

FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER ORAL ASSESSMENT – Strategy for Success

OVERVIEW

The Oral Assessment is the second component of the application process for the United States Foreign Service officer positions. In order to be eligible for the examination, applicants must first pass the Written Examination offered by the United States Department of State three times annually. If an applicant passes the written examination and oral assessment, then a security background investigation and medical examination are administered as the final steps toward becoming a Foreign Service Officer. Additional information regarding the application process can be obtained from the State Department's website at www.careers.state.gov.

The Foreign Service Oral Assessment is a day-long series of exercises that tests for the skills, abilities, and personal qualities deemed essential to the performance of Foreign Service work. The Oral Assessment has been revised to include management case studies, which reflects the growing importance the State Department places on resource management and quantitative analysis. The Oral Assessment is an examination, not a job interview, for selection as an entry level Foreign Service Officer.

As outlined in the *Oral Assessment Information Guide*

(<https://careers.state.gov/uploads/1d/51/1d51274caa589decdc407d7341861320/FSO-OA-Information-guide-December-2015.pdf>), the Oral Assessment measures the following 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 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.
- **Quantitative Analysis.** To identify, compile, analyze, and draw correct conclusions from pertinent data; to recognize patterns or trends in numerical data; to perform simple mathematical operations.
- **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 are evaluated solely against these criteria by four assessors who observe the performance of candidates in a variety of situations designed to enable the candidates to demonstrate the requisite skills. The assessors are Foreign Service Officers from various career tracks with a wide variety of experience in the geographic and functional Bureaus of the Department. Assessors are trained to conduct assessments in an objective manner in which the candidate's performance is observed and where the candidate's score correlates to an established performance standard.

The Oral Assessment is not an adversarial process. Candidates do not compete against one another, but instead are judged on their capacity to demonstrate the skills and abilities necessary to be an effective Foreign Service Officer.

The Oral Assessment

1. The Group Exercise

Preparations

For the first exercise of the day, candidates are brought together in a group of four to six to comprise an Embassy task force charged with allocating resources to competing projects in their host country. Each candidate receives a package of common background materials, as well as a five-page candidate specific project to read and absorb (30 minutes). At the end of that time, each candidate will present his or her project to the group. Candidates may take notes at any time.

B. Hypothetical Scenarios

The second assessment module in the Structured Interview consists of a series of hypothetical scenarios designed to test the candidate's situational judgment.

Assessors will give the candidate a brief scenario to read that provides information about the country and the candidate's position in the embassy, setting the scene for the hypothetical situation. Assessors' questions test the candidate's interpersonal skills, problem-solving abilities, initiative, objectivity, judgment, planning and organizing skills, composure, and cultural adaptability. Although the problems presented in this exercise are hypothetical, they are closely related to real-life situations regularly encountered by Foreign Service Officers overseas. Candidates are advised, however, that, while the problems occur in a Foreign Service setting, candidates are not expected to know how an embassy operates or to be familiar with government rules and regulations. They are asked to fashion a solution that employs good judgment and common sense.

The hypothetical scenarios challenge candidates to think quickly. Assessors look for a candidate who can organize for action, take responsibility, and respond to new situations creatively and effectively. While there is no single right or correct answer, a strong candidate will demonstrate mature thinking, recognize alternative approaches, and consider both the long- and short-term consequences of responses.

Sample Hypothetical Exercises

Earthquake Scenario

You are working in a small embassy in a developing tropical island country. Relations with the United States have been strained for some time, although the island is visited by increasing numbers of American tourists lured by its beautiful beaches, national parks and wildlife, and interesting archaeological sites. The island has experienced numerous tremors recently and ten years ago suffered a major earthquake, which destroyed the port and much of the capital city.

You have been at this embassy for almost two years and are looking forward to moving on to your next post.

When you first arrived at post, you worked in the consular section, which is responsible for assisting American citizens in distress and for issuing visas to host country nationals wishing to visit the United States. You then rotated for a stint in the management section, responsible for maintenance and upkeep of staff housing. You supervised the local Foreign Service National (FSN) staff charged with maintaining the embassy buildings and grounds. This past six months you have been working as the ambassador's aide, which required you to move to an apartment three blocks from the embassy.

