

HOW TO TAKE A WRITTEN TEST

WHY A TEST?

The New York State Constitution says that public employees must be hired for jobs on the basis of their merit and fitness. The constitution also says that examinations have to be used to measure merit and fitness for most jobs.

In practical terms, “merit and fitness” means finding people who are best suited to a particular job. The idea is to hire people who will be able to do the job well. In fact, the State of New York is no different from private companies. Any employer wants workers who can do a good job.

There are several ways to find good workers. When private companies hire, they ask people what kind of work they have done in the past and how they would do the company’s job. They also look at resumes and school records. Sometimes they give tests.

Through civil service examinations, New York State does many of the same things in a structured way that private companies do when they hire.

Written and oral tests are designed to find out how people would do the state’s job. Evaluation of training and experience is a detailed look at applications and resumes. Performance tests are tasks that measure certain skills, like typing or entering data at computer terminals.

All examinations are based on the kind of job to be filled. The major difference between examinations and other ways of hiring is that examinations all use some kind of formal rating scale or system that is as fair and objective as possible. Each candidate for an examination answers the same questions or does the same task. In any test, all candidates receive a score (rating) based on the same factors. This helps make sure that everyone has a fair and equal chance to get a job and it helps New York State find the people best suited to the available jobs. This is the “why” behind examinations.

HOW EXAMINATIONS ARE DEVELOPED

Before there is an examination for any job, the Department of Civil Service takes a good look at the job to find out what tasks and duties it involves. Civil Service staff may do any or all of these:

- ask employees and their supervisors to fill out questionnaires
- ask employees to make lists of the tasks they do during a day, week or month
- observe employees while they are working
- interview employees
- interview supervisors and program directors

After getting a clear picture of the job, Civil Service staff meets with agency staff where the job exists. They decide what type of examination would measure how well candidates are suited to the job. An examination may have more than one part. For example, there may be a written part to cover some aspects of the job and an oral part to cover others. Each part of an examination is called a test.

Once the examination is planned, experts in the job field help develop test questions and rating scales.

WHAT EXAMINATION ANNOUNCEMENTS TELL YOU

Announcements are published for all civil service examinations. You can find out what examinations are coming up by checking with the Department of Civil Service, the New York State Job Service, local libraries or placement officers.

When you pick up an announcement, you should read it carefully.

Find out what jobs are available.

The announcement will tell you the job title, typical job duties and where the jobs are. Here is an example from an announcement for Compensation Claims Clerk:

THE POSITION: This position exists in the City of Syracuse and Onondaga County

As a Compensation Claims Clerk, you would perform responsible clerical work in the development and processing of workers' compensation and disability benefits claims cases with the State Insurance Fund. Under supervision, you would organize and determine priority of claims bills; pay certain bills; review claim files; consult appropriate manuals, guidelines and schedules to determine if treatment is reasonable; verify ratings and compute allowable fees; complete vouchers; and respond to inquiries by doctors, billing offices and claimants concerning the status of bills. You would also recommend arbitration of disputed fees when appropriate.

The description of the job duties helps people decide if they want to be a Compensation Claims Clerk. Such a clerk should like to:

- work with numbers (“pay bills,” “complete vouchers”)
- compare facts and figures (“review claim files,” “consult appropriate manuals, guidelines and schedules to determine if treatment is reasonable”)
- keep records and make routine decisions (“organize and determine the priority of claims bills,” “recommend arbitration of disputed fees”)
- write to members of the public or talk to them by phone (“respond to doctors, billing offices and claimants concerning the status of bills”)

Think about what you would like to do. If a job on an announcement looks interesting to you, read further.

Find out which jobs are open to you.

There are minimum qualifications for most jobs. These tell you the kind of background you must have before you can take the examination. Here are the minimum qualifications for Compensation Claims Clerks:

MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS: On or before the date of the written test, candidates must meet the following requirements:

- Either I high school diploma or possession of high school equivalency diploma issued by an appropriate education authority or other high school level diploma;
- Or II four years of office, business, industrial or other work experience which involved public contact or military experience. Each completed year of high school study (grades 9 – 12) may be substituted for one year of work experience.

For many examinations, there is more than one way to meet the minimum qualifications. A candidate for Compensation Claims Clerk needs either a high school diploma or four years of work experience, but not both. A person who has two years of high school study and two years of work experience also qualifies.

Be sure you meet the minimum qualifications before you decide to apply for an examination. Many examinations require a \$10.00 application fee that will not be returned. If you do not have the minimum qualifications, you will not be able to take the examination or get a fee refund.

Find out what the examination will be like.

There will be a part of the announcement marked "selection." It will tell you whether to expect a written test, an oral test, an evaluation of training and experience or a combination of tests.

