

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR STUDY TIME FOR WRITTEN TESTS

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You may dread having a written test as a component of your promotional process or you may welcome it, according to your history with written tests. Whatever your history, you will do better if you understand some fundamentals about written tests in general, your test specifically, and what study methods and test-taking techniques will help you get the highest score possible.

Take the time to read this material, even if you've been studying already and even if you think you have a method that works for you. Unless you got 100% of the responses accurate last time, give yourself a chance to consider ways to adapt your favorite study method.

If You Think You Have Reading and Comprehension Challenges

This material can help you study and test more effectively. It does not provide focused help for those who have reading or learning disabilities or attention problems---and I am convinced that many officers have these issues and don't realize it.

If you think you have a reading, comprehension or attention problem, do yourself a favor and seek professional assistance to help you find strategies for coping with those issues. Those strategies can help you be more successful in any endeavor that requires reading, understanding and responding effectively.

Having said that, let me also assure you that any of those special strategies will fit with the concepts discussed in this material. Share this material with the person who is assisting you. It will help that person understand the differences between your test and the kind to which he or she is accustomed.

Refresher About Terms Used to Describe Test Components

Promotional tests based on a reading list usually consist of multiple choice items or essays about pertinent topics. The most common test consists of multiple choice items with two to five options, because it can be graded electronically and because there is only one correct answer. An essay has to be rated by one or more people and is more difficult to standardize. Occasionally, but not often, completion tests (fill-in-the-blank) or matching tests are used.

Test Items not Test Questions. The reason test items are not referred to as *questions* is because the stem (main part) of the item does not always present a question. It may provide a scenario for which you pick the best response for the rank you seek, a fact

statement for which you pick the correct ending, or a problem or situation for which you pick the best solution.

Options or Distractors: The options will consist of potentially correct answers that are likely to seem close enough to the correct one that someone who is not strong in knowledge about the topic might not be sure of the correct choice. The incorrect options are often called *distractors*, because they are close enough to draw the test-taker away from the correct answer.

The Difference Between Academic and Promotional Tests

Promotional tests are not developed for the same purposes or in the same way as tests you may have taken in other settings.

•**Academic tests:** Written tests in school or in certification programs are measures of knowledge retention and application. They are usually designed to separate those who know *significant* material from those who don't.

•**Promotional tests:** Written promotional tests also measure knowledge retention and sometimes knowledge application, but they often also serve other purposes:

- 1.) They force you to gain professional knowledge. Would you be reading everything on your reading list, multiple times, if you were not being forced to do it? I didn't think so!
- 2.) They eliminate those who are not committed to the testing process and to career development. Many people might show up for an interview or assessment center, just to give it a hearty try. Only those who are sincerely seeking the rank and who are willing to work for it will study enough to score high in a written test.
- 3.) They can reduce the number of candidates going through the expensive subsequent processes, such as assessment centers.
- 4.) If the scores are used as part of final list development, they provide one more component to differentiate between candidates.
- 5.) They can help reduce complaints that the promotional process emphasizes verbal skills over solid job knowledge.

Study the tips from your testing source: Your specific written test may be developed by a testing company, your Human Resources or Personnel Section, or by commanders or others within your organization. If they provide you with study tips, read those and follow them. My guess is that they will mesh with this material just fine. But, since you may not receive those tips until near testing time, use this as you study, well in advance. You won't go wrong with it and I'm confident it will save you time as well as helping your test results.

Stay positive: Don't spend your time worrying about potential or past lawsuits, unfairness or whether the assigned reading applies to the work you think you will be

doing. Just focus on *recalling and being able to apply* the material assigned for your study. This is especially true if you are reading a text on supervision, management, command or leadership, in addition to material on policies, procedures and rules.

I studied books for tests at every stage of my career and often laughed with others at how ridiculous the books were or what a waste of time, since our department didn't do things the way the books described. Now, decades later, I have bought those books as vintage items, read them and felt very foolish that I didn't appreciate their value and that I didn't attempt to learn from them when they could have done me the most good.

I also have come to realize how little I knew about professional policing concepts, in spite of how smart I thought I was. My old study notes contain the equivalent of, "A is the first letter of the alphabet." I think I had a note card to remind me of that fact! There were a lot of things I didn't know, even though I thought I knew quite a bit. You probably don't know as much as you think you do, either. So, resolve to enjoy learning.

