



**New York State  
Department of Civil Service**

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***Civil Service Examinations***  
**How To Take**  
**A**  
**Written Test**

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George E. Pataki  
*Governor*

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# *Civil Service Examinations*

## HOW TO TAKE A WRITTEN TEST

*This booklet is for candidates who are applying for entry level jobs with New York State and local governments in the state. However, it contains information that is useful to all individuals who are considering applying for a job in the public sector.*

### Why A Test?

The New York State Constitution says that public employees must be hired for jobs on the basis of 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 for 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 and local governments are no different from private companies. Every 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 perform the relevant job duties tests. They also look at resumes and school records. Sometimes they give tests.

Through civil service examinations, New York State and local governments do many of the same things that private companies do when they hire.

*Written and oral tests* are designed to determine out how people would perform in the state job. *Training and Experience* consist of a detailed look at the applications and resumes of job candidates. *Performance tests* are tasks that measure certain skills, like typing or entering computer data.

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 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 ensures that everyone has a fair and equal chance to get a job, and it helps New York State and local governments find the people best suited for the available jobs. This is the *why* behind examinations.

## How Exams 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 the following:

- ask employees and their supervisors to fill out questionnaires
- ask employees to list their typical tasks
- observe employees while they are working
- interview employees
- interview supervisors and program directors

After getting a clear picture of the job, Civil Service staff meet with staff of the agency where the job exists. Together they decide what type of examination would best measure a candidate's ability to do 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.

## How To Find Out About Jobs

Announcements are published for all civil service examinations. You can find out what examinations are coming up by checking with the New York State Department of Civil Service, local Civil Service Commission office or the personnel office for the local government where the job is located. Announcements may also be available at local libraries, New York State Department of Labor Community Service Centers or placement offices. State job announcements and applications

are also available on the Department of Civil Service web site: at [www.cs.state.ny.us](http://www.cs.state.ny.us). This web site also contains the address for each municipal civil service agencies in New York State.

## What An Exam Announcement Tells You

When you pick up an announcement, you should *read it carefully*. A job announcement will tell you:

- the job title
- the job duties
- the salary
- where the job is located
- what education and/or experience is required (minimum qualifications)
- the date the test will be held
- whether there will be other test parts, such as a performance test and/or an oral test
- the type of application form required and where to get it
- the processing fee
- when the application is due
- where to get your own copy of the exam announcement if you are unable to keep the copy you are reviewing.

Here is an example from an announcement for *Compensation Claims Clerk* showing some of the information:

**The Position:** This position exists in the New York State Department of Labor, State Insurance Fund in Albany, Buffalo, Hempstead, New York City, Rochester and Syracuse. Most positions and vacancies are in New York City.

As a Compensation Claims Clerk, you would perform responsible clerical work in the development and processing of workers' compensation and disability benefits claims cases. 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 Clerk:

**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 educational 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 processing fee that is non-refundable. *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* that 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:

- Arithmetic computation
- Arithmetic reasoning
- Understanding and interpreting written material

What does this announcement tell you?

*First*, the examination will have a written test only. Most written exams consist of multiple-choice questions. There will be no oral test, or 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 are interested in the job, meet the minimum qualifications and wish to take the examination, be sure to send in an exam application.

## **How To Fill Out The Application**

The examination announcement will tell you the type of application form required and where to get it. Once you have the correct form, fill it out carefully, honestly, completely and neatly. Read all parts and fill out all of those that apply to you. Provide information about past jobs that you have had and include a complete description of them.

Also cover your educational experiences. The information you provide must show how you meet any minimum job qualifications in order for you to be eligible to take the test.

Civil Service makes special arrangements for people with disabilities both at the test site and on the job. If you need an accommodation, there is a place on the application to write in these details.

War Time Veterans and Disabled Veterans are eligible for extra credits added to their exam score if they pass. In most instances, these extra credits can be used only once for any permanent government employment in New York State. If you want to have the extra credits added to your exam score, you must answer the appropriate questions on the application form. You can waive the extra credits later if you wish. At the time of interview and appointment you will be required to produce the documentation, such as discharge papers, to prove that you are eligible for the extra credits.

On the form, there is a place to sign a statement that all the information you have given is complete. This is your legal affirmation that the statements on your application are true

Be sure to enclose a check or money order for the processing fee shown on the announcement unless you qualify for a fee waiver. Some people are eligible to have their processing fees waived. No fee is due if you are unemployed and primarily responsible for the support of a household. No fee is due if you are receiving Supplemental Social Security payments, Public Assistance (Home Relief or Aid to Dependent Children), Foster Care, or are certified Job Training Partnership Act eligible through a state or local social service agency. Also, some employee labor organizations pay the processing fees for their members.

Mail your application by the date shown on the exam announcement and send it to the address given on the application form. It is advisable to keep a photocopy of your application along with the examination announcement for your records.

You will usually have four weeks from the filing date on the exam announcement to study for the exam. It is helpful to mark this date on your calendar so you can plan how to use this time.

## How To Prepare For The Exam

Before you get ready to study 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 an *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 as well.

If you have Internet access, you may want to search the web for information on a particular topic. Many libraries have Internet access and can help you with your search.

There are some private companies that publish examination study guides on particular state jobs. These are available in libraries or bookstores and have titles like *Civil Service Examination for Accountant*. The Department of Civil Service is not involved with the publication of these study guides, and does not endorse or recommend any. These study books do sometimes cover subjects that are similar to those in civil service examinations—arithmetic computation and reasoning, reading skills, and clerical skills are a few examples. However, these books will *not* give you the exact content of a test, because the *Department of Civil Service does not publish its questions, or sell or give them to anyone else to publish*.

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 particular areas.