This is the selection part of the Compensation Claims Clerk announcement:

SELECTION: There will be a written test which candidates must pass in order to be considered for appointment. The written test will be designed to test for knowledge, skills and/or abilities in such areas as:

1. Arithmetic computation
2. Arithmetic reasoning
3. Understanding and Interpreting written material

What does this announcement tell you?

First, the examination will have a written test only--there will be no oral test, no rating of training and experience.

Second, the test will cover a limited number of areas.

People hired to be Compensation Claims Clerks must have enough knowledge and skill in these areas to do the job. In other words, these are critical areas. They may not be the only critical areas, but they are the only ones covered by this test.

If you:

1. are interested in the job
2. meet the minimum qualifications and
3. wish to take the examination,

Be sure to send in an application. Then you can begin to get ready for the examination.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR AN EXAMINATION

Before you get ready for the examination, read the “Selection” part of the announcement again. There are certain words that appear often in lists of examination subject areas:

- principles, practices, procedures, methods, techniques
- understanding, interpreting, applying, reasoning, solving

The first set of words is usually a sign that you will be asked about your knowledge of a given subject. The second set of words usually indicates that you will be tested for a skill or ability. You would prepare differently for a test of knowledge than for a test of skill.

Preparing for a Test of Knowledge

If you are going to be tested for your knowledge, you can:

- read books, magazines, manuals or other printed material
- ask people who know a lot about the subject for information
- rely on your own background

Try your local library first for books and magazines. If the public library does not have the kinds of books you need, a nearby school or college may. You can go there and take notes. Sometimes you can borrow the books (with the help of your public library) through inter-library loan. Some libraries have collections of government documents. Books or manuals available at your present job may be useful also.

Sometimes people who are familiar with the job can be helpful. They may be able to answer your questions, recommend books to read or help you focus your studying on areas that matter.

Do not overlook your own background as a resource. If you meet the minimum qualifications--and we are assuming that you do, or you would not be taking the examination--you probably already have experience that will be useful when you take the test. Before you start studying, think through what you already know.

Preparing for a Test of Skill

Getting ready for a test of skill is a bit different. If you want to improve a skill, your best bet is practice.

Skills like typing are easy to practice--you sit down at a typewriter and type. To practice other skills, you may need to be more creative. If you are going to be tested on your skill at filing records in sequence, you can try something like this. Turn to any page in a telephone directory, and mark off the listings in groups of 5 or 10:

Smith, A.B.	82 Walsh Albany	407-1174
Smith, A.G.	3771 Prospect Rd Berne	412-1714
Smith, Alonzo	876 Main Colville	407-7114
Smith, Alyce	129 Providence Albany	407-1714
Smith, Arnold	1035 Main Babcock	412-7141

Put phone numbers in numerical order:

407-1174
407-1714
407-7114
412-1714
412-7141

See how many groups of listings you can rearrange in 10 minutes. Next go back and put each group of listing in alphabetical order by address. Ignore the number--just use street and city name.

(1035)	Main Babcock
(876)	Main Colville
(377A)	Prospect Rd Berne
(129)	Providence Albany
(82)	Walsh Albany

Again, see how many groups you can finish in 10 minutes.

If you are going to be tested on your skill in preparing written material, you can try writing a few paragraphs about an event you attended or a project you completed. Then ask others to read what you wrote. Ask them to tell you whether your paragraphs were clear to them. Ask if there were parts that needed to be rewritten. Get suggestions for improving your grammar and sentence construction from writers or teachers of writing. Then go back and try again.

Writing, by the way, is one subject for which books are useful. There are plenty of large and small textbooks to tell you the rules of good writing. Learn the rules; then practice them.

Books can also help you practice arithmetic. Arithmetic computation is addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, etc.

Arithmetic reasoning involves problems in sentences or paragraphs like this:

A company owned six panel trucks and three vans in March. It sold two trucks in April and two vans in May. The company did not buy any trucks or vans until July. How many vehicles did it have in June?

The answer is 5. ($6 + 3 = 9$, $2 + 2 = 4$, $9 - 4 = 5$)

Both kinds of problems, computation and reasoning, can be found in schoolbooks or library books. You can practice solving the problems until you are more comfortable with them.

“Understanding” and “interpreting” may be the hardest skills to practice. Your best approach is to learn more about the kinds of things that you will be asked to understand and interpret on the test.

Here is an example. “Understanding and interpreting written material” is one subject of the examination for Compensation Clerk. Anytime you read a book, letter, or even a poster--you are trying to understand and interpret written material. So the test will measure your reading skills.

The written material on the test will be paragraphs on various topics. The topics themselves are not important; what is important is the reading level of the paragraphs. The reading level will be the level of the material a Compensation Claims Clerk must read on the job.