Characteristics of Effective Test Items

- The majority of the items must be challenging enough that you will need to have read the text to determine the answers. General knowledge and guessing will not be enough.
- The items must be written in a way that you are not easily led to the correct answer.
- The items will often be very specific to the text or material being studied. That is why questions will often start with, "According to the text, (book title given)..."
- The items will often be obscure (even trivial), so test takers would only know the answer by reading all of the text many times, then recognizing the excerpt.
- The time allowed to take the test can be part of the test. Enough time is usually allowed for most people to complete the test, although with a bit of pressure.

If you can prove that you need extra time to read and respond quickly, let the testing coordinator or in-house developer know well in advance. They may be able to make arrangements to allow you to take the test in another room and be allowed more time.

- Test items may reflect an issue or recent event that the organization wants to have emphasized, whether or not it is a major concept in the reading material. This is not usually the case in departments that hire outside test producers who probably have a pre-developed test, but is often the case in in-house testing processes.
- The most challenging item to write and to answer correctly are usually those with a short scenario and several options for correct responses. Test-takers who only read to remember verbatim may not be effective when it comes to applying the material.*

Your study should involve:

Learning to recognize exact words and phrases and also learning concepts and how to apply them. That may seem obvious and overwhelming, but I'll mention some ways to make it easier.

Court Scrutiny of Promotional Tests.

If someone sues over the results of their written test, the test producer must be able to show that the questions being challenged were valid and reliable. Each test item, options and the correct response must:

- *Be accurate.

- *Be written reasonably for the reading levels and job description of test-takers.

- *Answered correctly by a reasonable number of people compared to those who did not answer it correctly. (Even if the answer is accurate and written well, if a majority of people missed it, it will likely be viewed as faulty in some way.)

- Not unreasonably difficult to read and understand.

- Be able to be proven as correct, using the text material.

Studying For Your Promotional Multiple Choice Test

If you consider the issues above, you will see that some of the traditional methods of studying for a test will not work well for promotional tests, *if used exclusively*.

1. It is not the best use of your time to rely *solely* on underlining key words and phrases and studying those areas. Many people like to underline key material—and that can be effective. However, there are three aspects of that method that can create problems:

- Since promotional tests are often developed on obscure text areas, you would need to underline every sentence on every page, which would then serve no purpose for study.

- It is time consuming to stop and underline.

- Your eyes will tend to skim the underlined areas when you read the material again, instead of reading every word for memory and understanding.

Key point: If you are studying to learn key principles, underlining can be helpful. If you are studying for a promotional exam, underlining will most likely reduce your study effectiveness. Usually it is more of a psychological help than a learning help. All those colorful lines make it look like you've done a lot of work!

2. It is not the best use of your time to rely *solely* on study cards or a version of study cards on your phone or computer. Many candidates make flash cards containing fill-in-the-blank type questions for study. Or, they put the first part of a statement on one side and the rest on the other side, for self-quizzing.

If you are trying to learn key facts, lists, statistics or specific reference citations, making cards containing that information can assist you in memorizing the material. However, there can be problems with using study cards:

- The odds are that many of the test items will not involve the material on the cards you develop. Remember, your promotional test is an eliminator as well as a test of learning.

The test material may come from less significant material immediately before or after the material you put on a card.

- Cards take a long time to make and the time could be better spent reading and re-reading for memory and understanding.

Bottom line: I'm not implying it is a waste of time to make any study cards at all. I think they can be useful in many cases. But, they should not be used as an exclusive study aid. The time allocated to them should not take away significantly from reading all of the text.

Read, read and read some more, from the written material, using some of the other methods listed below, to reinforce your learning.

3. It is not the best use of your time to write sample test items for your own use or to swap them with a study partner. It sounds helpful to say you and your study partners will swap sample test items. Like all other methods, there can be some usefulness to it. But, there are also some big drawbacks. Here are some thoughts to consider, if you want to practice taking a test:

- Do not develop multiple choice items.** Professional writers sometimes take an hour or more to write one good multiple choice item with reasonable options—you don't have that much time. Also, you will be focusing on creating false options to go with the one correct answer and might remember those instead of the correct answer.

If you know someone who is not already studying for the test and who is willing to spend eight or so hours to write ten or twenty really good test items, have at it. But, I doubt you will find anyone—even a loving spouse—who is willing to do it.

- There is also the issue of what you will do when you miss a question on your sample test. If you note it in your text and study it for learning, you may put more time into an unlikely question than is warranted.

