

Passing Muster: Tests, Observation, and Other Ways You'll Be Assessed

Just when you've weathered the storm of tough interview questions, you might find yourself having to take a test, be observed interacting in a group, or be sent off with homework to complete or even a cup to urinate in (for drug testing). Although it is possible that you can get through an entire job search without having to face any assessment technique other than a series of interviews, jobs involving specialized expertise and knowledge almost always require skills tests. High-level management or technical positions often require the measurement of your personality characteristics and aptitudes to make sure that you're cut out for the job. And positions that depend on platform skills—such as training, teaching, sales, and consulting—may not be yours until you successfully make a presentation to the hiring decision-makers.

This chapter describes these types of assessments, as well as other bumps in the road you may encounter,



Bright Idea

To get a sneak peak at some of the group exercises in which interviewers might have you participate, read “Games Trainers Play” or “More Games Trainers Play” (both by Scannell & Newstrom) or “101 Great Games & Activities” by VanGundy.

including medical examinations and drug testing. These are often nerve-wracking parts of a job search, but they need not be. Knowing what to expect, how to handle them, and what your rights are can make the process much less intimidating.

Assessment through observation

The best way for an interviewer to find out whether you can do something is to watch you do it, not to ask how you think you do it or how you’ve done it in the past. Assessment through observation involves having you complete tasks or take skills tests, either at the employer’s office, at your home, or in an assessment center.

Simulation exercises

Some tasks you might have to complete include exercises that simulate job-related situations. You complete these exercises alone or in a group, while your ability to do the job well—along with the character you demonstrate when doing it—is observed by the prospective employer.

The classic among simulation exercises is the in-basket test, which has been around for decades. This measures your organizational and time management abilities by presenting you with phone calls, emails to answer, papers to process or file, fires to put out, projects to attend to, correspondence to write, and other administrative or operational responsibilities. You will be bombarded with more than any person could handle during the time allotted, but you are not expected to complete everything. Showing that you know how to prioritize and delegate is

usually the most important part of this test. Other simulation exercises involve staging a mock meeting, discussion, or collaboration session with a group of fellow candidates. The group might be charged with solving a problem, discussing an issue, completing a task, or coming to consensus on a matter. You might also find yourself in a team-building exercise that has the group pretending to be lost at sea, trying to survive in the wilderness, or stranded in a snowstorm.

Whatever the task, the observers are watching for roles to emerge as participants fall into their natural patterns of leading, managing, organizing, selling, empathizing, or being a resource. They're also looking to see who's a team player, who is confrontational or conciliatory, who is authoritarian or a consensus-builder, and who causes or calms disputes.

You can ace these exercises by determining which traits and roles the job in question entails and the organization as a whole values. Then strike a balance between being yourself and giving them what they want. Don't try to be someone you're not; it does you no good to fake certain qualities just to get an offer. It is also to your advantage to appear versatile, particularly if you don't know exactly what qualities are sought for the position. For example, you might show that you are committed to building a consensus in a democratic fashion but can be assertive, too. Or, you might play up the team-player bit but demonstrate that you can think for yourself as well. Don't take this balancing act so far that you come across as a chameleon, but do keep in mind that most employers these days want to hire people who can wear many hats.



Watch Out!

Employers often plant difficult participants in a group when you're in a simulation exercise or making a presentation. They are put there to see how effectively and diplomatically you deal with people who challenge you or are belligerent, slow to understand, or otherwise disruptive.

Presentations

You might be asked to make a presentation to a small or large group as part of a first screening interview or as a follow up to an interview. This method of evaluating candidates is common for jobs that would require you to make presentations on the job, such as in training, teaching, sales, and consulting. You will either be assigned a topic or asked to choose one and then be expected to prepare and present a talk, workshop, or training session. The obvious advantage to the employer is that this activity enables a much more accurate assessment of your skills and style than even a behavior-based interview can elicit. From the candidate's perspective, this approach really lets you shine—assuming you do have the qualities needed to do the job.

