

## **PREPARING FOR YOUR WRITTEN TEST**

Preparing for a Civil Service test is not like a school test – there is no text book, you have no lecture notes to review, and the Human Resources department does not tell you what is on it! While this may sound like “mission impossible,” it really isn’t. There are quite a few things you can do. First, read the job announcement. Often, it describes in general terms the “scope” of the test. The job announcement tells you what subjects are most important for you to emphasize while you prepare. Your own prior experience in the field often gives you a great deal of knowledge about the subject of the test. Think about what is going on in your field, talk to friends or co-workers regarding current issues, and use the library to review current literature.

If the job announcement is not informative enough, you may ask to see a more detailed job description. One is usually available. Talk to people already in the job – ask what type, brand or models of equipment are in use. Since there are different approaches in practice within an industry, ask what the approach is in this City. Since you are applying for a job in your field, or in a field that interests you, a few hours of introspection will tell you a lot about what to expect on your Civil Service test.

Just don’t put this “thinking time” off to the last minute. As soon as you know that you will be taking a test, start preparing. That way, if you find there are some areas you need to study more closely, you will have time and not be rushed.

If you know others taking the examination, you can form a discussion group. Plan to meet a few times to: (1) quiz one another, (2) clarify difficult areas, and (3) discuss important issues in the field. When you know that other people are relying on your help, you are often better motivated yourself. Meeting with other people who are going through the same process lends you support and increases your motivation to study.

## **TEST TAKING STRATEGIES**

The most common type of written test you will take is in the multiple-choice format. This format consists of a question and several alternative responses. From these alternative responses, you must identify a single correct answer. Listed below are some strategies that will help you:

- Familiarize yourself with the test. Look over the whole test before answering any question. Note how many pages there are on the test – accidentally skipping an entire page of questions would significantly reduce your chances of scoring well.
- Read the directions carefully to make sure you understand how to answer the questions. Do not hesitate to ask the test administrator if you are unsure of what to do.
- Determine how much time you have for each question by dividing the number of questions in the test by the number of minutes allowed. Keep track of the time, and try to save some time at the end to go back and check your answers. Make sure you have answered all the questions. You will not receive extra credit for finishing early, so use all of the available time.

- Read each question carefully to make sure you understand what is being asked. Do not jump to conclusions about what you think is being asked. Read the entire question.
- Answer the easy questions first. This may help you relax in the first few minutes of the test, and inspire you to continue with confidence. Do not waste time worrying about questions where you are unsure of the answers. Remember, your score is based only on the number of correct answers. If you spend too much time trying to answer one question, you may not have enough time to answer later questions. Go through the entire test once before going back to the questions you have skipped. When you skip a question, be sure to skip to the corresponding number on the answer sheet; it is very easy to get off track, so check yourself often.
- If you do not understand a question, rephrase it in your own words. If you do not know the answer to the question, make your best guess. Unless it has been announced that you will be penalized for guessing, it is your best interest to answer every question.
- Try to determine what the answer will be before looking at the options. Then always read all of the answer options, even if you think the first or second option is correct. While reading the alternatives, try to narrow your choices by eliminating incorrect answers.
- Watch for the word “not” in a question. This can very easily trip you up, because your answer would be completely different to a question phrased in the positive than to the same question phrased in the negative.
- Get all the help you can from cue words in the questions, such as “never,” “always,” and “usually.”
- Only change your answer to a question if you realize you originally misread the question, you come across a clue in a later question, or you suddenly remember the correct answer. Typically, your first instinct is correct. Changing your answer (“second guessing”) does not usually improve your score.
- Approach the test confidently. Take it calmly.
- Arrive on time and ready.
- Choose a good seat, get comfortable, and relax.
- Avoid hurried answers. Guess intelligently. Think.

Other types of written tests that may be given are essay, written composition or in-basket simulation. The general principles outlined above still apply to these other tests types: Read all the instructions and questions before beginning, watch your time and save the more difficult items to the end. Anytime you are asked to write more than a short answer, take a moment to write an outline. This allows you to organize your

thoughts and later serves as a guide to ensure you have covered all the important points.

## TEST ANXIETY

Most people are naturally anxious about taking a test. A little bit of anxiety can help by increasing your alertness, however, too much can disturb your concentration and affect your performance.

If you become paralyzed at the thought of taking a test, you need to take a few steps to manage your anxiety.

**First**, don't focus on the negative consequences of a poor performance. Most people are afraid of taking tests because they believe that if they do badly, they will be a failure, appear unintelligent, or lose the respect of others. But if you do not do well, what is the worst that can happen? Are you a failure? Absolutely not! Negative thinking only raises your anxiety level and decreases the likelihood of good test performance.

**Second**, before the exam begins, avoid talking to other test-takers who are anxious. It is easy enough to get anxious on your own without help from someone else.

**Third**, learn to relax. If you feel yourself getting uptight, sit back in your chair, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Imagine yourself doing well on the exam. Remember, a few minutes spent relaxing is not a waste of time; it will help you to answer the questions more accurately. This is especially true when you consider that spending 20 minutes aimlessly reading test questions or guessing could have very negative consequences.

**Fourth**, resist the temptation to give up. If a question does not make sense, relax and read it again. Take control, keep going and give it your best shot.

**Fifth**, remember that no one is expected to know the answers to every question on the test, so think positively and do your best. Finally, realize that improving your study habits and test taking skills can significantly reduce your anxiety level and improve your performance.

Human Resources cannot provide specific advice on your written test. However, we know that the more relaxed you are, the better you will do, so we have prepared this guide to help you in your general preparation. If it has been a long time since you have taken a written test, we have one last suggestion—Practice. You can get test preparation and study materials from your local library. While these materials will most likely not be very close to the actual test questions we use, they can provide invaluable practice at taking timed tests and putting into play the strategies outline above. Give it a try, and then come show us how ready you are.

City of Torrance

Human Resources Division

3231 Torrance Boulevard

Torrance, CA 90503

[www.TorranceCA.Gov](http://www.TorranceCA.Gov)