Examination Preparation

- Competency
- Evaluation of Training and Experience (T&E)
- Written Test
- Interview
- Performance Test
- Reference Check
- Reviews, Protests, Appeals

Competency

What is a “competency”?

A competency is a family of work behaviors that underlie job success and share a common theme. Examples of competencies measured in our exams include: oral communication, attention to detail, managing conflict, customer focus, leadership, teamwork, professional/technical expertise, etc.

What is a “competency based” exam?

The LACOE Personnel Commission uses a competency based approach for job analysis and examination development. This means that we identify critical tasks and responsibilities of a job and determine what competencies are necessary to successfully complete those tasks. Once we have identified the competencies, we develop a selection process that will detect and measure the necessary competencies in the most effective and efficient manner.

How is a “competency” measured?

Our goal is to provide as many opportunities as possible for candidates to show evidence of competencies needed for a particular job. Competencies can be measured through different assessment tools, such as written tests, interviews, performance test, training and experience evaluation etc. To ensure that our selection process is unbiased and fair to all candidates, assessment tools are used by trained raters who are instructed to follow strict rating standards.

Back to top
Evaluation of Training and Experience (T&E)

What is a T&E?

A T&E is a scored evaluation of the job application materials submitted by a candidate. Such materials may include the completed application form, a resume, a written qualifications statement, and written responses to specific job-related questions.

The T&E is NOT a determination of whether the candidate meets the minimum requirements; rather, the T&E is one method for determining who are the better qualified among those who have shown that they meet the minimum requirements. In a T&E, candidates are typically scored in relation to one another; consequently, when the pool of candidates is exceptionally strong, many qualified candidates may receive moderate or even low T&E scores.

What are the raters looking for?

The T&E is conducted by qualified “raters” who are highly knowledgeable about the requirements of the job, and who have no prior relationship with the candidates that may affect their ability to be impartial in their evaluations. The raters follow a structured rating process for assessing the degree of a match between pre-set job readiness standards and the candidate’s background information. Some of the factors that raters typically consider are recency, relevancy, level, complexity, scope, quantity, quality, depth and breadth in pertinent education, training and experience. To be fair, raters limit their evaluation to the application material that has been requested of all of the candidates. Further, in making their evaluations, the raters rely entirely on what the candidate presents in the application material.

Raters are not expected to:

- Read between the lines
- Interpret illegible, ambiguous, or incompletely stated information
- Make sense of disorganized, unfocused, or rambling information
- Compensate for a rushed or carelessly prepared application packet
- Adjust for candidates’ deviations from the required or plainly expected structure of the information requested
- Know or research the curriculum and course content of all degrees or certification programs that may apply to a job from all schools or institutions that may confer those degrees, certificates or licenses

What should you do when preparing your application?

- The first thing is to carefully read the job bulletin/announcement. Be sure that you meet the minimum requirements, and carefully review the job duties and the
characteristics of the “Ideal Candidate”. Be confident that this job is right for you and that you are right for the job.

- Make an organized listing of your experience in the space provided – being sure to address all responsibilities you have had in each job that are similar to those in the job you are seeking. Include and elaborate on your relevant experience; however, elaborating on irrelevant experience may only obscure your strengths.
- Starting with the most recent, list all relevant experience you have had by each job title and employer. Do not merge different jobs under one title. If you worked in an “acting” position and were not paid for it, list the experience separately and attach a letter from your supervisor to support your claim.
- Be specific, clear, and accurate on the recency, relevancy, level, complexity, scope, quantity, quality, depth and breadth of your education and experience. Vague generalities do not earn points in a T&E.
- Honesty is the best policy. Your subsequent interview and reference checks will reveal any misleading information you may have provided. Anyone who misrepresents qualifications is subject to immediate disqualification and possible barring from taking any other exams with LACOE.
- If the job bulletin describes the need for a diploma, degree, certificate, transcript, specific course work, license, or fulfilling of other requirements, attach evidence that you meet them or will meet them by the time specified in the job bulletin. Preface your attachments with a list of those things you are submitting for review.
- Think of your application as your first work product for the job. Make it neat, organized, and easy to understand. Put yourself in the position of the rater: What does your application packet say about you to someone who has no prior knowledge of your background and accomplishments?
- Go over your application (and any additional requested information) before you submit it to be sure you have given everything asked for.

The Bottom Line: It is up to you to communicate your qualifications by submitting relevant and thorough information in a clear and organized way.

Back to top

Written Test

What is a written test?

A written test is usually the first test part in the selection process and it is used to test how prepared a candidate is to assume the responsibilities and duties of a particular job. A written test is designed to test a candidate’s knowledge of specific areas that are considered important to a particular type of job e.g., knowledge of the industry, commonly used equipment, safety rules and regulations, etc.