To put candidates' platform skills to a more stringent test, some employers ask them to make a presentation on a topic completely unrelated to the job or profession, perhaps on the subject of a personal interest or knowledge area, such as how to select a wine or buy a car. Of course, such an assignment is not without its intimidating side. Even if you are an accomplished public speaker, trainer, or teacher, you might get a bit rattled when thinking about a job offer that's contingent upon one presentation. If that's the case—or even if you're not particularly nervous—consider these tactics for success:

- Try to get the inside scoop on the department and organization where you'll be presenting. What is their philosophy toward training/sales/consulting and so on? What style do they prefer?
- Be sure to ask (in a preliminary interview or by phone or email prior to the presentation) what problems or goals they are trying to address. I once had a client who worked in insurance sales and was applying for a position that would entail making presentations on insurance products to employee benefits administrators at various companies. He learned that the company was in the midst of redefining their sales approach, encouraging their sales reps to

make more of an effort to educate prospective customers than to push products on them. Because he had a background in teaching prior to working in the insurance industry, he was able to call upon that experience and conduct a presentation that had an educational flavor. The hiring managers liked what they saw and offered him the job.

- If you've not had much public speaking or training experience but are trying to get a job that would involve making presentations, don't try to wing it. Read some of the books on public speaking listed in the "Communication–Oral" section of the online Bonus Appendix 2 and practice by giving a mock presentation to a group of friends, family, or professional colleagues.
- If you are an experienced presenter, don't try to change your approach drastically for your interview presentation. If you have a good thing going, now is not the time to mess with it. Make any minor adjustments necessary to fit the needs of the employer, but don't completely revamp your style.
- Remember that the presentation is just one aspect of your overall candidacy. If you give a less-than-stellar performance but have exceptional credentials and references, then the decision-makers might cut you a little slack and forgive a presentation with a few minor flaws.

Homework

Some job seekers are surprised to find that they leave an interview with homework to do. This is particularly common with entry-level positions, where you do not have a substantial track record or portfolio on which a hiring decision can be based. You might be directed to complete some task at home after a first interview and then will be called back for a follow-up interview if your work is satisfactory. Homework is also common for jobs that would involve writing or editing no matter what the level.

If you are assigned homework, the best thing you can do is to get it done quickly and completely. Half the reason—if not more—that homework is assigned is to see whether you are truly committed to getting the job and whether you can be relied upon to follow through. You should also make an effort to complete the task on your own. Ask questions when it is assigned so that you know how to proceed, but then do your best to be self-directed and not pester the employer with questions after you're underway. (If you really need to ask something that comes up after you get started and that is critical to the quality of your finished product, then there's no harm in calling or emailing with a couple of questions.)

You can usually assume that at least half the applicants given a homework assignment will not complete it, so if you simply turn something in, you are likely to make the first cut. Of course, you should submit your best work, but don't agonize over the task so much that you procrastinate and miss the boat.

Skills tests

As with homework assignments, you might be asked to complete a task that demonstrates your skills and knowledge, but this time you do so at the interview site or at an outside assessment center. Skills tests have traditionally been most common for clerical and administrative positions. Keyboarding (typing), word processing, filing, grammar, spelling, and punctuation are just some of the tangible skills that might be tested. Other positions that require specialized knowledge such as computer programming and other IT specialties might require testing as well.

Some of the written communication fields assign tasks such as those described in the previous section in the form of an on-the-spot test instead of as homework. You might be asked to edit a written document, write a press release, or come up with an idea for an advertising campaign. A paralegal or legal secretary might have to proofread a legal document or conduct some research.



Bright Idea

If you don't do well on a skills test, ask whether you can brush up on the skill on your own and come back to take the test. If your other qualifications are strong and you've established good rapport, some recruiters and employers will give you a second chance.

Whatever the task is, pay close attention to the instructions, asking for clarification as needed. Take the test willingly, even if you are annoyed that you have to do so.

