

Guide to the Diplomatic Security Specialist Selection Processes

Diplomatic Security Special Agent

Security Engineering Officer

Security Technical Specialist

Diplomatic Courier



Diplomatic Security Specialists

Selection Process 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 Oral Assessment (OA) 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 OA. 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 OA for the four Diplomatic Security specialties -- Diplomatic Security Special Agent (SA), Security Engineering Officer (SEO), Security Technical Specialist (STS), and Diplomatic Courier. 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 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

The Diplomatic Security Specialist selection process, including the Qualifications Evaluation Panel (QEP) and Oral Assessment, is an **employment selection tool used by the Department of State to identify the most qualified candidates for Diplomatic Security Foreign Service positions**. It is a hiring process and 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 Specialist 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 that includes a supplemental medical specific to the position, and be approved by the Suitability Review Panel. Candidates for Special Agent positions must also pass a physical readiness test. Once all these conditions are met, candidates are placed on the score-based register.

The Oral Assessment Process

Before the Assessment

Oral 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 locations, however they are generally conducted in the Washington, DC metro area. Once candidates schedule their OA, they should make travel and lodging plans. Please note that all travel expenses are the responsibility of the applicant.

- Be rested. Candidates who are tired cannot possibly be at their best – taking the OA 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/Uber/Lyft 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 OA 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 Special Agent and Diplomatic Courier candidates and approximately four hours for Security Engineering Officer and Security Technical Specialist candidates. 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 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 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 please leave them at the hotel or elsewhere but do not bring them with you.

The Specialist Oral Assessment 12 Dimensions

The 12 dimensions listed below are the core of the Diplomatic Security Specialist 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 this process will determine who receives 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, retired Diplomatic Security Special Agents, and active duty Diplomatic Security Specialists who receive training 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 Specialist.**

The Exercises in the Oral Assessment

1. The Written Test - All Specialties

Utilizing a computer, candidates will be given a list of topics to select from and they will have 45 minutes to write a 1-2 page 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 Technical Skills Exercise - SEO and STS only

Utilizing a computer-based program, candidates are given an assessment of multiple choice questions exemplifying the type of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to effectively perform the job. The Security Engineering Officer Technical Assessment consists of multiple choice questions covering various electronic and mechanical engineering questions, while the Security Technical Specialist Technical Assessment consists of multiple choice questions covering basic electronic and mechanical based questions and scenarios.

3. The Structured Interview - All Specialties

All candidates participate individually in a Structured Interview conducted by two assessors, one of whom will be a Subject Matter Expert in that specialty. 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 Diplomatic Security Specialist.

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 assessment 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 provide 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 Diplomatic Security Specialists. 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 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. For SEO and STS candidates, the Technical Exercise score is computed automatically. The combined score from all exercises determines a candidate's overall 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 5.25.

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 5.25 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.

Candidates who pass the Oral Assessment will 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 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 (for SAs only).

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. Special Agent: A number of states have decriminalized certain marijuana possession violations, allowing for personal use and the establishment of retail stores. Given this new reality, do you believe that there are professions or types of work for which any kind of marijuana use should be prohibited? Why or why not?
2. SEO: Describe how clearance procedures currently in effect at airports and important buildings might be improved to better screen persons as well as vehicles and packages.
3. STS: Technicians are essential for production, research and development activities. Employers hire technicians to provide repair services in technology and manufacturing, and to install and maintain products. Please describe what you've learned from your past technical jobs and give an example that shows how you applied your skills to solve a problem.
4. Courier: What do you think is the role of the U.S. Department of State? Based upon that role, what are some of the major functions of the State Department. Also, what is your understanding of the purpose of an Embassy or Consulate? Specifically, what are embassies and consulates doing in countries around the world. How does the Diplomatic Courier Service contribute to that role and to those purposes?

Hypothetical Questions

1. Special Agent: As a first-tour RSO at a 3rd World Post, you are quickly absorbed into the rapid pace of overseas life and the need for you to work extended hours in order to keep up with the demands of your assignment. Explain how you would prioritize your responsibilities and why to both Post Management and your family in these crucial opening months and why it is vital to establish a comprehensive strategy early on to ensure your overall success.
2. SEO: Ambassador's Request for HDTV – The Ambassador at your post wants an HDTV, digital video recorder and tuner purchased on the local economy and placed in his office for news broadcasts. He wants the system connected via cable to the satellite dish located on the roof of the building next door that houses the Public Affairs Section of the Embassy. You are aware that, by Department of State security regulations, installations of this type are not permitted. Can you identify the security risks that may be present if you were to comply with the

Ambassador's request? What will you tell the Ambassador? Is there any way to comply with his request without violating department security regulations?

3. STS: You are in an electronics laboratory and have at your disposal all the test equipment and spare parts you might need to troubleshoot and repair an AM/FM broadcast band receiver. You have been given a receiver and told only that it doesn't work. What are the first three steps you would take to determine the trouble? What kind of test equipment would you select to repair the receiver?

4. Courier: You are a Diplomatic Courier who has just arrived at a foreign airport of an underdeveloped country. You are delivering a sealed Diplomatic Pouch to the Embassy. At Customs control an official of the host government asks you to open your pouch for inspection. You know this is a violation of the Vienna Convention. What do you do?