

Guide to the Diplomatic Security Service Specialist Selection Processes

Special Agent
Security Engineering Officer
Security Technical Specialist
Diplomatic Courier



Diplomatic Security Service
Specialists Selection Process Guide
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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. The Diplomatic Security Specialist Selection Process	2
3. The Assessment Process	3
4. Sample Assessment Materials	9

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to familiarize candidates with the Bureau of Diplomatic Security's (DS) selection and assessment processes so that they will be able to prepare for the Assessment. While the main elements of the Diplomatic Security Assessment remain constant, information on logistical details - for example, time limits or assessment order - can change quickly. Accordingly, candidates who advance to the Assessment stage should follow the instructions provided on the day of the Assessment.

This guide outlines steps in the hiring process and provides the criteria used to evaluate candidates. It also offers some common-sense strategies candidates might use to prepare for the Assessment and includes a description of the activities during the Assessment itself. It also includes sample test materials; however, these are not the actual materials that will be used on the assessment day. Rather, they are merely examples of the types of questions that will be asked.

This guide is for the Assessment of the four Diplomatic Security Service specialties -- Diplomatic Security Service Special Agent (SA), Security Engineering Officer (SEO), Security Technical Specialist (STS), and Diplomatic Courier. Candidates should visit careers.state.gov for general information on the Foreign Service Specialist careers, as well as for details on the subsequent steps in the hiring process for those candidates who achieve a passing score in the Assessment. The careers.state.gov website also offers information on the Foreign Service Officer and other Foreign Service Specialist careers, Civil Service careers, professional fellowship opportunities, Limited Non-Career Appointments, and student/intern programs.

The Diplomatic Security Specialist Selection Process

Unlike educational testing, which focuses on mastery of knowledge, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security's employment selection process aims to identify those candidates most likely to succeed over the course of a normal career in the Foreign Service. The State Department's hiring process is highly selective with only a limited number of openings available.

The Diplomatic Security Service Specialist selection process can be lengthy. Following receipt of a candidate's application, DS Human Resources staff first review the application to verify that the applicant meets the minimum qualifications for the position, as outlined in the relevant Vacancy Announcement. The application packages which meet the advertised qualifications then move to the Qualifications Evaluation Panel (QEP). The QEP for each specialty meets on a regular basis to review each candidate's application package. An application package contains the candidate's resume, statement of interest and accomplishment questions. The QEP assigns a score to each application and scores are recorded in rank order. A certain percentage of applicants are invited to the Assessment based on their position in the rank order of final scores. The number of candidates invited to the Assessment may differ over time, depending on the State Department's budget and hiring needs.

The Assessment Process

Before the Assessment

Assessments for Special Agents are conducted in various cities throughout the United States. The other DS Specialist assessments may be conducted in a limited number of cities; however, they are most often conducted in the Washington, DC metro area. Please note that all travel expenses and arrangements are the responsibility of the applicant.

Once candidates schedule the Assessment, they should make any necessary travel and lodging arrangements, keeping in mind the following suggestions. Be rested. Candidates who are tired cannot possibly be at their best - taking the Assessment can be an intense experience, and candidates need to be alert and focused at all times during the day.

- Candidates traveling from out of town may wish to arrive at least a day in advance; candidates traveling from overseas may wish to arrive at least two days in advance of the Assessment.
- Candidates should appropriately make allowances for delayed flights, lost luggage, broken down Metro trains, stalled rush hour traffic, and taxi, Uber or Lyft drivers who can't find the assessment center.
- Candidates may want to locate the assessment center prior to the day of the assessment to make sure they are familiar with how to get there. The Assessment is a professional job interview; candidates will want to dress appropriately for the occasion. Men normally wear suit and tie; women wear the professional equivalent.

The assessment day is tightly choreographed, so it is essential to be on time and in the right location.

Assessment Summary

The invitation will specify where the Assessment will take place. Candidates must report to their assigned Assessment Center no later than the time indicated in their letter or e-mail invitation. Candidates who arrive late may be refused entry. The assessment itself will take approximately three hours for Special Agent candidates and approximately four hours for Security Engineering Officer, Security Technical Specialist, and Diplomatic Courier candidates. Candidates should plan their return trip accordingly.