Psychological tests

Most psychological tests are not actually tests, in that there are no right or wrong answers to questions. Most measure your own impressions of your personality and your preferred methods of communicating and behaving. The more accurate term is “assessment instrument,” but the word “test” is used customarily as a convenient shorthand that is often more meaningful to the lay person.

The tests you might take would be administered and interpreted by a psychologist or expert in psychometrics, either in a private practice or at an assessment center. You might also talk one-on-one with a psychologist in lieu of, or in addition to, taking tests.

Some tests are created specifically to aid employers in making hiring decisions and are, therefore, generally reliable in giving some clues to (although not an outright prediction of) your future behavior and success in a given job. However, many—if not most—of the personality and psychological assessment tools commonly used were not originally designed for selection purposes. Their intended use is in counseling and clinical settings, but because they provide valuable information about the test-taker's patterns of behavior, they are sometimes used as part of pre-employment screening. In that case, reputable employers will be cautious in relying on the findings as a predictor of how

you'll act on the job and will simply factor them into the larger set of data they collect on you.

Some degree of overlap occurs between tests designed to measure your personality traits or style and those that diagnose your emotional stability or detect mental disorders. Most, however, are developed for one purpose, so I am presenting them to you here in two separate categories: personality and mental health.

Personality

Most measures of personality traits (often called “personality inventories”) are designed for counseling and clinical settings. Career counselors such as myself use them to help individuals make career choices or understand how their personality type affects their job performance.

Personality inventories measure traits and characteristics not unlike the personal qualities listed in Chapter 3. They reveal your preferences and tendencies regarding communicating, managing, learning, and interacting with people. They tell us how you take in information, how you process that information, and how you make decisions. They help predict how people will act in various situations.

It is important to realize that personality tests do not measure serious mental disorders but simply describe normal adult personality. As a result, you need not be threatened by a personality inventory. It does not delve into the deep recesses of your psyche but instead takes stock of the traits you exhibit in everyday life.



Bright Idea

Every organization has an aggregate “personality” that evolves out of its mission and culture. The organization might be extroverted or introverted, cautious or cavalier. When thinking about personality traits that will be valued in you, don't just consider those needed to do the job, but take into account the personality of the organization as a whole.

Although you should be honest and give responses that reflect your true self, you can improve your chances by being strategic with candor. What I mean is that you can distinguish between the personality traits you exhibit in your personal life and those in your professional life. You might, for example, be an orderly, organized person at work but take a much more go-with-the-flow approach to your affairs at home. Obviously, when answering questions on a personality inventory that might have to do with this trait, you'll want to answer as you would in the professional arena.

As a career counselor, I have administered personality tests to thousands of clients over the years and also have taught fellow career consultants and human resource professionals how to administer them. I have found that when people respond to these tests with their work lives in mind, the results often differ markedly from those obtained when they put the questions in the context of their personal lives. As you take a personality test, try to figure out what type of quality each question or item is measuring and then consider how important that trait is in the workplace and respond accordingly.

Some additional tips for taking a personality test strategically are as follows:

- Keep in mind that you have considerable control over the outcome because these tests are based on your self-expressed observations as opposed to tapping into unconscious motives.
- Don't answer off the top of your head. There is usually no time limit on these tests, but you will probably be encouraged to answer each question quickly. Don't. Take some time to consider the rationale behind each question, and relate it to the traits needed to do the job you're going after or those valued in the organization as a whole.
- As you take a personality test, you might have the sensation that you are being asked the same thing over and

over. Well, you are. Personality inventories look for patterns. For example, a 300-item questionnaire might measure 15 traits by asking 20 questions per trait. If you want to appear balanced on a particular trait—perhaps neither extremely introverted or extroverted—then you can manipulate the results by responding slightly differently to each of those 20 questions. But, don't answer too differently each time, or your results will end up appearing abnormal.

- Mark your answers carefully. Some inventories have hundreds of questions, so they can become tedious. It is easy to start inadvertently filling in the wrong boxes on the answer form, which will obviously render your results inaccurate. Some tests have a built-in mechanism to check for this error (often called the “infrequency scale”), and your test will not be scored if you seem to have marked your answer sheet incorrectly.