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 difficult. If you want to improve a skill, your best bet is *practice*.

Skills like keyboarding are easy to practice—you sit down at a keyboard and type. To practice other skills, you may need to be more creative.

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 writing teachers. There are plenty of textbooks to tell you the rules of good writing. Learn the rules; then practice them. Then go back and try again.

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.

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.

## Admission Notices

The week before the date of the test you will receive an admission notice telling you the date, time and place of the test and listing the code numbers of the tests you will be taking. You are expected to present this notice at the test center, so be sure to save it. The admission notice tells you if you have to bring anything with you to the test like a calculator or special equipment. It also says to bring identification with

you to the test center. For instance, a driver's license, credit card or a picture ID. If you have not received an admission notice by the Thursday before the test or if you lose it, call the Department of Civil Service to find out what to do.

## Preparing The Day Before The Test

The day before the test get yourself ready just as you would for any other important appointment. Know where you are going and explore your options for getting there. Check bus or subway connections or get information on where to park ahead of time.

Plan what to take with you to the test. Review your announcement and your admission notice the night before the test to be sure you have everything that you need to bring. Since many tests last three or more hours, you may want to bring a lunch with you. Having a snack or thermos of coffee with you may make you more comfortable during the test. The night before, lay out what you will need to take in the morning. Number 2 pencils, calculator (if allowed) ID card or driver's license, admission notice, watch (to time yourself if you cannot see a clock), note saying *Remember Lunch*.

Get to bed early the night before. Set your alarm clock and allow yourself time to relax. Being rested and having a clear head on the day of the test may help as much as any last minute review.

## What To Expect On Test Day

### The Test Monitor

When you leave in the morning, allow extra time to find the room where you will be taking the test and to get yourself settled. A test monitor will be there to give you the materials you need to take the test and be sure that everyone has a fair chance. The monitor will check you in, distribute materials, give you general instructions ahead of time and write down the time each part of the test starts and stops. Follow the test monitor's instructions carefully. He or she will tell you where there are instructions that you should read to fill out the answer sheet, where to enter your test booklet number on your answer sheet, and where to put your candidate identification number.

Your monitor will help you if you have a problem with any of the procedures, instructions or materials. If something goes wrong, if there is a page missing or a misprint or if you have to leave the room, just raise your hand and the monitor will assist you.

If someone else is distracting you, bring it to your monitor's attention. Do not look at the work of other people in the room or you may be disqualified. When you leave, you are expected to turn in all test materials even any scrap paper that you may have had. The monitor will check all your materials before you leave. What the monitor cannot do is give you specific advice about the content of the test questions. That part is up to you.

## The Test

**Read all directions carefully.** General directions will tell you what questions to answer—for some tests, you do not have to answer every question in every booklet. These instructions will also tell you if some questions are worth more than others. Unless you are told otherwise, all questions count the same. Read the directions for all parts of the test carefully. If there are sample questions, do them carefully to get practice. *Be sure that you understand the instructions before you start on the questions.*

**Read the questions carefully.** Make sure you are seeing what is actually printed in the test booklet—*not just what you expect to see or want to see.* After you read each question carefully, then read each choice. Make sure that 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. Do not assume the question means something it does not say. Do not jump to conclusions. Be thorough, try all the choices. If you do not read each choice carefully, you could easily miss the best one.

**Budget your time wisely during the test.** Know how much time you have, and notice the starting and stopping times. Look at the whole test first then decide how much time to allow yourself on each part. You get just as much credit for an easy question as for a hard one. Answer all the easy questions. Do not take too much time at first on the hard questions. On a tough question jot down the number on

your scrap paper and come back to it if you have time later. *If you skip a question, make sure that you skip a space on your answer sheet.*

Time yourself as you go through the test. Know how much time you have and how many questions you have left to do. Only the answers on this answer sheet will be counted toward your score so it is important to match the question number and the answer numbers. If some parts of your test are separately timed or speeded, work as rapidly as you can but stay calm paying attention to the time limit. (See how to take a speed test on page 14.) Concentrate and pace yourself.

**Be aware of choosing answers that are only partly true.** Look out for words like *all, always, best, greatest, least, most, never and only*. 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. These words should cue you to think of possible exceptions. Find examples from your own experience in judging general rules. You may be able to recall typical instances that will make the general rule clearer to you. For instance, if you are asked what is generally the best way to handle angry people on the phone, remember typical phone calls you have had with angry people or how people have treated you when you were angry.

***Examples:***

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, grapefruits and lemons, 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 question being asked. When tests include questions like this, it is because people doing the job 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.

**Speed tests** are usually only 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 correctly all of the questions you attempt. If you have time, go back and answer any questions you skipped.

**Break large problems into more manageable parts and analyze each part.** For instance, a very long sentence or problem may make more sense if you break it into pieces and look at it a phrase at a time. Make diagrams or notes on your scrap paper or whatever helps you to better understand the question. Sometimes you can work backwards from the answer to see which answer best fits the problem. Try each answer, in turn, to find the one that works.

**Be sure that the numbers on your answer paper match the questions.** Most of the written multiple choice tests are scored by machine. You will not get credit if your marks are unclear or if you put your marks in the wrong places. Check your work every way you can.

**Should I take a guess if I do not know the answer?** If you do not answer a question, you will not get credit for it. If you guess correctly, you will get credit. Therefore if you are not sure of the answer, you can still try to answer the question.

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. Remember, if you can eliminate one or more of the choices and make an educated guess, your chances of success are better than if you make a completely wild guess.

**Keep a positive attitude.** The way that you feel has a lot to do with how well you do on a test. People who are nervous or tense may not do as well as they should. They may forget things they really know or make careless mistakes. If you are confident and concentrate on the test, you will do your best.

**Good Luck!**

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