

# WRITTEN COMMUNICATION



## SUGGESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR TEST-TAKING SKILLS

ANALYSIS OF  
WRITTEN COMMUNICATION



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## 1. PRACTICE

*PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.* It's crucial. We have been told countless times by successful test takers that practicing with sample questions has helped them to significantly raise their exam scores. As you practice, you develop an understanding of how to do well with the various sections of the exam. When you practice the sample questions, use a homemade answer sheet rather than marking your answers in the booklet. You will then be able to review the questions again in the future. Also, it's best to answer a few questions and then check your answers at once. You can see whether you're on track. Even when you answer a question correctly, read the explanation that follows the correct answer to ensure you answered correctly for the right reasons.

Practicing is also important because the exam can be a test of your endurance as much as a test of your reasoning ability. Most of us aren't used to sitting for hours reading material. Practicing the exam preparation questions at home doesn't require the same degree of discipline as taking the actual exam, so we have tipped the scales a bit by making the sample reading passages somewhat longer than those you're likely to find on the actual exam.

Try to study over a period of time. It's not wise to pack it all into the night or even the week before the exam.

## 2. THINK POSITIVELY!

It really helps to view taking the exam as a positive experience rather than as a dreaded activity. What we tell ourselves has a powerful effect on how we view what's happening to us. And this, in turn, will affect what actually will happen to us. Many studies have shown that people who consciously try to think positively can improve their performance. If we worry or obsess about the exam, we're simply wasting valuable energy. Thinking takes energy. And negative thinking takes even more energy.

If, for example, math is your demon, then keep telling yourself, "I do well in math." If you get anxious when taking the exam and the pages start swimming before your eyes, tell yourself "I think clearly under pressure." Create thoughts that are positive and in the present tense. It's more empowering to say, "I am perfectly calm whenever I take an exam" than to say "I will not be nervous during the exam." The latter phrase doesn't support you because it introduces an element of doubt.

For some people, their negative self-talk involves putting themselves down, perhaps because they've not done well in the past on exams. If this is true for you, try to remember that being able to answer test questions correctly doesn't reflect on your intelligence, your worth, or how well you actually perform your job. It simply reflects upon your ability to answer test questions.

### **3. EXERCISE PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE**

Be patient with yourself, with the exam preparation questions we've provided here, and with the exam itself. When you practice, don't get rattled if you do poorly at first. Just stay with it. Persistence does pay!

One favorite trick of the impatient person is to think that there must be a typo (typographical error) in the exam booklet. Or, to be overly enamored with choice D: ("none of the above" or "all of the above"). Typos do occur, but not too frequently and "none of the above" is rarely the correct answer. In fact, it's not even given as a choice for most exam questions.

How do 'good' test takers differ from 'poor' ones? Those who succeed develop confidence; they believe that the problem can be solved and that they can solve it. And because they believe that, they are persistent. They stick with a problem until they're satisfied they've selected the right answer. They also analyze problems step by step, breaking them into manageable (understandable) parts. They often creatively manipulate the information -- translate it into real life examples, or draw diagrams, or write things down in simple terms, or reorganize the information so that it becomes more understandable.

### **4. KNOW THE TEST LOCATION AND GET THERE EARLY**

Make sure you know where you need to be and whether parking may be a problem. Try to leave home early and arrive early. Of course, you can still take the exam, even if you arrive late. But why put added time pressure on yourself?

### **5. ARRIVE PREPARED**

Here are five things we suggest you bring:

- (a) Your admittance card, and some form of ID (just in case).

- (b) A calculator if math or tables are included on the exam. You may not need it, but bring one anyway.
- (c) A watch to track your time. Generally, there's enough time to answer all exam questions, but timing yourself will keep you from spending too long on any one section.
- (d) A few #2 pencils.

## **6. FOOD AND DRINK -- BRING THEM TOO!**

Whether your exam is a long or short one, we and Civil Service suggest that you bring food. For some, it's hard enough to get themselves to the exam site without packing a lunch. Others are self-conscious about bothering others with noisy bags and food wrappings. Use plastic wrap to carry your food in.

Our brains need a constant, steady supply of glucose (blood sugar) to function to capacity. Many of us have chosen lifestyles with diets laden with sugar, caffeine, nicotine, processed foods, and alcohol and these can interfere with the proper functioning of the brain. When blood sugar is low, we are likely to become irritable, frustrated, and highly impatient. Or we may get headaches, or have trouble thinking clearly and concentrating. During an exam, we often get anxious, which triggers our adrenaline to pump and throw off our blood sugar levels even more.

Bringing appropriate food to an exam may be critical. But stay clear of candy bars and other sweets because they provoke an adrenaline response. Yes, they bring up your sugar level but for many, those levels rise too high and too quickly. And with processed sugars the levels drop quickly to a low point. Extreme blood sugar fluctuations are hard on the body and prevent the brain from functioning as well as it might otherwise. The answer is to bring high protein foods like cheese, nuts, cold chicken, or maybe a tuna fish sandwich. If you smoke, it's even more imperative you bring food because your body is used to using cigarettes to stabilize your blood sugar levels. And if you're addicted to caffeine and don't believe you can function well without it, by all means bring a thermos of coffee or tea.

## **7. HANDLE ANXIETY WITH CONTROLLED BREATHING**

Are you one who takes an initial look at a test booklet and breaks out into a sweat? Have you experienced reading a passage over and over and having no idea what the words mean? These are common symptoms of a common malady -- anxiety. Many find that spending a few initial seconds doing some deep breathing helps to get centered and relieve anxiety.