The invitation to the Assessment also advises candidates what documents they need to bring to the Assessment Center. Candidates are also asked to bring the Social Security numbers and dates of birth of family members who might be traveling with them overseas. This will help to expedite the medical process for successful candidates.

The Department of State considers arrangements known as "reasonable accommodations" for candidates with disabilities. Candidates requiring reasonable accommodations for any part of the Assessment should so advise the Department at OAA@state.gov once they have received their invitation to the Assessment. Decisions for granting reasonable accommodations are made on a

case-by-case basis. Candidates must request such accommodations in advance. The Department of State will be unable to honor requests made on the day of the Assessment.

Candidates are allowed to bring coffee and/or soft drinks to the Assessment Center for use in between Assessment activities. Water will be available at the Assessment Center. There is secure space to store coats, bags, and electronic gear. Electronic gear, including cell phones, must be turned off and may not be accessed until the Assessments are completed.

The Specialist Assessment Dimensions

The dimensions listed below are the basis of the Diplomatic Security Specialist Assessment evaluation process. Assessors evaluate candidates solely on these dimensions. Candidates are encouraged to read the definitions of the dimensions carefully and to spend some time thinking about what they mean. While the definition of leadership, for example, may seem obvious, it is unlikely that the average person on the street would focus on the same aspects of leadership as those highlighted by the Department's definition.

- **Critical Thinking.** To discern what is appropriate, practical, and realistic in a given situation; to weigh relative merits of competing demands using sound judgment; to consider multiple points of view when making recommendations; to formulate creative alternatives or solutions to resolve problems; to show flexible and innovative thinking/problem solving.
- **Cultural Adaptability.** To work and communicate effectively and harmoniously with persons of other cultures, value systems, political beliefs, and economic circumstances; to recognize and respect differences in new and different cultural environments.
- **Experience and Motivation.** To demonstrate knowledge, skills or other attributes gained from previous experience of relevance to the Foreign Service; to articulate appropriate motivation for joining the Foreign Service.
- **Information Integration and Analysis.** To evaluate the importance, reliability, and usefulness of information; to absorb and retain complex information drawn from and variety of sources; to synthesize and analyze available information; to recognize patterns or trends and draw reasoned conclusions from data.
- **Leadership.** To recognize and assume responsibility for work that needs to be done; to persist in the completion of a task; to influence a group's activity or direction significantly; to motivate others to participate in the activity one is leading.
- **Negotiation.** To recognize divergent and overlapping interests; to recognize advantages and disadvantages of agreement and available options; to advocate, influence and/or persuade others using information, facts, and reasoning rather than emotion; to resolve disagreements; to maintain or develop mutually beneficial working relationships with counterparts in the process.
- **Objectivity and Integrity.** To be fair and honest to all employees and keep an open mind; to present issues frankly; to analyze facts and data effectively, without interjecting bias; to be consistent in words and actions; to be dependable.
- **Planning and Organizing.** To prioritize and order tasks effectively, to employ a systematic approach to achieving objectives, to make appropriate use of limited resources.

- **Presentation Skills.** To present fluently in a concise, grammatically correct, organized, and precise, manner; to think on one's feet, adjusting quickly to changing situations; to convey key elements and nuances of meaning accurately; to respond to others effectively; to use appropriate styles of communication to fit the audience and purpose.
- **Teamwork.** To interact in a constructive, cooperative, and harmonious manner towards a common goal; to work effectively as a team player; to establish positive relationships and gain the confidence of others; to ease tension as appropriate.
- **Written Communication.** To write concisely yet comprehensively; to use clear arguments and facts; to use correct grammar and syntax; to appropriate vocabulary to promote understanding.

A panel of three assessors will conduct the Assessment, which is designed to enable candidates to demonstrate the requisite skills and abilities listed above. The assessors include retired Foreign Service Officers, retired Diplomatic Security Service Special Agents, and active-duty Diplomatic Security Service Specialists, all of whom annually receive specialized training on how to conduct Assessments objectively by measuring the candidate's performance against an established performance standard.