- Instead of Multiple Choice test items, use completion statements for practice tests:** If you really want to have sample tests, use completion statements (fill-in-the-blank) that are straight from the text or other reading material. You or your study partner will have to know the exact text to answer correctly and that can be useful.

- Use modified hypothetical tests for practice:** One way to practice some hypothetical scenarios is to select a portion of a text or a rule, policy or procedure and write a scenario to which that material would apply.

Then, require the test-taker to *write* a list of the correct actions to take in that scenario. Your real multiple choice test won't be verbal, it will be on paper. Require yourself to know the answers in a few select written words, to ensure you really do know the material. Talking allows you to mush around the answer, writing requires you to know it.

4. It is not the best use of your time to read the text and record it so you can listen to it in your car or elsewhere. There are some advantages to listening to tapes and CDs, but there are some strong negative issues as well.

•First, it is very, very time consuming to read the entire text and record it. In addition, there is a temptation to listen to it while on-duty. Don't do that. It is not safe to be concentrating on studying while you are driving and it is not ethical to use your work time that way.

If you are confident it will be helpful to listen to a recording while you are driving back and forth to work, do one chapter and see how it works before you or someone else invests more time.

Try this: Develop some completion items from a more complex portion of the material, then record the material, listen to all of it, then a few days later test yourself. You'll probably do fairly well, because you were listening for your test items. However, the process may help you decide if you want to record all of the material or not.

5. It is not the best use of your time to primarily study commercial text book study-guides with sample questions. This can certainly be one of the methods for studying a text book, but it should not be your only method. Study-guide questions are often not written very well (I know, because I have written them and have read the questions of others!) Since writers are paid by the item, the questions are often quickly assembled from the most obvious text material.

Another draw-back of commercial study-guides is that they are condensed versions of the original and are designed to provide key points. You need to be reading every word of the text.

6. Any other ideas for study that are long-shots for their effectiveness are also not the best use of your time. For example, a determined candidate studying for a test for lieutenant decided to study each of the words and phrases in the index of one of the text books, figuring the index would highlight the most important material.

The candidate wrote the word or phrase on a card, then wrote the significant material about that word or phrase on the other side and used the cards for study in a variety of ways. Later the candidate wrote sample questions about the key words or phrases.

The result was probably helpful---the candidate scored very high---but the process took weeks of work, to the point of obsessively working on cards every spare minute. The time could have been better spent just reading re-reading and considering how to apply the material. (And the questions the candidate missed had not been significant enough to put in the index.)

That candidate was me and I remember the effort very well. I used poor judgment about how to study. You can avoid that error.

. An Effective Way To Study

Having said all of that about how *not* to study, you finally get to the part about *how* to study in a way that will make the best use of your limited time.

Consider again the facts about multiple choice questions on promotional tests:

- (1.) Some of the items may be about portions of the text that seem trivial.
- (2.) The items will be written in a manner that is reasonably easy to read, understand and answer in the time allowed.
- (3.) The way an item is written may purposely lead you to the wrong answer (what you might call a trick question.) There is nothing illegal or unethical about that—and it can help separate those who have read the material from those who have not. That is why almost memorizing the material is the best way to study.
- (4.) Hypothetical scenario questions nearly always have a correct option that can be proven either directly or indirectly through policies, procedures, rules or the text.

Given those facts, it strongly indicates that the best use of limited time is to approach study in these ways:

How to study textbooks or other non-technical material:

(1.) Read the texts and other materials as many times as possible, with focused attention on every sentence, every chart, every footnote, and from the introduction to the very end. Don't skip the introduction, footnotes, endnotes or anything else.

That may sound obvious—but it is a completely different approach than reading to understand concepts and apply them. It is *reading to memorize many things and to recognize everything*.

(2.) While you are reading and re-reading, stop after concepts are introduced and develop a short mental scenario of you in the target rank, applying the concept while using the exact approach described in the text. This is very helpful for recalling and applying the material.

(3.) A variation on (2), above, is to write several sample scenarios that could be used in your assessment center or interview. When you come to material that can help you respond to the scenario, write down the source and material.

For example, if you have developed a scenario about correcting and counseling an officer who has made inappropriate comments at roll call, when you come to information about counseling, correcting, interpersonal techniques, etc, write where you found the material and what it said that would help you deal with the situation.

(3) Another way to study is to develop a scenario sample test item on a section of material. Using the material as a guide, write out the fundamental steps or issues that would be important to someone of the rank you seek. Number the steps or issues to give yourself or others a checklist. Use the checklist as you or a study partner list the steps for correctly responding to the scenario.

