

Diplomatic Security Special Agent Oral Assessment Information Guide



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Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to help familiarize candidates with the selection and assessment process so that they will be able to better focus on their own performance during the Oral Assessment rather than spend their limited time reviewing procedures. While the main elements of the Diplomatic Security Special Agent Oral Assessment (SAOA) remain constant, information on details – for example, time limits or assessment order – can change quickly. Candidates should stay alert and follow the instructions provided on the day of the Oral Assessment.

This guide includes the criteria used to evaluate candidates and some common sense strategies candidates might use to ensure they are performing their best, as well as a description of the activities during the SAOA. It also includes sample test materials to provide candidates with an idea of the kind of information and exercises candidates will be given during the oral assessment. These are not the actual materials that will be used on the assessment day, but examples of what might be used.

This guide is for the Diplomatic Security Special Agent OA only. Candidates should visit careers.state.gov for general information on a Foreign Service Specialist career, as well as details on the next steps after a successful oral assessment. The careers.state.gov website also offers information on Foreign Service Officer careers, Civil Service careers, professional fellowship opportunities, Limited Non-Career Appointments, and student/intern programs.

The Diplomatic Security Special Agent Selection Process

Congratulations on passing the online exam and the Qualifications Evaluation Panel (QEP). The Diplomatic Security Special Agent Oral Assessment process is an **employment selection tool used by the Department of State to identify the most qualified candidates for Diplomatic Security positions**. In other words, it is a hiring process. Therefore, the nature and purpose of the assessment process are different from those of educational testing.

In education, assessment focuses on “mastery testing” and the goal is to determine if the student possesses sufficient knowledge or skill to pass a course. Educational assessments, more commonly referred to as “exams,” are usually comprehensive, covering the entire body of required knowledge or skill. The scores verify current competence and command of a definite skill set. Exams are often accompanied by extensive feedback, and possibly remedial training and re-examination, with the ultimate objective of passing. It is not a competition because everyone should pass.

In **employment selection**, (the Foreign Service uses the term “assessment”), the goal is to determine which candidates are the most qualified because an organization wants to hire the most qualified candidates. For the most part, the scores measure potential job performance, rather than specific job knowledge. Thus, tests like the Oral Assessment are not accompanied by

extensive feedback because they are not meant to measure an entire body of knowledge or skills. Moreover, the organization's hiring process is meant to be highly selective given the limited number of openings available.

The Diplomatic Security Special Agent selection process can be lengthy. Candidates must undergo a thorough background investigation to determine whether they can be granted a Top Secret security clearance, obtain a class one medical clearance with a supplemental medical specific for the Special Agent position, pass a physical readiness test, and be approved by the Suitability Review Panel. Once all those conditions are met, candidates are placed on the score-based register. Basic Special Agent Classes (BSAC) are formed from those on the list with a competitive ranking.

The Oral Assessment Process

Before the Assessment

Oral Assessments are conducted in the following cities: Atlanta, GA; Boston, MA; Bridgeport, CT; Buffalo, NY; Charleston, SC; Chicago, IL; Denver, CO; Williamsburg, VA; Greensboro, NC; Houston, TX; Los Angeles, CA; Miami, FL; Minneapolis, MN; New Orleans, LA; New York City, NY metro area; Phoenix, AZ; Pittsburgh, PA; San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA and the Washington, DC area. (These sites are subject to change.) Once candidates schedule their SAOA, they should make travel and lodging plans.

- Be rested. Candidates who are tired cannot possibly be at their best – taking the SAOA 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 OA.
- Candidates should appropriately make allowances for delayed flights, lost luggage, broken down Metro trains, stalled rush hour traffic, and taxi drivers who can't find the assessment center address.
- 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 SAOA is a 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 place.

Oral Assessment Summary

Candidates must report to their assigned Assessment Center no later than the time indicated in their letter or e-mail invitation. Candidates arriving late may be refused entry to the assessment. The invitation will specify where the assessment will take place. The assessment itself may take approximately three hours for successful candidates, so candidates should plan their return trip accordingly. The message that invites candidates to the Oral Assessment also advises candidates what documents they need to bring to the Assessment Center. This list of documents can also be found on the Department of State's careers.state.gov website under the Selection Process heading. In addition to the listed documents, candidates are also asked to bring the Social Security numbers and dates of birth of family members who might be traveling with them overseas (candidates who pass the OA will need to provide this as part of next steps) – this will help the medical clearance process.