On a Saturday afternoon the communications officer has called you in to the embassy for an urgent incoming telegram that needs immediate action. As you enter the embassy gate, you see two FSNs enter the building. Walking toward the building, you feel a sudden jolt and immediately realize you are in the middle of an earthquake. You have difficulty standing, and see windows in the embassy shatter. Then the earthquake ends.

What do you do?

(Possible responses: If appears safe, check on the FSN staff and help as needed; determine cable contents; inform ambassador and Washington; inform and motivate staff to take appropriate actions including finding out how much damage employee residences sustained; make sure someone checks on resident American citizens and American tourists.)

The earthquake has knocked out electricity all over the city. Because of your in-country experience, the ambassador has asked you to lead the embassy's crisis response center. The city's only hospital requests fuel oil for its emergency generators, which will run out in a day. The embassy stocks emergency fuel oil to keep all embassy functions, including communications with the State Department, going continually for three days.

What do you do?

(Possible responses: Determine exact embassy needs; seek alternate fuel sources; consult colleagues/staff on reducing fuel use; consult host government regarding hospital needs; consider establishing limited hours for communication operations; determine when embassy fuel can be replenished.)

The earthquake hit residential areas hard, and many embassy officers and FSNs lack shelter. Building materials are scarce and the airport is temporarily closed. A local nightclub owner, known for his flashy life-style, offers building materials and labor to the embassy. The security office's head FSN reports that the businessman is rumored to be engaged in drug smuggling and strongly urges you to decline this offer. **What do you do?**

(Possible responses: Discuss offer with colleagues; determine facts in case, excluding hearsay; weigh only proven cons against pros of needed help; seek other sources of supply, including from United States embassies in neighboring countries; seek other housing options; contact the United States military to determine if they can transport portable housing units or building materials by ship or helicopter.)

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 his or her own experience. The questions are designed to assess a range of dimensions determined through a documented job analysis that are key to successful performance as a Foreign Service Officer.

3. Case Management

The third part of the Oral Assessment is the 90-minute Case Management Exercise. The purpose of this segment is to evaluate the candidate's management skills, interpersonal skills and quantitative ability. Writing concise, correct, and persuasive English is also important in this exercise. This exercise is indicative of the candidate's ability to integrate and analyze information, to interpret quantitative data, and to display sound judgment. The candidate will be asked to incorporate data and other statistical information in the analysis and recommended solutions.

The candidate is given a memo describing the tasks to complete and a variety of information about the central issue, including a summary of the major issues (from the candidate's supervisor), an organizational chart, e-mail messages from a host of different perspectives at different levels in the embassy and details about the past performance of the staff. A calculator is not needed in reviewing the quantitative data, but these data must be incorporated in the analysis and recommendations.

The candidate may want to spend 30 minutes reading and analyzing the material, 45 minutes writing the required memo, and 15 minutes reviewing and revising.

Sample Exercise

You are the newly arrived Supervisory General Services Officer at a medium-sized embassy in a country with few amenities. General Services Officers are responsible for the embassy's logistics operations: leasing, maintenance, transportation, procurement, management and inventory of property, and the like. Your supervisor, the Management Officer, Steve Hansen, is out of the office, and has left you a memorandum, indicating that a file on the top of your desk should be your number one priority. His memorandum indicates that a conflict has developed between your deputy, Sharon Smith, who has recently arrived on her first tour, and the Junior Officer in the consular section, Mitch Stevens. The maintenance chief, Peter, a local national who reports to Sharon, is also involved. There are no other American personnel in the section; Sharon is responsible for leasing, maintenance, and property inventories, while you are responsible for procurement, transportation, and overall management of the section. The Management Officer instructs you to draft for his consideration a two-page memo that presents the facts and offers recommendations on how to resolve the issue, including at least one alternative.

