

## **Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests**

By Lieutenant Raymond E. Foster, LAPD (ret.), MPA

You can increase your score on almost any multiple choice test by employing five simple "tactics for test taking." In fact, it is likely that you could increase your final score by between five and ten percentage points by using these test taking tactics! That means if you studied enough to score eighty, these tactics can get you a score of eighty-five or ninety.

These tactics aren't about studying (a subject of later articles), they are about actually taking a test. You wouldn't approach a robbery-in-progress, burglary or traffic stop without a plan. The same is true for civil service examinations. Like any other tactical problem, the more you know about the problem, the more planning you can do. The first task is to understand a little more about the nature of the problem – civil service multiple choice tests.

Multiple choice tests are not designed to find the most qualified person. Generally, the purpose of a multiple choice test in the civil service arena is to narrow the candidate pool. It is like a big funnel. Anyone can walk in the front door or the wide part of the funnel. The test narrows the passage way, only the people who score high spill out the other end. I suppose that the remainder swirl in the vortex of "what might have been."

Nearly all civil service tests have the purpose of establishing minimum qualifications to proceed to the next phase – generally an interview. This can mean two things. First, the test means that you must score at least a minimum passing grade on the test in order to move forward and the your score on the test does not figure into your final score (your position on the promotional list). A second configuration is more common –

## **Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests**

not only do you need the minimum to proceed, but your score on the multiple choice test is a percentage of your final grade. The percentage varies from agency to agency, and test to test within agencies. The bottom line is – if your score on the multiple choice test is a percentage of your overall grade, you can improve your position on the list by doing well on the test.

Most multiple choice questions consist of the question and four potential answers. Having participated in the writing of two detective tests for a major metropolitan police agency, I know how test writers get and design the test questions. A good test writer takes the questions directly from the source material. In other words, if your Department has a manual, the questions (including the exact wording, come from your manual). This is done to limit protests. If the exact wording of a question (and ultimately the most correct answer) comes from a written source that was made available to you before the test, your chances of successfully challenging the question and answer is fairly slim. Moreover, scenario based questions, particularly legal questions, are taken from published sources such as the California Peace Officer's Legal Source book. Generally, your organization will publish a test bibliography. This bibliography is the source of the questions

The test writer starts with the question and the correct answer, then comes up with an alternative answer that is clearly not the correct answer. The writer next comes up with three alternatives that are designed to distract you from the correct answer. The reason they design tests in this manner has to do with establishing the validity of the test (something we really don't need to explore). We do need to look a little further at how incorrect answers are designed.

## **Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests**

The first type of wrong answer (let's say answer A) is written to look correct, but it is incomplete or contains an important detail that is incorrect. The second wrong answer (say B) is often written to look a lot like answer A. In other words, it is a similar answer, but contains other incorrect or incomplete information. The third type of wrong answer (say C) is clearly different from A or B. In other words, it stands out from A and B because it is so different. The correct answer, in this scenario D, probably looks similar to A and B. Confused? That is the point. The choices are designed to confuse the test taker. This leads to the first tactic.

Multiple choice tests would be easier if you could bring the source material with you. It would be very cool (but not too efficient) to look up the answers when you come across certain questions. However, when you approach that robbery-in-progress, do you refer to the tactics manual? No, because you have the information in your head. It is the same with tests. If you have studied, you have the information in your head. Part of the problem is that when you are under pressure to answer specific question, your mind vapor locks, the questions confuse you (as they are intended to do) or you simply forget. So, the first thing you are going to do when the test starts is a "data dump."

The data dump is simply emptying your head of key information you memorized while studying. Most of the time, you are provided with a scratch sheets of paper. If you are not, you need to ask if you can write on the test booklet (not the answer sheet!). If the test proctor has given you scratch paper, or you can write on the book, you can write anything you want. In future newsletters, when we look at what and how to study we will identify key tactics and areas to study. For now, let's presume you have studied.

## Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests

Like most of us, you probably invented or were told cute acronyms to help you recall information. For instance, in California, the Standard Emergency Management System/Incident Command Post system has five basic management functions. They are Command, Operations, Planning, Logistics and Administration (COPLA). Pretty easy to remember – unless you are under the pressure of a test and the four answers are:

- A. Operations, Communications, Planning, Logistics and Administration.
- B. Operations, Communications, Planning, Logistics and Analysis.
- C. Operations, Command, Planning, Logistics and Administration.
- D. Operations, Command, Personnel, Liaison and Analysis.

How many of you looked back at the acronym? This question could easily confuse you unless you had completed the data dump and written out your acronym. You can bring the information in your head into the test! If allowed (and most do), write out your top 20 test helpers (a tactic we will look at in the next newsletter) and design your crib sheet before you start!

The second tactic has to do with how you read the question. Read each question four times before you look at the answers. The first time silently mouth each word and point to the word on the test with your finger. This will help you not miss important words or details. The second time you read the question slowly read it, word for word, mouthing each word. The third time you read the question – underline important features. Every sentence must have a noun. Where is the noun? Finding the noun will help you understand the subject of the question. Underline the noun! Find modifiers – words like never, not and only. Underline those words. On your fourth read of the question – read it to comprehend. What is the test writer asking you? Remember, in any

## **Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests**

tactical situation – time, distance and information are your allies. Take your time and gather all of the information from the question. You wouldn't go to a robbery-in-progress call without listening to all the information from dispatch – don't make the tactical mistake of rushing into the question or failing to gather all information.