The Department of State considers arrangements known as “reasonable accommodations” to candidates with disabilities. Candidates requiring reasonable accommodations for any part of the Oral Assessment should so advise the Department at ReasonableAccommodations@state.gov within one week of receiving their invitation to the Oral Assessment. Decisions for granting reasonable accommodations are made on a case-by-case basis.

Candidates are allowed to bring coffee and/or soft drinks to the Assessment Center for use in between assessment exercises. 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. NOTE: Bags, including luggage, larger than a backpack are not allowed at the Assessment Center, so leave them at the hotel or elsewhere but do not take them with you.

The Special Agent Oral Assessment 12 Dimensions

The 12 dimensions listed below are the core of the Diplomatic Security Special Agent Oral Assessment process. Candidates are encouraged to read the definitions of the 12 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.

- **Composure.** To stay calm, poised, and effective in stressful or difficult situations; to think on one's feet, adjusting quickly to changing situations; to maintain self-control.
- **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 absorb and retain complex information drawn from a variety of sources; to draw reasoned conclusions from analysis and synthesis of available information; to evaluate the importance, reliability, and usefulness of information; to remember details of a meeting or an event without the benefit of notes.
- **Initiative and Leadership.** To recognize and assume responsibility for work that needs to be done; to persist in the completion of a task; to influence significantly a group's activity, direction or opinion; to motivate others to participate in the activity one is leading.
- **Judgment.** To discern what is appropriate, practical, and realistic in a given situation; to weigh relative merits of competing demands.
- **Objectivity and Integrity.** To be fair and honest; to avoid deceit, favoritism, and discrimination; to present issues frankly and fully, without injecting subjective bias; to work without letting personal bias prejudice actions.
- **Oral Communication.** To speak fluently in a concise, grammatically correct, organized, precise, and persuasive manner; to convey nuances of meaning accurately; to use appropriate styles of communication to fit the audience and purpose.
- **Planning and Organizing.** To prioritize and order tasks effectively, to employ a systematic approach to achieving objectives, to make appropriate use of limited resources.
- **Resourcefulness.** To formulate creative alternatives or solutions to resolve problems, to show flexibility in response to unanticipated circumstances.
- **Working With Others.** To interact in a constructive, cooperative, and harmonious manner; to work effectively as a team player; to establish positive relationships and gain the confidence of others; to use humor as appropriate.
- **Written Communication.** To write concise, well organized, grammatically correct, effective and persuasive English in a limited amount of time.

Candidates' qualifications and work experience are evaluated in the QEP process and determine who gets an invitation to the Oral Assessment. On the day of the Oral Assessment, however, candidates are evaluated solely against the 12 criteria above. Two assessors conduct the assessment which is designed to enable the candidates to demonstrate the requisite skills and abilities. Generally, the assessors include retired Foreign Service Officers and active duty and retired Diplomatic Security Special Agents who receive training from professional consultants on how to conduct assessments in an objective manner. These Subject Matter Experts also learn how to observe the candidate's performance and how to correlate the candidate's performance with an established performance standard.

The Oral 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 Special Agent.**

The Exercises in the Oral Assessment

1. The Written Test

Utilizing a computer, candidates will be given a list of topics to select from and they will have 45 minutes to write a one to two paged essay. Essays will be evaluated on a candidate's ability to analyze a topic and on the quality of writing, not on the opinions expressed. A well-written essay will be concise and well-organized. It will make a clear and effective argument that is easily read and understood. Other important elements include word choice, spelling, grammar, syntax and punctuation.

2. The Structured Interview

All candidates participate individually in a Structured Interview conducted by two assessors, one of whom will be a Subject Matter Expert. For this portion of the Oral Assessment, assessors will have reviewed portions of the candidate's application for employment so they will be familiar with the work history and information provided in the biographical section of the application. Candidates are expected to respond to questions based on their personal background, professional experience, and motivation to become a Special Agent.

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

This is a focused job interview designed to evaluate a candidate's skills. Candidates will likely find it more formal and structured than other interviews they may have experienced. They should expect assessors to remain neutral throughout the interview. They will not provide any clues – including non-verbal ones – about how candidates are doing. During the Structured Interview, assessors may interrupt a candidate, shuffle papers, or cut short answers. Candidates should not assume that this signals anything either positive or negative.

The Structured Interview portion of the assessment consists of three sections lasting approximately 65 minutes. The interview has a lot of material to cover, so candidates will have only a few minutes to answer each question. The time is controlled to give all candidates the same opportunity.