The Assessment is not an adversarial process. **Candidates are not competing against other applicants for the same position; rather, they are judged on their ability to demonstrate skills necessary to be an effective Diplomatic Security Specialist.**

The Exercises Comprising the Assessment

1. The Written Test-All Specialties

Utilizing a laptop computer, candidates for all specialties will have 45 minutes to write a one-two page essay on a topic that the candidate will select from a list of questions provided on the day of the Assessment. Assessors evaluate essays based on a candidate's ability to analyze a topic and to write a concise, well-organized essay in grammatically correct English. A well-written essay will make a clear and effective argument that is easily read and understood. Assessors do not consider the opinions expressed when evaluating an essay. For Special Agent candidates, the essay will be the first exercise of the assessment day.

2. The Technical Skills Exercise - SEO and STS only

For SEO and STS candidates, the first exercise of the day will be an online, multiple choice technical skills exercise which includes questions exemplifying the type of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the job effectively. The Security Engineering Officer Technical Assessment covers various electronic and mechanical engineering questions, while the Security Technical Specialist Technical Assessment covers basic electronic and mechanical based questions and scenarios. Candidates will have an hour to complete this exercise using a Department of State laptop computer.

3. Competency Test - Diplomatic Couriers only

Candidates for Diplomatic Courier positions will begin their day with an hour-long online Competency Test which includes multiple choice questions about English expression, reading comprehension, and situational judgment.

1. The Structured Interview - All Specialties

All candidates participate individually in a Structured Interview conducted by three assessors, one of whom will be a Subject Matter Expert in that specialty. Candidates are expected to respond to questions based on their personal background, professional experience, and motivation to become a Diplomatic Security Specialist.

Candidates should be careful to respond specifically to the questions that are asked in a clear and concise manner, rather than give a response that highlights their qualities or resume but does not answer the specific question.

The interview is structured to ensure that all candidates receive the same Assessment experience. Candidates will likely find it more formal and structured than other interviews they may have experienced. Assessors will remain neutral throughout the interview and not provide any clues - including non-verbal ones- about a candidate's performance. During the Structured Interview, assessors may shuffle papers, lose eye contact, or interrupt a candidate in order to manage the time. Candidates should not assume that these actions signal anything either positive or negative.

The Structured Interview portion of the Assessment consists of three sections which together will last no more than 60 minutes. The interview encompasses a lot of material, so candidates will have only a few minutes to answer each question. The time is controlled to provide all candidates the same opportunity.

A. Experience and Motivation Interview

In this portion of the Structured Interview, candidates should convey to the assessors a clear and precise picture of themselves, including their understanding of the opportunities and challenges of a career in the Foreign Service. The assessors will consider candidates' expressed motivation to join the Foreign Service, education, and work experience. It is helpful to have some knowledge not only of the Foreign Service in general, but also of the specialty you have selected.

B. Hypothetical Scenarios

The second part of the Structured Interview consists of a series of hypothetical scenarios designed to test the candidate's situational judgment. Although the scenarios presented in this exercise are hypothetical, they are closely related to real-life situations that Diplomatic Security Specialists regularly encounter. Candidates are advised, however, that while the scenarios occur in a Foreign Service setting, they are not expected to know how an Embassy operates or to be familiar with government rules and regulations. Rather, they are asked to provide a solution that demonstrates good judgment and knowledge of their specialty.

C. Past Behavior Interview

In the final segment of the Structured Interview, the assessors ask the candidate a series of questions to which the candidate should respond with examples from their own experience. Candidates will have six minutes to select six questions they wish to discuss (one question for each dimension) and to prepare their responses based on the candidate's personal experience. During this portion of the Structured Interview, candidates should ensure that their responses relate directly to the relevant dimension and emphasize what they personally did in each situation.

Evaluating the Exercises

Each assessor scores a candidate's performance on the writing exercise and on the structured interview based on a scale of one to seven, with seven being the highest possible score. For Special Agent candidates, their score from the DSSAT is included in their overall score. For SEO, STS, and Courier candidates the scores for the online exercises are computed automatically. The combined score from all exercises determines a candidate's overall score. The cut-off score to continue a candidacy is 5.25.

Exit Interview

Following the conclusion of the Assessment, assessors will meet privately with each candidate to provide the results of the Assessment and to advise whether they reached the cut-off score that would allow their candidacy to be continued. At this time, all candidates will have an opportunity to ask general questions about the assessment process or about the Department of State. However, assessors are not permitted to provide specific feedback or critiques of the candidate's performance. Because many candidates take the Assessment more than once, individualized feedback would be considered personal coaching and would constitute an unfair advantage for those who have previously taken the Assessment.