You review the file in front of you. It contains:

1. An exchange of e-mails between Sharon and Mitch: Mitch complains that the work orders for repairs at his residence are not being completed to his satisfaction; he has received no follow-up information. Sharon responds that many of his requests are not appropriate use of the embassy's limited maintenance staff. Mitch responds that this was never a problem under Sharon's predecessor, and furthermore, that he himself, as a General Services Officer on his previous tour, allowed such practices and certainly knows the regulations at least as well as Sharon. She in turn retorts that Mitch's personal friendship with her predecessor resulted in favoritism that should never have happened in the first place. Mitch in turn alleges that Sharon must bear a personal grudge against him, apparently because he was recently tenured (while she was not).
2. A memorandum from Mitch's supervisor to the Management Officer, complaining that the maintenance section's failure to handle Mitch's household repairs is having an unsatisfactory effect on his work in the Consular Section, and referring to an incident the previous Friday evening at the Marine House, in which Sharon and Mitch apparently resorted to name-calling after a few beers. The Consular Officer also suggests that, since Sharon's arrival, embassy morale has suffered considerably; she is known as "the lady who can only say 'no.'"
3. Mitch's work orders, as follows:
 - Repair torn window-screen in kitchen: marked "Low Priority" by Sharon, with the notation that this is the third time in two years that this particular screen has been torn and is in need of replacement.
 - Repair motorcycle: marked "Not approved" by Sharon, with the notation that this is Mitch's personal property and should not be repaired using United States government funds or personnel.
 - Build tool shed in back yard: marked "Not approved" by Sharon, with the notation that there is ample space for tools in the garage, but this space is being used by Mitch's two motorcycles instead.
 - Replace draperies throughout the house: marked "Defer" by Sharon, with the notation that the draperies were all changed upon Mitch's arrival eighteen months ago, and that they are changed only once per occupant, regardless of the circumstances.
 - Replace living room carpet: marked "Approved" by Sharon, with the notation that carpet cannot be purchased at the present time because the embassy has no funds for the procurement of furniture and furnishings.

4. A memorandum from Peter, the local maintenance chief, to Sharon, cc: Steve, indicating his discomfort with Sharon's new policy of disapproving so many work orders. He says he has been with the embassy for 15 years, and has always provided quality and courteous service to the American staff, at both their homes and offices, and indicates he has a large, able staff of workmen ready to be of service. He is concerned about the effect that the new policy is having on embassy morale, and in particular on the relations between his section and the American staff.

Activity	Annual Budget	Expended to Date	Remaining
Local Salaries	\$450,000	\$230,000	\$220,000
Overtime	\$10,000	\$95,000	-\$85,000
Benefits	\$100,000	\$52,000	\$48,000
Awards	\$8,000	\$10,000	-\$2,000
Supplies	\$500,000	\$355,000	\$145,000
Utilities	\$675,000	\$455,000	\$225,000
Furniture and Furnishings	\$250,000	\$200,000	\$50,000
Equipment	\$75,000	\$95,000	-\$20,000
Travel	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$0
Transportation	\$100,000	\$85,000	\$15,000
Fuel	\$145,000	\$100,000	\$45,000

6) A statistical summary of work orders for past month, as follows:

DATE	REQUESTOR	WORK REQUESTED	STATUS
3/16	Stevens	Repair torn screen	Deferred
3/19	Johnson	Repair a/c	Completed
3/19	Berman	Paint kitchen	Scheduled
3/20	Jones	Replace stove	Deferred
3/21	Stevens	Repair motorcycle	Not approved
3/22	Cass	Repair refrigerator	Completed
3/23	Stevens	Build tool shed	Not approved
3/29	Haskell	Fix drain	Completed
3/30	Stevens	Fix loose tiles in kitchen	Deferred
4/1	Echeverria	Pest control (ants)	Scheduled
4/2	Hadley	Repair a/c	Completed
4/2	Haskell	Fix drain (again)	Completed
4/3	Stevens	Replace LR carpet	Approved
4/3	Sanchez	Repair a/c	Scheduled
<p>Approved/Completed 5; 36% Approved/Scheduled 3; 21% Approved/Not Scheduled 1; 7% Approved/Deferred 3; 21% Not Approved 2; 14%</p>			

Questions:

1. Summarize the situation

Suggested reply:

Sharon feels that Mitch's requests are frivolous. His friendship with her predecessor allowed his every wish to be granted (bankrupting the section's overtime and supply budgets), and -- his previous tour as a General Services Officer aside -- he now needs a reality check. Mitch, in turn, feels Sharon is being dismissive of requests that are legitimate in the local hardship environment, inconsistent with past precedent, and disrespectful of his own self-acknowledged expertise in her area. Mitch's requests constitute a third of all those made in the past month, and the only ones not approved.