(4.) To develop sample completion (fill-in-the-blank) test items, just take a statement out of the book or reading material and leave key words out. Pick some significant information and some that may seem to be insignificant.

(5.) Don't muddle your mind by developing effective distracters for sample multiple choice tests. Doing that requires you to think of what is *not* the answer, and you can't afford to have those things floating around in your head.

How to study department procedures, rules, policies, the law or similar material that is more technical in nature:

(1.) Optimally, you will be studying a long time before a test is announced. That way, when you see a large reading list it will not be so intimidating.

(2.) If you want to ensure you don't read anything unnecessarily prior to the announcement of the official study list, focus on material that directly relates to the rank you seek.

(3.) Generally, department rules, regulations and policies are all valid, but procedures may only apply to specific activities and not all would be valid for testing. Often you will be assigned a specific portion of a large procedure manual or state statutes.

If possible and reasonable, use your printer or scanner to scan the material on the selected pages and create a study text of your own, focused only on the material you need to read.

(4.) Create mental and written scenarios, much as you did when studying a textbook. Think about how the section you just read would play out in real life. What would be a situation in which you might think, "What should I do now?"

For example, if you have developed a scenario on the activities of your rank in a shots-fired incident, list the rules, policies and procedures that apply and how you would use that information in the incident.

Make it real: *This next study method has helped many candidates.* Get hard copies of the reports, forms, etc., that you are reading about in the departmental material. As you read, look at the form or report and picture yourself doing the task.

(5.) If you have time, also create scenarios in which your responses must come from a variety of sources. For example, an officer is involved in an accident.

- *What would be your essential responsibilities?
- *What reports must you complete or direct someone to complete?
- *Who do you have to inform?
- *Who and what are your resources?
- *How should you document it and develop a final report?
- *What policy is there about your role?
- *What resources are available for the officer and his or her family?

See how many rules, policies, procedures and recent memos might be involved? Also, see why studying has to be started as soon as possible?

I hope you can also see how valuable it would be for a real sergeant, lieutenant or captain to not just know *where* to find such information but to have most of that information already in his or her mind. That is the value of forcing candidates to read the material.

(6.) If you are studying with a partner, both of you may want to develop some scenarios to consider, but *don't rely on your study partner to give you the correct responses*. For one thing, your study partner may be wrong. For another, you will benefit by looking up the material and seeing all the words around it. Those are the very words you might be asked about in a test item.

How to study statistics and facts from any source:

(1.) It is not common to test on statistics or a list of facts, because they can too often be guessed and they risk being considered not valid. However, there may be times when you feel you need to memorize hard, cold facts and figures. You might think study cards are ideal for this activity—and it is the one time when they might be helpful. However, you will still benefit by simply marking the pages that contain the statistics or facts and flipping to them time and time again to read and memorize them.

(2.) Use sticky notes: Consider putting a test item stem on a sticky note to mark a page, then provide the correct answer before you open the book.

For example, you may want to memorize the five steps required for some task. On the sticky note you could write, “What are the steps for (name the task)?” Then, you would answer it before you open the book to read the steps and the material around that information.

- Vary that method as you continue to study by changing the sticky note for one that lists the steps, then asks, “What do these relate to?” You once again answer it before opening the material.

- Another variation is to list three of the steps, requiring you to provide the remaining two, and similar approaches. This also works with other types of testing material, if you adapt the concept somewhat.

How Much Time For Each Study Session?

Reading seems to be a sleep aid for many people! So, reading in short sessions is almost certain to stick with you more than reading for a long time and having the words be blurry. When you don't remember what you just read, wake yourself up, wash your face, move around a bit, then read it again. Three half hour sessions will probably be more beneficial to learning than one session lasting longer.

However, study is more than reading. It also involves active mental participation. Read a paragraph or so and stop to think through what you just read. Picture yourself doing or being what you just read about. Make it real for you and your potential work.

- Look at the sample reports and forms and picture yourself filling them out or correcting them.
- As you read about a supervisory concept, picture yourself using the concept effectively.
- As you study a policy, think of how you would teach that policy.

Do whatever it takes to allow you to recognize the correct responses to hypothetical situations and to recognize the correct options when they are verbatim from the text.

Taking The Test

The following techniques will be helpful, even if you are nervous or tired:

1. Skim briefly: Look through the test briefly and see how many test items there are compared to the time allotted. Notice if some test items are structured in more complex ways. That will help you know how long you can dally on items you're not sure about.