A written test usually consists of a number of multiple-choice questions. A multiple-choice question is a question with several possible answer choices. Your task is to pick out the answer choice that gives the correct answer to the question. Although the
number of questions vary, a written test typically consists of about 50 – 150 different questions.

A written test is commonly administered in a paper and pencil format, but it can also be given on a computer.

**How do I prepare for a written test?**

To prepare for a written employment test may seem difficult since LACOE Personnel Commission will not give you any study material nor tell you what will be on the test. However, there are some things you can do to prepare for the test. The first thing you should do is to read the job bulletin and study it carefully. The job bulletin states the minimum requirements for the position, describes characteristics of the ideal candidate, provides an idea of what the job entails, and what competencies are needed to successfully perform the job. Test-takers are highly encouraged to study any subject area listed in the job bulletin by reading text books, manuals, professional publications, and applicable safety regulations, since these areas are likely to overlap with the written test content. Test-takers are also encouraged to read up on common practices of the industry, types of equipment used, rules and regulations, latest trends of the field etc.

**Interview**

**What is an interview?**

The interview is the most commonly used assessment procedure. A job interview conducted at the LACOE Personnel Commission is called an “oral examination” “or a “technical oral” and follows a pre-determined structure. An interview is designed to predict future job performance on the basis of applicants’ oral responses to oral inquiries. You can expect to be interviewed by an interview panel, often consisting of at least two people. The panel may include experts in the field for which you are applying, and/or a Human Resources representative.

Interviews generally last about 30 to 60 minutes and the interview process is tape recorded. During this process, the interview panel will ask you and all the other candidates the same set of structured job-related questions. However, during the interview, the panel may ask follow-up questions as necessary in order to clarify and expand on your answers. At the completion of your interview, the interviewers will evaluate your responses and behavior during the interview relative to provided grading standards. After all candidates have been interviewed, the panel is “debriefed” by Personnel Commission staff and assessments are reviewed. At this time, candidates are considered in relation to one another, and adjustments may be made to the assessments made throughout the day. When multiple panels are used, variations
across panels (if any) are discussed, and ratings may be adjusted based upon clarification of the rating standards.

Interview Panels

Interviewers must qualify for their roles by having relevant training and expertise in competencies to be assessed, and they must have no prior relationship with a candidate that may influence their assessments. With some exceptions, interview panels will consist of a minimum of two interviewers. Often, three interviewers are scheduled to allow for interviewers to excuse themselves if they feel they cannot impartially assess a candidate. If this is the case, the remaining two interviewers constitute a complete and valid interview panel. If a minimum of two interviewers are not available to conduct your interview, you may be rescheduled, or your interview may be video-recorded and assessed at a later time by a qualified panel.

Types of Interviews

I. Technical Questions
Candidates are asked questions pertaining to how they would handle job knowledge. Interviews tapping job knowledge offer a way to assess a candidate's current level of knowledge related to relevant implicit dimensions of job performance. For example, “Proper inventory is essential in each phase of textbook services. As a Textbook Supervisor, what would you do to ensure that textbook inventory meets the needs of operation?”

II. Behavioral Questions (Describe a time when…)
This technique involves asking all candidates standardized questions about how they handled past situations that were similar to situations they may encounter on the job. The interviewer may also ask discretionary probing questions for details of the situations, the candidate’s behavior in the situation and the outcome. For example, “Please describe an incident in which you had a critical work deadline to meet, but you also had other demands on your time that could cause the work to be late? How did you handle the situation? What did you do? Who else was involved? How did it work out? What would you do differently?

III. Situational Judgment Questions (What would you do if…)
Candidates are interviewed about what actions they would take in various job-related situations. For example, “A major duty of your job involves interacting with the public. If an irate parent came into your department where you were the Administrative Assistant and angrily demanded to know why his/her child received a disciplinary letter from the District, what would you do?”
IV. Presentation
One technique requires the job candidate prepare a brief presentation on a job-related topic and to answer questions from the panel of interviewers. Usually, the presentation is mini-simulation of the kind of presentations made on the job, and the panel represents the kind of audience likely to be encountered. Each member of the panel then rates each interviewee on presentation skills, and possibly other competencies such as handling stress, managing conflict, influencing, etc. A variation may include having the candidate prepare a written response to a technical issue and then present it orally to the panel. In addition to the presentation skills, the written response may also be used to evaluate clarity and effectiveness of writing skills as part of the interview.

V. Role Play
Candidates are asked to pretend that they already have the job and must interact with another employee or client to solve a problem. The other role player is usually a trained Human Resources Specialist. For example, the candidates may be asked to play the role of a supervisor, to show how they interact with counsel an employee.

How do I prepare for the Interview?

I. Find out about the department or agency
Find out as much as you can about the department in which the vacancies exist. This will show that you have initiative, are truly interested in the work the organization does, and understand the services it provides. This information will be useful throughout the interview process by helping you to see the relevance of some of the questions and to enable you to frame your responses to be most relevant to the needs of the organization.