During this exit interview, successful candidates will receive an Immediate *Conditional* Offer of Employment and a briefing on next steps in the hiring process. They will also be asked to sign an Essential Physical Requirements certification certifying their ability to meet the physical requirements of the job, as detailed in the vacancy announcement.

It is important to note, however, that passing the Assessment is not a guarantee of employment. Following the Assessment, successful candidates must undergo a thorough background investigation to receive a Top-Secret security clearance. In addition, a Suitability Review Panel will review the candidate's entire file to determine overall suitability for a Foreign Service career.

All candidates also must meet a minimum medical qualification standard that would allow for acceptance of assignments based upon the needs of the Foreign Service. For DS, this includes a supplemental medical requirement specific to Diplomatic Security Specialist positions. **For Special Agent candidates only**, once the candidate has the requisite security clearance, met the minimum

medical qualification standard, including the supplemental medical required for the specialty, and passed the suitability review; they will be scheduled to take their physical readiness test (PRT) within 45 days. Candidates who do not pass the first time will be given one additional opportunity to pass the PRT.

On meeting all pre-employment requirements, candidates will be placed on the score-based rank order register for the specialty for which they applied. Candidates may remain on this register for up to 18 months, after which the individual's candidacy will expire. A candidate's ranking on this register will fluctuate over time as other candidates are added to or drop off the register.

Candidates who are eligible for veterans' preference, or who demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language, may receive additional points and thus may increase the chances of receiving a final offer of employment.

Sample Assessment Materials

The following materials provide candidates with an idea of the kinds of questions and exercises they will encounter on the day of their Assessment. **They should be seen as illustrative only.** They are not the actual questions and exercises that will be encountered on the Assessment Day, nor do they necessarily reflect the difficulty or the length of such questions and exercises.

Written Test

1. Special Agent: As funding for federal law enforcement declines, agencies must sometimes prioritize its dwindling resources between preventive measures and enforcement. Discuss ways of how best to balance the two opposing priorities and what consequences, intended and unintended, those choices may have on the overall mission.
2. SEO: Many electronic devices, such as computers, cell phones, printers, etc., have the means to connect to the internet, some via wireless links. Discuss the security risks related to internet-capable equipment.
3. STS: Technology is changing so quickly that we are frequently using computers, software programs and other technologies that have frustrating glitches and problems. Is there a solution? Defend your answer.
4. Courier: What do you consider are the most important changes in transportation in recent years and why?

Hypothetical Questions

1. Special Agent: You are the Regional Security Officer in a developing country in which a large percentage of the population is engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. Your Foreign Service National Investigator (FSNI) informs you that a large number of local herdsman and their flocks have arrived at the gates of the embassy demanding to speak to the person in charge about the killing of several sheep by an embassy vehicle. The FSNI states that the dead sheep were good breeders and worth much money to the herdsman. They are seeking a large amount of local currency as compensation, along with a formal apology from the embassy for the incident. Describe your actions as the Regional Security Officer. How do you handle such a situation? What would you do if the crowd became unruly?
2. SEO: You are assigned overseas to a high-threat country where terror attacks are becoming more frequent. Western diplomatic personnel are most often targeted. Last week a roadside bomb exploded three miles from the Embassy, killing three. Afterwards the decision was made to move all U.S. employees into the Embassy building for safety, including you. You and your local staff, however, are still required to travel outside the Embassy compound daily to maintain and repair, if needed, essential security equipment used to monitor remote U.S. government facilities located throughout the city. What steps would you take to help ensure your safety and the safety of your staff while carrying out your important mission? How do you respond to the Ambassador?

3. STS: You are assigned a task to install the next generation of infrared cameras at your post. You are told that your post is the first to receive this next generation of cameras and that headquarters will be watching closely how smoothly or not the installation process proceeds. You quickly realize that the new cameras are of poor quality and fall far short of what the vendor advertised and what you believe is sufficient. In fact, you believe the security posture of the post will be *degraded* if the existing cameras are removed and these inferior cameras installed. What do you do to rectify the problem?

4. Diplomatic Courier: You are on a routine courier mission when, in mid-flight, the pilot informs everyone that due to a medical emergency, the aircraft will make an emergency landing at an airport in a country where you had not expected to land. Your diplomatic pouches are in the cargo hold and you do not have a visa for this country. What do you do?