2. Calm yourself: Use the time you skim through the material to breathe comfortably and to calm yourself. Think of yourself in a comfortable setting, without pressure, just reading and responding in a relaxed way.

3. Follow the instructions: The slightest deviation from the instructions can cause your test to be disallowed. Read the instructions and if you have any questions or concerns, hold up your hand and ask a coordinator. Do not get up and go to the coordinator unless you have been told you may do so.

Don't start fishing around in your pockets or briefcase for the correct kind of pen, ask the coordinator if you can do so. Anything that looks like cheating is a problem.

Don't talk to anyone except the coordinator, even if someone talks to you. Just focus on that test and get it done! If someone talks to you after the test has started, shake your head no and point to the coordinator. If the talker has a question, he or she will be reminded of the person to ask.

4. Start at the beginning and answer each one before moving on. An old-time tip used to be to answer questions you know immediately, then mark the others and move on. That requires that you go back and find the ones you missed, which takes up extra time. Many candidates miss questions that way.

You will almost always do better if you answer each question in order and keep going.

*If you aren't sure of an answer, answer as well as possible and mark the item so you can go back and re-think it. At least you will have an answer of some kind, if time runs out.

5. Picturing the answer: Try the approach of reading the stem (main part of the question) and trying to *picture* the answer (see it in your mind) based on the many times you have read the book. What did you read that sounded like that statement or question—and what was the rest of it? Then, look at the options and read each one carefully—especially those that have many of the same words. Which one looks the material you remember reading?

If the question asks for a year or a figure, use the same technique of *picturing* what you read about that issue.

For example, optimally you would simply *know* that the National Program for Violence Reduction started in 1987. However, maybe you can only remember that there was a 7 in the number. So, it won't be the options of 1981, 1995 or 2000, it will be 1987. You will also know it isn't another option of 1977, because you don't remember reading about anything that happened in 1977.

That picturing technique may sound simplistic—but it works well for many people.

6. Reasoning the answer: Sometimes you can't picture the answer, in fact you don't remember reading the information at all. In those cases you may need to use reasoning—and that is helped by your general understanding of the topic and the overall text.

You may not know what degree of felony a particular crime is—but you might know about other crimes and you can compare them. It's essentially a guess anyway and at least it is based on logic.

Sometimes you can reason the answer based on the philosophy or approach of the text author. What would he or she be likely to want the answer to be? Rarely do authors include material that contradicts their beliefs or position on a topic.

You can also reason rules, policies and procedures, if you have kept informed about your organization at all. What fits with what has actually happened? That's at least the place to begin with your guessing.

7. Consider the structure and style of the questions and options. It may be that the options developed by the test writer will have a slightly different flair or sound than the one written by the author. When the options are just words, figures or short phrases, that doesn't usually help, but it might on a few.

8. If you are still perplexed about a test item: Relax your mind a bit and read the stem with each option.

- How does it sound to your mind?
- Does it seem familiar as you try to picture it in the text?
- Clear your mind and go onto the next option and do the same thing. Often that will bring back a memory of something you've read.

The old advice about not changing an answer once you have marked it, may not be correct for you. If you suddenly remember reading something different than you have marked, trust your memory. If you're desperately guessing, you probably will be better to go with your first guess. Hopefully you're not at that point!

If you have time, go back through and look at those you have marked as being not sure. Sometimes you will be more sure on the second time around. Make sure you have answered all of the items and guess at those you are not sure about. You might as well!

Summary

Most candidates will find it is the best use of their limited time to read text or material as many times as possible, no matter how many times that is. This should also be combined with extra reading of material that is specifically about the tasks of the rank being sought. (That way you are also preparing for your assessment center or interview.)

If you have a great deal of time you can combine reading and re-reading with study cards, sample tests and anything else you think will keep you focused on study. *Just be sure to read and re-read all of the text, not only what seems to be the most significant material. Nothing in the reading material is off-limits to test writers and they may use anything on any page.*

If you only have a short amount of time, read every word over and over, with a focus on trying to fix the sentences, headings, lists, footnotes and charts in your mind. When you take the test, letting your mind recreate the text will help you recognize excerpts and key information, even if you don't at first recall it.

Read with intention rather than just putting in time. Consider what you are getting ready to read, then read it, then consider what you just read. Move on in the material—and when you're finished, do it again.

Best wishes as you read, study, read some more, reflect, read some more and test!