Now that you have read the question so that you understand it, we can begin to employ our third tactic and actually answer the question. The potential answers are designed to distract you and confuse you. How many times have you looked at the answers and only been more uncertain? Before you read the question, cover the answers with your hand or a sheet of paper. When you are reading the question – do not, under any circumstances, look at the answers. Once you have read and understood the question – answer it in your own mind. What is the answer that you would have written? After you have formulated your answer, uncover the test writer's answers and look for the one that agrees with you! This tactic changes the nature of the test. It minimizes the probability that the test writer will distract you from the correct answer. If you studied, you will know the answer!

Our fourth tactic is very simple and straightforward. Be careful! You know that in the street, it is the basic stuff that keeps cops alive. You don't park in front of the radio call, you don't stand in front of doors, and you keep you gun leg back when interviewing suspects. If you violate a simple rule in the street, you could get hurt. Most of the time, if you were to stand in front of a door, nothing would happen. It is that one time you make a simple mistake that could cost you. It is the same with the test.

As you answer the questions circle the correct answer on the test booklet. Then, as you mark the answer sheet, darken in the bubble and look at what you have circled.

## Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests

Say to yourself, for instance, 1A and as you darken in the bubble, repeat 1A. Then, as you progress, 2C – 2C, 3A – 3A and so on. The point is to make sure you don't mark the wrong line or wrong bubble. You can lose a point or the whole test, by being on the wrong line or marking the wrong bubble. Be careful, take your time. Remember, time is your tactical friend. While your time is limited, this tactic takes a second or two.

Our fifth and last tactic has to do with gambling. There are going to be some questions where you do not know the answer! Despite your data dump, careful reading and covering the answers – you just don't know. You are going to have to employ WAG or Wild Ass Guess. This tactic presumes that your test is score based upon the total correct answers and that you are not given a penalty for wrong answers. You must research what type of test you are taking. For instance, some tests give you three points for a right answer and take one point from your total if you answer incorrectly. Test writers use this to prevent you from employing WAG. If your test penalizes you for a wrong answer – Don't WAG! However, most civil service tests do not penalize you for an incorrect answer. But, before you WAG let's see if we can improve your odds.

Presume that on a hundred-question test you have correctly answered 90 questions. You have ten that you do not know the correct answer. When I come across a question that I do not know, I circle the entire question in the booklet and then mark any number on the answer sheet. The questions I have circled in the booklet are the ones I am going to come back to when I have finished the entire test.

Nearly everyone has heard the urban myth that says when you don't know the correct answer, choose C. Well, if you employ some statistical research (I will not bore you with central tendency, probability theories and distribution), you will find out that C

## Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests

is just as likely as A, B or D. But, if you have ten questions left and each question has four possible combinations – there are 1,048, 576 potential solutions. With over a million possible solutions to the ten questions, you are really gambling. And, even though the central tendency of potential correct answers means you should have a one in four chance of guessing right, the central tendency also means there is a distribution – or people who will guess no right answers and people who will guess all right answers. Again, that is gambling.

If you can go back over those ten questions and eliminate one answer from each. Find one that is clearly wrong – the number of potential combinations drops from 1,048,576 to 59,049. In other words, if you can eliminate at least one wrong answer, your WAG improves significantly. And, if you can eliminate two wrong answers, the potential combinations drop to 1,024. Now, you are gambling on the houses money! And, your WAG has a 50/50 chance.

In an effort to eliminate incorrect answers and improve your WAG, re-read the question slowly and see if you missed something. Next, ask yourself with each potential answer – What would be the practical outcome of the answer? In other words, if you did it in the street or station like the answer suggests – what would happen? Can you spot negative outcomes? Often, you can find at least one that is clearly wrong. Even finding one, improves your WAG and probably your overall score. For instance –

Question: Which Constitutional Amendment is the foundation for an officer's use of deadly force?

- A. Second
- B. Fourth

## Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests

- C. Fifth
- D. Fourteenth

This was an actual question. After thinking it through, I eliminated the Fourteenth Amendment because it was not one of the original ten. The Fourteen Amendment is Post-Civil War and I figured that cops were using deadly force long before the end of the civil war. Looking at the Second Amendment, it is the “right to bear arms.” But, as I recall, nothing in the Amendment says you can actually use them. I figured that was the test writer’s “red herring.” By crossing those two out, we are left with two choices. The Fifth Amendment is about self-incrimination and trials while the Fourth Amendment is the foundation for search and seizure. Ah, it dawned on me - the government’s ability to search and seize would be moot without the ability to enforce compliance, hence the use of deadly force. The correct answer.

The point is that you may be able to cipher out the correct answer. At the very least, you can discard incorrect answers by concentrating on the consequences of the questions and ultimately improve your WAG. Those are the five basic tactics (there is some advanced stuff – but that’s for later). Of course, nothing replaces applying yourself and studying. However, studying can be more focused with five my five study tactics – the subject of our next newsletter. In the meantime, forward this newsletter onto your partners.

### About the Author

Lieutenant Raymond E. Foster retired from the Los Angeles Police Department after 24 years of service. He is the author of “Police Technology (Prentice Hall, July 2004) and number articles on technology, leadership, terrorism and policing. Raymond is a part-time

## **Five Tactics for Civil Service Multiple Choice Tests**

lecture at California State University, Fullerton and a part-time faculty advisor at the Union Institute and University. He has three current book projects. They are on terrorism, policing and leadership.

Raymond's complete CV can be viewed at [www.hitechcj.com/id55.html](http://www.hitechcj.com/id55.html) and he can be reached by email at <mailto:raymond@hitechcj.com>.