II. Review the position requirements from the Job Description
The position requirements provide a detailed description of the job requirements of the position for which you are applying.

III. Think about types of questions you may be asked at the interview (Refer to Types of Interviews)
Candidates may be asked questions related to their past work experience. For example, "Tell us about your experience and background that has prepared you for this position."

   o Be aware of what competencies will be assessed. You can find that information in the recruitment bulletin and in the job description available through the Personnel Commission website.
o Make sure that you have reviewed your application prior to your interview appointment and that you are ready to answer any questions about your career background.

IV. During the interview…

o Responses to the questions should be organized and complete. Keep in mind that the raters have no prior knowledge of your capabilities and cannot read your mind or draw conclusions based on vague or general statements about your accomplishments or capabilities.

o Responses should be focused and succinct. Keep in mind that you and the interviewers have limited time to cover several areas in the interview. Rambling or repetitive responses (maybe due to nervousness) will affect the time budget of the process and tend to create a negative impression of your communication skills.

o If you do not understand a question, ask the interviewers to repeat the question. However, for the sake of consistency, interviewers are limited in the extent to which they can re-word or re-state the question.

o Some interviews may provide the candidate with a list of questions (usually placed on the interview table for your reference during the interview.) If the questions are available, be sure to refer to them to help you remember the questions and to help you pace answers so you can answer all of them with a minimum of repetition.

o You will present your qualifications in the best way if you provide specific examples of your past experience which relate to each question. For example, to answer questions regarding your ability to get along well with others, responses such as: “I always get along with everyone”, or “Everyone likes me”, do not provide the raters with sufficient information. Cite examples of how you have handled difficult situations. Tell the interviewers what the situations were and how you handled them.

o When necessary, pause briefly and think before you answer. You can sometimes get a little room to think by rehearsing some lead-in statements to your response, such as: “That’s a good question, and I know the importance of that topic in… [organizing my day, approaching a project, motivating a team, handling a complaint, etc.] Let me give you… [my approach, the steps I would take, a good example, etc.] Of course, don’t over use this device or use it at all if it doesn’t come naturally to you. Nevertheless, practicing this type of dialogue with someone before the interview will help and may also help reduce some of the nervousness you may have during the interview.
- Provide only information that is related to the qualifications of the job. Do not volunteer unrelated information such as marital status, religion, health conditions, hobbies, views on news and current events, etc.

- Make eye contact, smile appropriately, and speak in a friendly yet professional manner. Be well-groomed and dress for a business situation, not a casual or social event, or a club or party. Take your cue from the type of attire that would be worn on the job and raise it a notch. If you are not sure, ask the analyst conducting the examination.

- Most important, be honest and be yourself. GOOD LUCK!

Performance Test

What is a performance test?

In a performance test, a work situation is replicated to test a candidate’s ability and skill in performing critical and frequently performed job duties. A candidate can expect to be evaluated by a panel consisting of at least two experts in the field. The experts will give identical instructions to all candidates and evaluate all candidates according to the same set of rating standards.

How do I prepare for a performance test?

The only way to prepare and score high on a performance test is to know how to do the job and know how to do it well. There are no short-cuts, no books to study, no manuals to read, and no test-taking tips on how to pass a performance test. This is an applied test where previous hands-on experience and “how to” skills are invaluable. If you have extensive experience performing the most common job duties of the field, you are likely to do well on the test.

Types of performance tests

**Job task:** Candidates are tested on different job tasks. The test is designed to include a set of well-structured tasks that highly resemble real parts of a job. For example, a bus driver may be asked to complete a driving assignment, a painter may be asked to paint a wall, and a tile layer may be asked to set tile.

**Writing Skills test:** Candidates are asked to prepare a written document (memo, report, summary, plan, etc.) using a provided computer in a controlled setting with supplied information or materials. The test is designed to represent the writing requirements of the job. The product is evaluated by at least two trained raters using structured scoring guidelines. The assessment will likely include
writing mechanics, organization, clarity and conciseness, analysis and critical thinking, technical soundness, etc.

**In-basket tests:** Candidates sort through a manager’s “in-basket” of letters, memos, e-mails, and/or reports describing problems and scenarios. Candidates are asked to review them, prioritize them, and respond appropriately with memos, action plans, and problem solving strategies. Managerial and professional judgment and decision making will likely be a focus, and elements of writing skills testing (see above) will likely be included.

**Office Proficiency Assessment Certification (OPAC):** Candidates are tested on office skills (e.g., word processing, spreadsheets, computer applications, data entry, typing speed, proofreading, filing, office computations, etc.). This test is administered on a computer.

