

# U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

## FOREIGN SERVICE CONSULAR PROFESSIONAL ORAL ASSESSMENT STUDY GUIDE

- ✓ Composure
- ✓ Cultural Adaptability
- ✓ Experience and Motivation
- ✓ Information Integration and Analysis
- ✓ Initiative and Leadership
- ✓ Judgment
- ✓ Objectivity and Integrity
- ✓ Oral Communication
- ✓ Planning and Organizing
- ✓ Resourcefulness
- ✓ Working With Others
- ✓ Written Communication



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# Foreign Service Consular Professional Oral Assessment Information Guide

## June 2018

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***Note: This Information Guide is for all candidates who will take a Foreign Service Consular Professional Oral Assessment (FSCP OA). This includes those applying under the Consular Fellows Program (CFP) and those applying under the Appointment Eligible Family Member (AEFM) program.***

### Introduction

The purpose of this Foreign Service Consular Professional Oral Assessment (FSCP OA) Information Guide is to familiarize candidates with the selection process so that they will be able to better focus on their performance during the Oral Assessment rather than spend their limited time reviewing procedures. While the main elements of the FSCP OA remain constant, information on details – for example, time limits or sequence of exercises – 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, common sense strategies candidates might use to ensure they are performing their best, and a description of the activities during the FSCP OA day. It also includes sample test materials that represent the kind of information and exercises all candidates will be given during the oral exam.

This guide is for the FSCP OA only – other guides are available for Foreign Service candidates, such as the FSOT Information Guide, the FSOA Information Guide and the Foreign Service Specialist OA Information Guide. Candidates should check with [careers.state.gov](http://careers.state.gov) for general information on Limited Non-Career Appointments, as well as details on the next steps after a successful oral assessment. The [careers.state.gov](http://careers.state.gov) website also offers information on Foreign Service careers, Civil Service careers, professional fellowship opportunities, and student/intern programs.

### The Foreign Service Selection Process

The Foreign Service assessment process is an employment selection tool used by the Department of State to identify the most qualified candidates for Foreign Service 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. The assessments are usually comprehensive, covering the entire body of required knowledge or skill. The scores verify current competence and command of a definite skill set. Such assessments are often accompanied by extensive feedback, and possibly remedial training and reassessment, with the ultimate objective of passing. It is not a competition, because everyone should pass. In employment selection, the goal is to determine which candidates are the most qualified because an organization wants to hire the best. These assessments only sample a job-related body of knowledge or skills because assessment time is limited. The scores are predictors of future job performance, rather than indicators of current competence. Thus, tests like the oral assessment are not accompanied by extensive feedback or remedial training 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 Oral Assessment Process**

### **Before the Assessment**

Oral Assessments are generally held in Washington, DC and, budget and schedule permitting, another major city within the United States. Once a FSCP OA is scheduled, candidates should make travel and lodging plans. Following are some general tips that will help candidates perform at their best:

- Be rested. Candidates who are tired cannot possibly be at their best. Taking the FSCP OA can be a stressful experience, and candidates need to be “present” at all times during the day.
- Candidates traveling from out of town should plan to arrive at least a day in advance.
- Candidates traveling from overseas should give themselves at least two days to get over jet lag.
- Candidates should make allowances for delayed flights, lost luggage, broken down Metro trains, rush hour traffic, and taxi drivers who can’t find the test center address.
- The day prior to the test, candidates may wish to locate the test center and make sure they are familiar with how to get there.
- The FSCP OA is a job interview, so candidates will want to dress appropriately. Men normally wear suits and ties; women wear the professional equivalent.
- The test 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 invitation letter or e-mail. Candidates arriving late may be refused entry to the assessment. Consular Professional oral assessments are generally conducted in the Washington, DC area. The invitation will specify where it will take place. The assessment itself may take up to four hours for successful candidates. Candidates should plan their return trip accordingly. The e-mail 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 be found in the Department of State’s [careers.state.gov](https://careers.state.gov) website by clicking on the “Downloads” link. 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 – this will help speed the medical clearance process.

The Department of State provides provisions known as reasonable accommodations to candidates with disabilities. Candidates requiring reasonable accommodations for any part of the Oral Assessment must advise the Department at [ReasonableAccommodations@state.gov](mailto: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 snacks, sandwiches, coffee and/or soft drinks to the Assessment Center for use in between assessment exercises. Individuals might wish to bring reading materials to pass the time between exercises. Water will be available at the Assessment Center. There is secure space to store coats, purses, and electronic gear.

*NOTE: Bags, including luggage, larger than a backpack are not allowed at the Assessment Center, and should be left at the hotel or elsewhere, not brought to the Center.*

**The Consular Professional Oral Assessment measures the following 12 dimensions:**

- **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.

The 12 dimensions are the core of the Foreign Service 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 in the street would focus on the same aspects of leadership as those highlighted by the Department's definition.

Candidates are evaluated against these criteria by two assessors who observe the performance of candidates in a variety of situations designed to enable the candidates to demonstrate the requisite skills. Generally the assessors are Foreign Service Officers, at least one of whom has proficiency in consular work. Assessors receive training on how to conduct assessments in an objective manner. They 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 but are judged on their capacity to demonstrate skills and abilities necessary to be an effective Foreign Service Consular Professional.

## **The Oral Assessment for Consular Professionals**

When candidates arrive for an oral assessment, they will be asked to fill out several forms, including a Non-Disclosure Agreement and Conditions of Employment in the Foreign Service. By signing the Non-Disclosure Agreement, candidates agree that they will not discuss the content of the assessment with anyone. This ensures that future assessments are fair for all candidates.