A. Experience and Motivation Interview

Dimension scored in this exercise: Experience and Motivation.

In this portion of the Structured Interview, candidates should convey to the assessors a clear and precise picture of themselves, including their understanding of a career in the Foreign Service. The assessors will consider candidates' expressed motivation to join the Foreign Service, education and work experience, and cross-cultural skills. It is helpful to have previously informed yourself about the Foreign Service in general, and also about the work related to the specialty you have selected.

B. Hypothetical Scenarios

Dimensions scored in this exercise: Planning and Organization, Working with Others, Judgment, Cultural Adaptability, Initiative and Leadership, Objectivity and Integrity, Information Integration and Analysis, and Resourcefulness.

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 regularly encountered by Special Agents. 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 fashion a solution that employs good judgment and knowledge of their specialty.

C. Past Behavior Interview

Dimensions scored in this exercise: Planning and Organization, Working with Others, Cultural Adaptability, Initiative and Leadership, Objectivity and Integrity, Oral Communication, and Composure.

In the final segment of the Structured Interview, the assessors ask the candidate five questions to which the candidate should respond with examples from his or her own experience. Candidates will be given a question sheet containing the five different dimensions being assessed during this portion of the interview, with two questions listed under each dimension. Candidates will have five minutes to select the question they wish to discuss for each dimension (one question for each dimension) and to prepare their five responses. Candidates' examples should be appropriate and drawn from their own experience. During this portion of the Structured Interview, candidates should ensure their responses relate directly to the dimension and emphasize what they did in each situation.

Evaluating the Two Exercises

Assessors read or listen to the candidate's answers carefully and individually enter their scores for the Written Test and the Structured Interview into a master score sheet. The average of the two exercises determines a candidate's overall score. The Written Test and the Structured Interview each count for one-half of the total score. Overall scoring is on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing poor performance and 7 representing outstanding performance. The Oral Assessment cut-off score to continue a candidacy is 80.

Exit Interview

After the assessors complete the score sheet, each candidate is notified in a private interview whether they have been successful in reaching or exceeding the cut-off score. Along with their final overall score, candidates receive an indication as to whether or not they reached the 80 level on the assessment.

Unsuccessful candidates are given an opportunity to ask general questions about the assessment process or future assessments. Assessors are not permitted to provide specific feedback or critiques of the candidate's performance. This would be considered personal coaching, and would constitute an unfair advantage to those who take the assessment more than once.

Those candidates who pass the Oral Assessment receive an Immediate *Conditional* Offer of Employment and are asked to sign an Essential Physical Requirements certification certifying the candidate's ability to meet the physical requirements of the job (as detailed in the vacancy announcement) in order to proceed to the next phase of the hiring process. Successful candidates are then given a briefing on the next steps in the Diplomatic Security Special Agent selection process, including information on the security background investigation, extra points for language proficiency and veteran's preference, the medical examination, suitability review, and the physical fitness test. At this point, successful candidates will meet with a Diplomatic Security representative, who will initiate the security clearance process.

Sample Oral 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 Oral 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. Under the Patriot Act, Congress authorized wiretaps by U.S. intelligence agencies of certain international communications such as telephone calls and faxes, as a tool for thwarting terrorism and international criminal activities. Should these wiretaps continue and, if so, under what circumstances?
2. Do you believe that the Guantanamo Bay detention facility should be closed and prisoners released to foreign countries or should the facility remain open indefinitely and continue its current role? Please discuss your views.

Hypothetical Questions

1. You are the sole DS Special Agent at a post in a country which is generally hostile towards the United States. At 0230 on a Sunday morning you receive a call from the Marine Security Guard on duty advising you that the local guards reported a package has just been thrown over the Consulate's perimeter fence and has rolled to within a few feet of a building which houses several personnel. She has located the package via closed circuit TV and is keeping it under observation. She advises that the package is emitting smoke and asks for your instructions. ***What do you tell her?***
2. You have just assumed your duties as the new Regional Security Officer at a small African post and are responsible for the security of the Embassy. There are two investigators assigned to your office who are nationals of the country where you are posted. The junior investigator was hired by your predecessor about a year ago. The senior investigator was opposed to his being hired due to the fact that he is a member of a different ethnic group. The junior investigator asks to speak to you privately and tells you that the senior investigator is untrustworthy, unreliable, and is accepting bribes to help unqualified applicants become embassy guards. ***What immediate actions do you take?***