Sometimes the duties description in the announcement can help you figure out what reading level to expect. A Compensation Claims Clerk “responds to inquiries” (reads and answers letters), and “consults” (reads) manuals, guidelines and schedules. The manuals, guidelines and schedules are likely to be sets of directions for paying claims and bills. Some things will be simple to read; others will be more complicated. The test will probably be like that too.

We would like to add a work here about examination study books published by private companies. These are available in libraries or bookstores and have titles like Civil Service Examination for Accountant. Study books do sometime cover subjects that are similar to those in new York State civil service examinations--arithmetic computation and reasoning, reading skills, clerical skills are a few examples. However, these books will not give you the exact content of a New York State test, because the Department of Civil Service does not publish its questions or sell them to anyone else to publish. If you do decide to get a study book, its main value will probably be the practice it gives you in answering multiple-choice questions. If you want this practice, especially for a skill, there is no harm in using a book when you prepare. But do not rely on the book to get you through a particular test, because it cannot guarantee that.

In general, the more you learn about a job, the better you can prepare for the examination. Learn to use the announcement as a guide--the whole announcement, not just the selection portion. If you decide you need to study, start early. You will remember more if you study when you are relaxed than if you wait until the night before the examination.

HOW TO TAKE MULTIPLE-CHOICE TESTS

When the selection portion of an examination announcement says, “There will be a written test,” you can usually expect multiple-choice questions. For example:

Which one of the following trees is an evergreen?

- a. maple
- b. oak
- c. birch
- d. pine

Only one of the four answer choices is correct; the others are wrong in some way or another. The answer to the question is choice “d,” pine. Its needles stay green all year. The other choices--maple, oak and birch--are trees that lose their leaves in the fall.

Not all multiple-choice questions ask for simple facts. Some require you to solve problems or choose the best course of action for a given situation. The question below is intended for Mental Hygiene Therapy Aide Trainees.

A Therapy Aide Trainee’s job is to help people who are mentally ill or mentally retarded learn to get along in the community outside facilities or institutions. This means showing them how to care for themselves, how to get along with other people, how to solve problems they have at the moment. When a Therapy Aide acts, he or she has to think about what is best for the person being helped. This question is designed to test for good judgment in working with mentally retarded people.

George is a mentally retarded adult who is staying in the building where you work. He is getting ready to go outside for a walk and has buttoned his jacket the wrong way. What is best for you to do?

- a. Tell George to button his jacket the right way before he goes outside.
- b. Ask George to wait while you button his jacket the right way.
- c. Show George how to button his jacket the right way and help him do it.
- d. Let George wear his jacket the way he buttoned it.

The answer is choice “c.” The best way to help George is to show him how to button his jacket correctly. This is something he would have to be able to do for himself if he were living in the community.

Choice “a” is wrong because it does not give George any help. It assumes that George knows how to button his jacket correctly, but he may not. If George does not understand how to button his jacket, just telling him to do it right will not be enough.

Choice “d” is wrong also. Most people do not go outside with their jackets buttoned incorrectly. It looks sloppy and can be embarrassing.

Choice “b” is wrong because it does not allow George to do anything for himself. George will learn best by buttoning the jacket the right way, with help.

Behavior that is not acceptable for other people is not acceptable for George either.

We’ll give you more samples of multiple-choice questions later. First here is some general information and advice.

1. READ THE INSTRUCTIONS.

Be sure you understand them before you start on the questions.

2. READ THE QUESTIONS CAREFULLY.

Make sure you are reading what is printed in the test booklet—not what you expect to see or want to see. Read the questions carefully, and then read each choice.

- Read all choices.
- Make sure you understand each choice before you decide which answer is best.
- Pick out the one choice that BEST answers the question. The best choice will be the one that tells what people in the job should do most of the time.
- Answer the question as it is asked in the booklet. Do not assume the questions means something it does not say.

3. USE YOUR TIME WISELY.

You will have a certain amount of time to take the test. Unless you are taking a speed test (more about those later), the time allowed should be plenty for you to read and answer the questions carefully. You should not waste time, though. Keep working through the test.

4. ANSWER THE EASY QUESTIONS FIRST, BUT ANSWER EVERY QUESTION.

You get just as much credit for an easy question as for a hard one. Do not take too much time at first on the hard questions. Answer all the easy questions. Then, in the time left over, go back and figure out the hard ones.

IF YOU SKIP A QUESTION, MAKE SURE THAT YOU LEAVE THAT SPACE OPEN ON THE ANSWER SHEET.