Mental health

As with most personality inventories, assessment tools that measure your emotional stability or diagnose serious mental disorders are not designed as personnel selection measures. Although it is unlikely that you will have to take a true psychological test, you might come across such tests when interviewing for extremely high-level positions or for jobs in which your mental stability and integrity are especially critical, such as positions in law enforcement or public safety.

Most of these are projective tests—tests that tap into your unconscious motives to reveal your true nature and behavioral tendencies. The infamous Rorschach inkblot test is typical of this genre, as are similar exercises that ask you to tell a story about a picture you see or to complete a sentence that has been started for you. A qualified psychologist then analyzes your statements to determine where you stand on a number of characteristics and to identify any indication of psychiatric disorder or mental instability.

It's normal to be a bit nervous about taking these sorts of tests, but you need not be. If you consider yourself, and are seen by others, to be a normally functioning, stable individual with healthy personal and professional relationships, it's very unlikely that these tests are going to uncover anything unusual. Generally the best approach to taking these tests is to be yourself. But, there is some advantage to selecting the most socially desirable reply to each question. You want to come across as someone who seems sociable, honest, and cooperative. Now is not the time to reveal your rebellious, independent streak (unless you're up for a job that requires a high degree of creativity and independent thinking above all else).

Intelligence and aptitude

Some employers will want to collect objective data on your ability to learn, to master tasks, and to think in the way that the job or the organization requires. Measures of intellectual aptitude (that is, IQ tests)—along with tests that measure such areas as mathematical, creative, and verbal abilities—are controversial in that their ability to predict success on the job has not been proven unequivocally. Nevertheless, when used conscientiously and factored into the overall equation of who you are, they can provide employers with useful information.

Although there is not much you can do to alter your basic nature when it comes to innate talents and intelligence, you can employ tried-and-true test-taking strategies to improve your scores. Many of these are techniques you might have used when taking standardized tests for college or graduate school or for a professional credential or license.



Watch Out!

In most cases, it is against the law for private employers to give you a polygraph test.

- Get plenty of rest and eat healthy, well-balanced meals the day or two before the test.
- If you have a choice, schedule your assessment appointment at a time of day when you are typically most alert mentally.
- Realize that the best thing you can do for yourself is to stay relaxed and avoid getting nervous.
- Read all instructions carefully. Far too many errors occur due to misreading directions rather than to lack of ability.

Drug tests

Before you assume that you don't need to read this section because you don't do drugs, please reconsider. Understanding the who, what, when, where, and why of drug testing as a pre-employment screening tool is relevant for even the most chaste job seeker. Drug testing, particularly the most common method of urinalysis, is an inexact science that often leads to test results that are false-positives, so you need to be knowledgeable of the process and aware of your rights. Drug testing is also a process that is seen by many as an invasion of privacy, so if you are particularly fond of your civil liberties, you might want to know which companies test for drugs and why they do it before agreeing to work for a company whose practices conflict with your values.

Although subject to state legal restrictions, drug testing by employers (or prospective employers who have extended you a job offer) has become more common in the past decade. Many large companies test for drug use before finalizing a job offer,



Bright Idea

If you are opposed to the idea of drug testing on grounds that it is an invasion of privacy, or if you are worried about being the victim of a false-positive, you'll find hundreds of companies on the Non-Testers List: A Consumer Guide to Companies That Do Not Drug Test at www.nontesterslist.com.

and it is required for just about all federal government positions. If you will be doing a job in which safety is a major concern—such as work with heavy equipment, law enforcement, transportation, and care giving—then you can just about be certain you'll be tested. A drug test is usually not given until after an offer has been extended and you have accepted it. Your employment is then contingent upon a negative result from your drug test. If both the initial test and back-up tests turn out positive, you will most likely not be hired.