Consular Fellows are hired via limited non-career appointments (LNAs). The Consular Fellows program is not an alternate entry method to the Foreign Service or the U.S. Department of State, i.e., this service does not lead to onward employment at the U.S. Department of State or with the U.S. government. Consular Fellows are welcome to apply to become Foreign Service Specialists, Foreign Service Generalists, or Civil Service employees, but they must complete the standard application and assessment processes. The complete list of the Conditions of Employment for Consular Fellows is available online in the Downloads section of the Department of State's [careers.state.gov](https://careers.state.gov) website.

Next candidates will take the two elements of the assessment listed below, in the order in which they are listed.

### **1. Case Management**

#### **Dimensions scored in this exercise: Planning and Organization, Working with Others, Judgment, Information Integration and Analysis, Resourcefulness, and Written Communication**

In the first part of the Oral Assessment, candidates are given a scenario describing issues which may typically arise in the Consular Professional context. They have 45 minutes to read several realistic problems, analyze them, develop recommendations, and then write a logical and clear 1-2 page memo to their supervisor summarizing the situation and providing solutions to the problems identified. Candidates do not need to know U.S. Government or State Department rules and regulations – they should rely on their own knowledge and experience. The timing of this exercise is deliberately tight, as the Written Communication dimension measures, among other things, how well a candidate writes under time pressure. All writing exercises are done on a computer using Microsoft Word.

See page 11 for sample Case Management questions.

### **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 proficient in the consular field. 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, experience, and motivation. Candidates should be careful to respond to the questions that are asked, rather than give a response that highlights their qualities or resume 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 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 60 minutes. The interview has a lot of ground to cover, so candidates have only a few minutes to answer each question. The time is controlled to give all candidates the same experience.

#### 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 examiners a clear and precise picture of themselves, including their understanding of the Foreign Service. The assessors will consider candidates' expressed motivation to work as a Consular Professional, education and work experience and cross-cultural skills. It is helpful to have previously become informed about the Foreign Service in general, and also about the type of work performed by Consular Professionals.

#### 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 problems presented in this exercise are hypothetical, they are closely related to real-life situations regularly encountered by Foreign Service Consular Professionals overseas. Candidates are advised, however, that, while the problems 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 field.

See page 14 for sample hypothetical questions.

#### 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 a series of questions to which the candidate should respond with examples from his or her own experience. Candidates will be given a question sheet containing the 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 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, even if the work was done in a group.

### **Evaluating the Exercises**

Assessors read or listen to the candidate's answers carefully and individually enter their scores for the Case Management exercise and the Structured Interview into a master score sheet. The score for the Online Competency Exam/Consular Fellows Program Test is automatically computed and entered into the master score sheet. The average of the three exercises determines a candidate's overall score. The Online Competency Exam/Consular Fellows Program Test, Structured Interview, and Case Management Study each count for one-third 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 to continue a candidacy is 5.25.

### **3. Exit Interviews**

After the assessors complete the integration of their scores, they notify candidates whether they have been successful in reaching the cut-off score for the oral assessment. Along with their final overall score, candidates learn whether they reached or exceeded the cut off on any of the three major components of the oral assessment.

Successful candidates receive a briefing on the next steps in the Foreign Service Consular Professional selection process, including information on the security background investigation, veteran's preference points, the medical examination, and suitability review. Candidates are also given the opportunity to ask questions about Foreign Service life. Following this interview, candidates will meet individually with a Diplomatic Security representative to begin their background investigations.

Candidates who did not pass are informed of their oral assessment results in a private interview with two assessors. At this point, the candidate is given an opportunity to ask general questions about the assessment process or future exams. Assessors are not permitted to provide specific feedback or critiques of the candidate's performance, as this would be considered personal coaching, and would constitute an unfair advantage for those who take the exam more than once.

### **Sample Oral Assessment exercises**

The material listed below is meant to illustrate the types of questions a candidate may encounter during the oral assessment. The actual questions on the day of the assessment will be different.

#### ***Case Management***

**Situation:** When you arrive at your new post, your supervisor asks for your opinions and recommendations for how to address a number of current problems because you have a "fresh perspective." Here are the three main problems your supervisor wants you to address.

1. Your supervisor recently read an article that showed how another embassy saved substantial amounts of time and money by outsourcing its fingerprinting of visa applicants. He realizes you have no knowledge of fingerprinting, but he asks you for a plan to examine the feasibility of outsourcing the process for your embassy.

2. Your supervisor believes that the local and American employees in the Visa Unit have formed their own cliques. There is little interaction between these groups at lunch time or after hours. Your supervisor thinks this is affecting office morale and productivity, and wants some ideas on how to improve the situation.
3. The Visa Unit has always closed down at noon for lunch and re-opened at 1:00 pm. Your supervisor wants the unit open all day and asks for your suggestions on how to manage this. The employees who staff the unit strongly prefer this schedule and will be resistant to change.

**Your Task:** Your supervisor wants you to draft a plan of action, 1-2 pages long (single-spaced), outlining your recommendations to address each problem.

**You should use a normal paragraph narrative format, but you may include some ticks and bullets.**

### ***Structured Interview – Hypothetical Questions***

- You are a Consular Professional in the Visa Unit of a medium-size embassy and you have formed very good relationships with the Locally Employed Staff. You soon learn that many of them believe that you have influence over your supervisor's decisions on office matters, and they have begun to raise their office-related problems and requests with you during social events such as shopping trips or community picnics. How do you respond to these approaches?
- You have been doing visa interviews at post for a few months and have heard that local visa brokers have created files on all interviewing officers that they sell to visa applicants. You start to notice that people waiting in line for an interview suddenly decide to use the rest room when they are about to be called up to the window of a visa officer you hear has a broker file that says she is very tough. One day, an applicant pushes the person behind her to the front of the line to avoid the tough visa officer, and this applicant then appears at your visa window. What do you do?