

CIVIL SERVICE TEST-TAKING TIPS

UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING WRITTEN MATERIAL AND USING LOGICAL REASONING TO DRAW VALID CONCLUSIONS

General Tips

1. First start with the lead-in to the question(s) before you read the passage (but do *not* read in the answers.) This will help you look for the important points in the passage as you read it (e.g. is it asking you about the “main idea” or a detail in the passage? See below for more tips on this.)
2. Read the passage quickly to get the idea of what it is about. Don’t get caught up in details during this first reading.
3. However do spend a little more time on the first sentence and the last sentence of the passage. They usually provide good clues as to the main idea in the passage. (Do this for each paragraph if there is more than one paragraph in the passage.)
4. Go back to the question. Look at the lead in to the question (what is it really asking?) Sometimes it’s good to underline the major words in the lead-in. (Unless you are told otherwise you are allowed to mark up the exam booklet, and you are always allowed to use scrap paper.)
5. When answering – **always stick to what is written in the passage (even if you think the passage is wrong about something!) In this section you are not being tested on your general knowledge, but on how well you understand what you are reading.**
6. Look at the answer choices. Usually you can eliminate two or more of the choices. Think through why you think the choice is incorrect.
 - Is the choice obviously incorrect? (e.g. it is **opposite** of what is stated in the passage?)
 - Does the answer say **more** than what has been written in the passage?
 - Does the answer say **less** than what has been written in the passage?
7. **This section is often the hardest on the exam. Because of that many people spend too much time on the section and don’t have enough time for the other parts of the exam.** Therefore, if you are stuck on answering a question, go on to the next question. **(However, be very sure that you have also skipped the question on your answer sheet.)**
8. At the end of this section of the test go back over the questions you have not answered and take your best guess (Usually you have a 50/50 chance of getting it right if you eliminated the obviously incorrect choices.) *Unless you are told otherwise, you will not be penalized for guessing, so you should make sure to answer every question.*

Types of Questions

Generally, the “Understanding and Interpreting Written Material” section has two types of questions. Each type of question needs to be approached in a slightly different way:

Main Idea Questions: The Main Idea questions test how well you understand the passage as a whole. You can usually tell it is a Main Idea question, if the lead-in says:

- Which one of the following best expresses the main idea of the passage?
- The author’s primary purpose is to....
- The best title for the passage is....

For these kinds of questions, you can use a number of strategies, depending on how difficult the question is:

- Summarize in your own head, or on a scrap of paper, what you think the main idea is – even before you look at the choices.
- Look again, especially at the first and last sentence. Does it clarify the main idea of the passage?
- Look at the choices, which is closest to how you would summarize the main idea?
- Even if you think you have the right answer, look at the other choices and “test” them. Why do they not provide the main idea? Again are these choices:
 - Not even close to what is in the passage? (Often there will be at least one answer that is obviously wrong.)
 - Stating the main idea **too broadly** than what you have just read?
 - Stating the main idea **too narrowly** than what you have just read?

Detail Questions: Detail questions test your ability to locate information in the passage. You can usually tell it is a Detail question, if the lead-in says:

- According to the author/passage....
- The author states....
- Which of the following statements are true?

Some tips for Detail questions are:

- The lead-in to the question, or the choices, often refer back to a word or phrase in the passage. If so, go back to that part of the passage and read it very carefully to make sure you understand what that word or phrase means within the context of the passage. Then “test” if the answer choice says the same thing.
- Detail questions are usually very specific. They are *not* the same thing as the Main Idea. So, if the answer choice is too broad and sweeping, it probably is not the correct one for a Detail question.

Using Logical Reasoning to Draw Valid Conclusions

While “Using Logical Reasoning to Draw Valid Conclusions” is referred to as separate section in the Firefighters exam, but not in the Professional Careers Opportunities exam, it will found in both exams and follows the same general rules as other reading comprehension questions (see above for general tips).

These questions test your ability to use the information in the passage to come a logical conclusion. You can usually tell this type of question if the lead-in states:

- Based on the information above, which one of the following conclusions must be true...
- It can be inferred from the passage that...
- The passage/author suggests/implies that...

Some tips for these questions:

- The answer to the question will usually not be found directly in the text. Rather there will be clues that will lead you to the right answer.
- If the answer choice is too far-fetched, or you can’t find any clues in the passage, it probably is wrong.
- Never, ever rely on your own knowledge of the subject. Always draw the conclusion from what is written in the passage.