Urinalysis

The most common method of testing is *urinalysis*, also called enzyme-multiplied immunoassay. This method tests for traces of amphetamines, cocaine, marijuana, opiates, and PCP in your system. This test is limited in that it can detect only drugs that have been in the system for a short period of time, usually the past few days or a week or so. Opiates and cocaine are water-soluble, so they typically leave your system in 48 to 72 hours. Marijuana, on the other hand, has a slower urine excretion rate, so regular users can test positive for several weeks. Despite its limitations, urinalysis is a relatively inexpensive test with hundreds of testing labs that provide prompt and convenient service, so this is the method of choice for most employers.

Hair analysis for drugs

The analysis of hair follicles, or RIAH (radioimmunoassay of hair), is growing in popularity as a way to detect drug use, and experts in employment law say its use should continue to rise. Hair follicle analysis is a more precise and reliable test than



Bright Idea

Before taking a drug test, you can save time and confusion down the road by bringing the prescriptions for any medications you are currently taking or have recently taken (or the actual medication with the pharmacy label) to the test.

**Watch Out!**

Don't be surprised if a same-sex observer accompanies you to the restroom to verify that you are the source of your urine sample. Although more testing labs now have other methods of verification, many still use observers.

urinalysis and is much less prone to false-positives. This method can detect drugs that have been in one's system for several months, depending on the length of the hair. It also reveals when drugs were used and if use has increased or declined.

Brief periods of abstinence from drugs will not significantly affect the outcome of hair analysis, and contaminating or altering a sample to manipulate the test results is much more difficult with hair than with urine. Research has shown that even treating hair with strong chemicals to strip it will not completely remove traces of illegal drugs. Also, hair samples are easier to handle than urine ones, they require no special storage conditions, and they carry less risk of disease transmission. Hair analysis is more expensive than urinalysis, however, so employers have been reluctant to convert fully to this method. Also, some people are skeptical of hair analysis because scientists do not yet fully understand how drugs are actually absorbed into hair. They believe that drug metabolites (the traces of drug consumption) could be introduced into hair from external sources, such as sharing a sweaty cap with a drug user.

The risk of false-positives

False-positive results occur for a number of reasons. You might be taking legal drugs prescribed by a physician, such as antibiotics or sleep aids, which appear in drug tests to be illegal controlled substances. Some over-the-counter medicines can be problematic as well, particularly diet pills, cold medications, and Ibuprofen, which can yield a positive result for narcotics. Something you've eaten can also skew the results. Tales of poppy seeds jeopardizing employment because they show up as

opiates are legendary and have led many job seekers to forego poppy-seed bagels before interviews. The chances of your looking like a heavy drug user just because you consume one innocent poppy-seed bagel are slim, but why not play it safe and have a plain bagel that morning?

False-positives also result from mishandling and mislabeling of samples, as well as faulty analysis. Most reputable employers use only labs accredited by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, but the risk of human error will always be present.

If your results are positive on the first go-round, reputable labs follow up immediately with a more precise test called a GC/MS (gas chromatography/mass spectrometry assay). If that test turns out positive, you do have the right to demand another one, although you might be hard pressed to convince the prospective employer to try again. In that case, you have a decision to make about how far you want to push the matter. When they agree to allow you to undergo another test with a new sample, you will most likely have to pay the cost yourself.

As with any job search issue critical to your livelihood and reputation, you should consult an employment law specialist rather than relying solely on advice given here, as the legalities of drug testing fluctuate from state to state and change over time.

Physical exams

Very few employers require that you undergo a medical exam as a part of the pre-employment screening process. Exceptions to this rule are those jobs that are physical in nature or that involve public safety, such as for airline pilots and emergency medical technicians. If you are asked to undergo a medical exam, the human resources department of the hiring company will usually instruct you to complete the exam at a medical office or clinic of their choosing. In some states, the law requires employers to allow that you submit a report from your personal physician rather than an appointed one.

**Watch Out!**

The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of a physical or mental handicap, so if you are concerned about any health problems that might be discovered, you should find out whether they are legally classified as disabilities. Contact the ADA at 1-800-514-0301 (voice) or 1-800-514-0383 (TTY) or <http://www.ada.gov>.