam, find a good seat in your assigned room. Generally there are fewer distractions if you sit in the front and away from the door. Some people prefer to sit near a window so they may take periodic mini breaks by looking out the window.
- Bring a watch, several #2 pencils and some good erasers.
- Calculators are now permitted unless the exam announcement specifies otherwise.
- Bring food - healthy food - to the exam. Candy may give you an instant high, but as its immediate effects wear off, you'll find yourself drooping.
- If you are used to a coffee break and/or lunch break, you'll need one on the day of the exam too. Plan ahead and bring your food accordingly.
- Remember, panic is contagious. If you are already nervous (and most of us are), sometimes talking with someone about the exam will deepen your panic.

DURING THE EXAM:

- Remember, generally your anxiety level will be highest when you open the test booklet. Some people prefer to look over the whole test briefly (if this is permitted); some people prefer not knowing what lies ahead and simply plug through it step by step. You should do whichever method works best for you in minimizing your anxiety.
- Budget your time. Quickly figure the time you can spend on each section and still finish on time. For example, if there are 150 questions and you have four hours, you should have completed 75 questions in less than two hours.

- Use all the time you are given. Studies have shown that the first and last to leave the test get the highest grades. The middle group is lower. Therefore, stay until you are sure you are 100% correct. If you get tired, and good chances are that you will, take a break (eat an apple, look out the window, take a walk, etc.).
- Use well-timed rest breaks. Flow with your body needs and natural rhythms. Examples of rest breaks also includes 30 seconds of stress-relieving breathing and tension reduction exercises.
- Should you change an answer? That depends on your analysis of answers you have changed on other exams; and your reason for the change. Generally, your first answer is best unless you have a good reason for changing it, i.e. you misunderstood the question.

ANSWERING THE MORE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS:

- Most important in answering a difficult question is a positive attitude - that through your own experience, confidence, and good analysis, the question can be answered.
- Make sure you have a true and complete understanding of what is being asked.
- If the question still gives you difficulty, you may wish to note its number and return to it later. This strategy has several advantages in that it:
 1. Allows you to receive credit for all the questions that you know, if time expires, you will have answered most of the questions and will lose out only on those questions which you may have missed anyway.
 2. By reading and postponing the difficult question, you give your subconscious a chance to work on it. The answer may then come to you suddenly.
- If the question still gives you difficulty, use active problem solving techniques. Break the problem into small steps or parts to make some sense out of it. You can make a diagram, rephrase the sentences, count on your fingers. You may then be able to piece some of the puzzle together.
- On the other hand, if you can't make even an educated guess, have planned ahead of time what letter you are going to use to fill in the blanks as our "guessed answer." Some people use the letter which they don't have very many of as answers. Others claim that "B" is most frequently the correct answer, followed in order by "C", "D",

"E", then "A." Whatever your belief or strategy, **NEVER LEAVE ANY ANSWER BLANK.**

OTHER TIPS:

- Keep your test booklet and answer sheet close together, being careful that your answer numbers match your question numbers.
- Keep a running tab of the question numbers you wish to return to or put a light mark in the test booklet next to the question (erase the marks later).
- Label your scrap paper. This makes it easier to double check your answers.
- Ask for more scrap paper if and when you need it.
- Don't blacken your answer space too heavily. You can waste 10% of your time just darkening the space - and even more time if you want to erase it later.
- It's not the end of the world. Remember, these exams are often designed to wear you down. Besides, if the exam seems difficult to you, it may be even more difficult for others.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE EXAM:

- Double check all answers. This includes proofreading the questions to make sure you understood them correctly.

WHEN YOU LEAVE THE ROOM:

- If your text booklet or the candidates instructions indicate that the test has a pre-rating review, pick your Pre-Rating Review Information Form (T-188), as you leave the room. If you don't see it, ask for it.

AFTER THE EXAM:

- Immediately record your thoughts, notes on specific questions and answers, etc. You'll find that if you wait even a day, your memory on these specific items will have clouded. Return your pre-rating review request as soon as possible. It is generally required that this form be returned to Civil Service by the Tuesday following the exam. Civil Service recommends mailing the request on the day of the exam. The review itself is usually held on the Saturday following the exam date.
- Take the time to go to the pre-rating review. There you will be allowed to review the written test and the tentative correct answers. This is your chance to see what questions you may have

answered wrong, which answer is tentatively correct, and to make any objection to any question and/or answer you feel is appropriate. Objections are made by filling out Form T-192. During the following week, you may supplement your comments and/or objections.

- The tentative answer key may then be adjusted after Civil Service review of the objections. The tentative correct answer may be changed, more than one answer may be deemed acceptable, etc. After the Civil Service Commission approves the answer key, it is released and candidate papers are rated.
- When you receive your final rating, you will have another opportunity to review. This is called the computational review. (See back of your rating notice for the procedure) Here you can review the accuracy of the rating of your paper. You will be provided with the Commission approved answer key, your waxed over answer sheet, and the conversion formula for changing the raw score into the final score.
- Errors are seldom found, but discovering and correcting an error may be critical to your promotion. Objections are then submitted on Form T-192.1. Additionally, you can analyze your answers by comparing them to the correct answer and the question. You will be able to discover whether you changed correct answers to wrong ones, and vice versa, and enable you to determine your strengths and weaknesses so that you will know where to spend your time most valuable the next time around.
- Remember, your attitude is the biggest key to success. If you are well prepared, treat the exam experience as a game which you can learn from, you can improve your score.

GOOD LUCK!!