**Physical Abilities tests:** Some jobs require general physical abilities such as lifting, pushing, pulling, climbing, crouching, crawling, reaching, balancing, eye-hand coordination, manual dexterity and steadiness, etc. When physical abilities are essential job requirements, they may be tested in a standardized environment and using standardized equipment or materials. At all times, safety will be a primary consideration in the design and administration of the test. In the event of a safety concern (e.g., the candidate doing something that puts him/her at risk), the testing may be terminated.

**Reference Check**

**What is a reference check?**

Reference checks are often used to verify employment, education, and achievement records already provided by the applicant on a resume, application, or in an interview. Unless you are a current or retired LACOE employee in regular status in the Classified Service or permanent status in the Certificated Service, your references will be contacted after the eligibility list is produced to confirm your background and suitability for employment.

A candidate should make sure that all information on the application, resume, or in an interview is true to the best of their knowledge. It will be checked.
Reviews, Protests, and Appeals

An examination result may be protested on the basis of a design or content error, procedural error, scoring error, abuse of discretion, bias, or illegal discrimination. Unfortunately, disagreement with the result or belief that the score is not an accurate representation of one’s qualifications is not, in itself, a basis for protest or appeal. Because the resolution of a protest or appeal affects every other candidate in a competitive examination process, the candidate must make a fact-based claim and carry the burden of persuasion that the procedure was flawed in a way that affected the validity of the outcome.

To protest an examination result, one or more of the following conditions must be cited.

“Design or content error” is a lack of job-relevancy of the examination (in part or in total), or a flaw in the currency, accuracy, or structure of test material (e.g., a poor test item). To protest on the basis of design or content error, the error or issue must be identified in sufficient detail to be researched and resolved.

“Procedural error” is a lapse, omission, or breach in the consistency of the administration of the process that may cause some individuals to be unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged in the assessment. To protest on the basis of procedural error, one must identify a specific administrative issue and explain the reason that the issue affected the examination outcome.

“Scoring error” is a miscalculation of an examination part score or miscalculation of the final grade based upon the scoring plan and formula. Candidates are free to make appointments to review the accuracy of scoring. Because scoring has basic mathematical properties, scoring errors will be corrected if found. Certain types of written tests, however, have scoring keys that are research-based and can not for test security reasons be shared.

“Abuse of discretion or bias” is the exercise of judgment made irrespective of the facts or an express or implicit favoritism or disfavor for specific individuals. To protest on the basis of abuse of discretion or bias, one must identify the divergence of judgment from facts and data, or the specific biasing relationship between raters and candidates.

“Illegal discrimination” is anything written, stated, or otherwise communicated that indicates discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, age, gender, gender identity, sexual preference, or any other category of people protected under anti-discrimination law. To protest on the basis of discrimination, specific evidence of discrimination should be shown (e.g., a comment or statement made by an interviewer).
Procedure for protest or appeal

Whenever one thinks that examination part was flawed, the problem should be immediately reported to the analyst-in-charge before the exam is scored and notice of results is distributed. This is not a complaint or formal protest, rather, it is feedback that can help us correct problems before they become potentially serious issues. Problems are best resolved in this way. Any problem identified early lends additional credence to an protest that may follow.

Follow notification of results, there are three levels of review or protest.

Level 1: Within six days after results notifications have been sent, candidates can make an appointment with the analyst-in-charge to go over the scoring of the examination to receive an explanation of how the score was determined and to verify the accuracy of the score calculation. Because this is a competitive examination process, and examination materials are re-used in subsequent procedures, not all scoring information may be shared for examination security purposes. Scoring and calculation errors may be resolved at this stage.

Level 2: If the issue is not resolved with the analyst-in-charge, a formal protest may be made to the Personnel Director within the same 6 day review period. Protest of any part of an examination must be written and received in the office of the Personnel Director no later than six (6) working days from the postmark of the notification results. We cannot be responsible for lost mail, misdirected mail, or failure of mail to be delivered after it has been entrusted to the U.S. Postal Service. Any protest made directly to the Director without attempt to resolve it with the analyst-in-charge will be referred back to the analyst, and will probably result in an untimely appeal to the director if one is sought.

The director will research the issue, typically by reviewing the documentation of the examination development, administration, and scoring. Where relevant, the director will interview involved parties and listen to any parts of the examination that were electronically recorded. Candidates can expect a written response within 20 working days; however, complex issues may take longer. Any determination of flaw will be remedied as appropriate.

Level 3: The director’s resolution of a protest may be appealed to the Personnel Commission for public hearing. The appeal must be in writing to the Members of the Personnel Commission, in care of the director, and received within six working days of the written protest response from the director. Email correspondence is preferred to ensure timely delivery. Upon receipt, the appeal will be placed on the earliest possible monthly meeting of the Personnel Commission. The Personnel Commission decision will be final.

If the examination is for a single-position classification, timely protests or appeals must be resolved prior to approval of eligibility lists.

Back to top