Try it now: Sit up straight, cross your legs at the ankles or put your feet on the floor. Close your eyes and place your hands loosely on your abdomen. Take in a long, slow breath through your nose and hold it for a few seconds. Then exhale slowly and evenly through your nose. Repeat this several times. If you feel calmer now, plan on doing this exercise when you begin the exam.

## **8. PACE YOURSELF**

Know how much time you have and watch that time so you can pace yourself. You don't have to speed through the exam; the individual sections aren't timed and you generally have enough time to finish them all. You are usually given 3 to 5 hours for 60 to 90 questions. But of course, some sections will take longer than others. Most people have enough time to not only finish but to go back over each section and recheck difficult questions. One caution: if you choose to skip a difficult question and move on, be sure to clearly make note of which question you're skipping so you return to it easily later.

## **9. TAKE DEEP BREATHS AND SHORT REST BREAKS**

It helps to take short breaks to reduce or minimize the build-up of tension. The exams can be tedious, anxiety-producing and frustrating. Often we are forcing ourselves to concentrate. The added effort creates fatigue which can interfere with optimal performance. So take deep breaths, stretch, stare out into space (or out the window if there is one). Or, close your eyes for a while or do other tension release exercises.

Here are a few tension-release exercises that may help you:

- Hold your arm out in front of you. Make a very tight fist. Then, release it and let your arm just fall. Do the same with the other arm.
- Hunch up your shoulders as if you were trying to touch your ears with the tops of your shoulders -- higher, higher. Now drop them.
- Straighten your leg in front of you and lift it about 6 inches from the floor. Point your toe -- more, more. Now point your heel -- tighter, tighter. Now drop it. Do the same with your other leg.

Deep breathing exercises, as we described under point 7, can be very helpful throughout the exam. Your brain needs extra oxygen when in a stressful situation like test taking. And deep breathing increases your oxygen intake, calms your nervous system, and increases your vitality. Deep breathing exercises are really worth the few moments they take.

**10. READ THE EXAM MATERIAL CAREFULLY**

We simply can't stress this enough. Sometimes there will be just one word in an answer that will make that choice the wrong one.

**11. PICK THE 'BEST' POSSIBLE ANSWER**

Read all choices and pick the best answer. If you want to do well on the exam, you have to get used to being asked to pick the least likely choice!

Don't expect all the questions to be well-written. Civil Service has tight budgets and lots of exams to prepare. Remember this when you come across what you believe is a poorly written question. Do the best you can and if you choose to appeal it later, fine. Simply make note of the question and move on.

Don't let a question unnerve you. Everyone taking the exam has the same questions, so no one has an advantage when a question is poorly written. And please...don't pick an incorrect answer on principle. That is, don't pick an answer because you believe it's the best one, even though you believe the exam writers would probably disagree with you. This is most likely to occur with some supervisory questions. Or, you may know the "proper" response -- the one you believe the exam writers would prefer -- but you may feel that there's no way that response would work in real life. You may well be correct, but so what? It's not worth lowering your score just to make a point.

**12. ASSESS THE REASONABLENESS OF YOUR CONCLUSIONS**

Don't be falsely reassured if the answer you think is correct is one of the choices. But test makers are clever: they often figure out the mistakes people are most likely to make and insert these as choices.

Sometimes we choose an answer that is so far off that in retrospect, it's hard to imagine how we could have done so. Here's an example from one exam:

How much does June earn per month if the  
\$350 she pays for rent is 20% of her salary?

Many, many people select \$70 as the answer. They multiplied by 20% rather than dividing - a natural mistake. But if they stopped and asked how June could pay \$350 for rent if she only makes \$70 per month, they'd catch this mistake and choose another answer. Every one of us is susceptible to this kind of error. So before moving on too quickly to the next question, stop for a moment and think about the logic of your choice.

**13. DON'T OVERANALYZE NOR JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS**

Be careful about being too picky; too analytical. Some people just get too wrapped up in one aspect of a question, or they tend to read too much into a question. This can cause you frustration and lead to your choosing a wrong answer. Similarly, if you know a lot about the content of a question, you may not read as carefully as you should, or you may read information into the passage that isn't there.

Don't jump to conclusions! Don't be in such a rush to finish the exam that you fasten onto something too quickly. And beware of picking the first choice prematurely. It's not that "Choice A" can't be the answer, but the first choice is sometimes designed to bait those who tend to be impatient and careless.

**14. NEVER...NEVER...NEVER LEAVE AN ANSWER BLANK!**

If you encounter a question that leaves you clueless as to the right answer -- make note of it, skip it, and move on. Just remember to go back and answer it. Usually, you can easily eliminate one or two choices, leaving you a 33-50% chance of picking the right answer. And if you do skip a question, be absolutely certain to skip the corresponding space on the answer sheet. It's terribly frustrating to get to the end of a section only to find that you have a space left over. If this happens, don't panic. Just work patiently backwards, retracing your answers to see where you skipped.

Don't be intimidated by technical topics or strange words in reading the comprehension questions. The answer is there and you don't need to be an expert to figure it out.

**15. USE SCRAP PAPER AND TREAT IT APPROPRIATELY**

Use scrap paper to make your notes and keep your scrap sheets labeled and in order. Scrap paper can help you later -- particularly in the math sections when you need to check your work.

Regarding tabular questions, it's wise to look over all the choices first. You may not need to do as much calculating as you might at first think. For example, sometimes tables on exams contain question marks instead of data. It's important to not waste time doing calculations to fill in all of the question marks before you begin because it's unlikely you'll need all the information.