Mitch's requests are not critical, even in a hardship environment; he has probably been getting by with more than he deserved because of his close friendship with Sharon's predecessor. At the same time, Sharon appears to be too rigid and, perhaps, has failed to communicate to Mitch the justifiable reasons for her actions. Her actions are having a serious effect on morale, not only according to Mitch but also other (perhaps more objective) observers. She needs to understand that following regulations and giving good service are not mutually exclusive.

An analysis of the budget reveals that, although the fiscal year is only half over, several categories have less than 50% of their annual allocation remaining: overtime, awards, supplies, furniture and furnishings, equipment, travel, transportation, and fuel.

2. How do you propose to resolve the situation?

Suggested response:

Meet separately with Mitch and Sharon and then meet with them together to determine what can and should be done to address Mitch's work orders. Perhaps the three of you could visit Mitch's house to find practical ways in which he can better help himself where the embassy can't help him.

Work out with Sharon a system by which all employees submitting work orders receive prompt communication on the status of their requests, including reasons for their refusal. Suggest a pro-active notice to American employees on what maintenance actions the embassy is responsible for and which it is not, and anticipated time delays in completing them. Also consider the division of duties between Sharon and yourself; perhaps you'd like to swap the maintenance and transportation functions, so you can get a better idea on how the maintenance section is being utilized. To deal with the budget problem, put an immediate moratorium on overtime, furniture, supply, and equipment purchases, awards, and travel; do not fill any vacant positions unless absolutely necessary; look at ways of conserving energy.

Be sure to follow the instructions, particularly for the writing sample. Do not make assumptions that are not clear from the instructions. Be as complete as possible in the time allotted. This essay is intended not only to test your management and quantitative skills, but also your written communication ability. Pay just as much attention to how you write as to what you say.

Scoring the Exercises

Assessors observe the candidate's performance closely, taking notes during the testing module. At the end of each exercise, assessors individually enter their scores into a computer. The average of the exercise scores determines a candidate's overall score. The Oral Assessment cut-off score to continue a candidacy is 5.25 out of a possible 7. For this cycle, each exercise and each component of each exercise have equal weight. The Group Exercise, Structured Interview, and Case Management Study each count for one-third of the total grade. Within the Structured Interview, the Experience and Motivation, Hypothetical and Past Behavior modules are equally weighted. Overall scoring is on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing poor performance and 7 representing an outstanding performance. In 2006-07, roughly one out of five candidates passed the oral assessment.

4. Exit Interviews

After the assessors complete the integration of their scores, candidates are notified whether they have been successful in reaching the cut-off score. Along with their final overall score, candidates receive an indication as to whether they reached or exceeded the cut off score on any of the three major components of the exam.

Unsuccessful candidates are informed of their results in a private interview with two assessors. At this point, the candidate is given an opportunity to ask questions about the assessment process and future exams. Assessors are not permitted to provide specific feedback or critiques of the candidate's performance. This prevents any undue advantage to those who take the exam more than once.

All who pass receive an Immediate Conditional Offer and proceed to the next phase of the hiring process. Successful candidates are then given a briefing on the next steps in the Foreign Service hiring process, including information on the security background investigation, language bonus point system, veteran's preference points, the medical examination, and final suitability review. Candidates are also given the opportunity to ask questions about Foreign Service life. Diplomatic Security may then initiate background interviews.

5. Register List

The Register List is a rank order list of all candidates who have completed the pre-employment process and are waiting for a job offer. Candidates can remain on this list for up to 18 months after which their candidacy expires.

In order to be placed on the Register List, candidates must have a Medical Clearance, a Security Clearance, and a Suitability Clearance. Candidates may be denied suitability on the basis of any of the eight suitability factors, including: drug usage; alcohol abuse; misconduct in prior employment; financial irresponsibility; misrepresentation in the application process; poor judgment; criminal conduct; and questionable loyalty to the United States.

Veterans who pass the Oral Assessment and qualify as preference eligible are entitled to .175 for a 5 point preference or to .35 for a 10 point preference, based on a seven-point scale. In all other situations, veterans' preference is not a factor. Unlike the Civil Service, veteran's points are added only after the candidate has passed the oral assessment. Candidates who have passed the oral exam and believe they have foreign language skills may qualify for bonus points to improve their position on the register by taking a telephonic language test which assesses speaking proficiency only. The Foreign Service will train officers in job skills or languages required for assignments.