5. DO NOT BE AFRAID TO GUESS IF YOU ARE NOT ABSOLUTELY SURE OF THE ANSWER.

If you do not answer a question, you will not get credit for it. Generally, if you guess correctly, you will get credit.

- If you are sure a choice is wrong, stop thinking about that choice. The questions have four possible answers. Most people see right away that one or two of those answers cannot be correct. Stop thinking about that one or two, and just think about the others.
- Choose the best of the choices that remain. Even if one choice seems only a little better than the other one or two, pick that one. The difference between a right answer and a wrong one can sometimes seem very small.

6. BE AWARE OF KEY WORDS.

This section will show you some of the words to watch for when you read multiple-choice questions. Best, greatest, least and most, show up in questions like “which one of the following is the best way to do X?” or “Which one of the following is the most effective way to prepare Y?” These words are signs to be very careful when you read the answer choices. Do not settle for the first choice that looks good to you. There may be a better answer to the question.

Question: Of the following foods, which one is the best source of vitamin C?

- Answer Choices:
- a. One cup of grapefruit juice
 - b. One cup of sliced peaches
 - c. One cup of mashed potatoes
 - d. One cup of chopped broccoli

Explanation: All of these foods contain some vitamin C. Many people know that citrus fruits, like oranges, grapefruit and lemon, are good sources of vitamin C. That makes choice “a” look attractive. But one cup of broccoli actually contains more vitamin C than one cup of

grapefruit juice. Choice “d” is the correct answer. People who work in nutrition--those who would see this kind of question on a test--should recognize that while choice “a” is a good answer, it is not the best answer. These people need to know more than most about vitamins and minerals in food so they can plan menus for others.

Pay attention to phrases like “Which one of the following.” This means that you should concentrate on the answer choices that are listed. If you can think of another answer that might be possible some time or other, do not worry about it. When the question says “Which one of the following,” you can expect a best answer among those listed.

Words like common, generally, likely, more, often, primarily, probably, typical and usual, are reminders to look for the choice you would select most of the time. Do not choose one that would only be correct on rare occasions.

Question: Which one of the following is generally the best way to repair an X machine?

Answer Choices:

- a. Replace the entire engine
- b. Replace the valves
- c. Rewire the starter
- d. Replace the gaskets and add oil to the reservoir

Explanation: Suppose that in 99 cases out of 100, rewiring the starter will solve the problem. Then choice “c” is generally the best way to do the repair. This is the correct answer. Remember, nearly every rule has an exception. Questions that use words like generally and usually are looking for the rule, not the exception.

Watch for words like disadvantage, except, least and not. Questions using these words are looking for an exception. If the question asks about a disadvantage, be sure not to choose an advantage as your answer. Be careful of words beginning with non- or un-. Non- and un- are ways of saying not.

Question: If grease in a pan catches fire, it is unwise to do which one of the following?

Answer Choices:

- a. Cover the pan with a lid
- b. Pour water on the fire

Explanation: Covering the pan with a lid would smother the fire by cutting off the oxygen it needs to burn. Pouring water on the fire would probably make the fire spread and get worse, because water and grease do not mix. So it is unwise to pour water on the fire. Therefore, choice “b” is the correct answer to the questions being asked. When tests include questions like this it is because people doing the must know what actions would cause trouble as well as what actions would solve problems.

When a question uses the word first, look for a set of events to put in order.

Question: Which one of the following should you do first if X happens?

- Answer Choices:
- a. Call the security staff
 - b. Turn off the power
 - c. Have people leave the area
 - d. Call your supervisor

Explanation: Suppose that all four choices list actions that should be taken. The important thing to know is what to do first in the situation. Let's say X is a life-threatening situation. The first thing to do then is to have people leave the area. That is the correct answer. But maybe X is not life threatening. Maybe you would have people leave only when a repair crew arrives, so the crew would have room to work. Then one of the other choices--turn off the power, perhaps--would be correct.

When you see a question like this, be sure you understand the situation thoroughly. Then figure out which choices would be first, second, third, fourth. When you think you have the right order, mark down your first choice as the answer. The reason for doing it this way is to make sure you think about the whole series of events, not just one event by itself. You are more likely to choose the correct answer that way.

HOW TO TAKE SPEED TESTS

The speed tests we mentioned earlier are usually only a part of longer tests. The test instructions will tell you if you will be taking a speed test. This kind of test will be in a separate booklet with a separate time limit.

A speed test is designed to determine how accurate you can be when you are working rapidly. The test monitor will tell you how much time you have to work on the questions, and will collect the booklet when the time is up. So if you are taking a speed test, you should work as quickly as possible and skip any question if you are not sure of the answer. On a speed test, you are not expected to answer all the questions, but you are expected to answer correctly all of the questions you attempt. If you have time, go back and answer any questions you skipped.