SECURITY CLEARANCE TIPS

Organizations Requiring a Security Clearance

U.S. State Department  www.state.gov
Department of Defense  www.defense.gov
National Nuclear Security Administration  www.nnsa.energy.gov

Intelligence Positions
www.cia.gov
www.fbi.gov
www.uscg.mil

Private Sector Businesses and Contractors as Necessary

Level of Security Clearances

Confidential
Also known as a "public trust" clearance, this is the simplest security clearance to get. This level typically requires a few weeks to a few months of investigation. A Confidential clearance requires a National Agency Check with Local Agency Check and Credit Check (NACLC) investigation which dates back 7 years on the person's record and must be renewed with another investigation every 15 years.

Secret
A Secret clearance, also known as Collateral Secret or Ordinary Secret, requires a few months to a year to fully investigate. Poor financial history is the number-one cause of rejection, and foreign activities and criminal record are also common causes for disqualification. A Secret clearance requires a National Agency Check with Local Agency Check and Credit Check (NACLC) and it must be re-investigated every 10 years.

Top Secret
A Top Secret or "TS" clearance is often given as the result of a Single Scope Background Investigation, or SSBI. In general, these afford one access to data that affects national security, counterterrorism/counterintelligence, or other highly sensitive data. A TS clearance can take as few as 3–6 months to obtain, but more often takes 6–18 months. The SSBI must be renewed every 5 years.

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The Four Step Process to Obtaining a Security Clearance

1. Receiving the Job Offer
Receiving the job offer is the first step, wherein the agency has approved you to the post, on the condition that you can successfully pass the investigations and clearances to receive the security clearance.

2. Basic Background Check
A basic background check is conducted and usually consists of criminal and credit history, as well as law enforcement records, verification of education, past employment, and citizenship. Past mistakes are considered on a case-by-case basis, and remember that being honest is more important than a spotless record.

3. More Intensive Investigation
This will begin once the offer has been made to do so. At this point, the agency will send you the Questionnaire for National Security Positions (Standard Form 86) for you to fill out and return so the investigation may begin.

4. Agency Grants Approval
After a careful review of the information gathered, the decision is made on whether or not to grant the clearance. While around 90% of background investigations go through the Office of Personnel Management, the hiring agency makes the ultimate call on granting or not granting the clearance.

What Investigators Look At

International Experience and Contacts
While international experience and foreign language skills are generally major assets in applying for federal jobs, they can lengthen the clearance process significantly, due to the fact that the investigation must go overseas, not necessarily as a disqualifying factor. Other factors that lengthen the process include: dual citizenships, a history of traveling, studying, or living abroad, foreign military service, foreign contacts, a foreign-born spouse, or having relatives who are not citizens of the United States.

Drug and Alcohol Use
Drug and alcohol use can have an adverse effect on obtaining a security clearance, although it is not an immediate disqualifier. It would be wise to check the website of the specific agency to which you are applying to read the details on their drug use policy.

Financial History
Financial irresponsibility can be seen as an issue and prolong the process to earning the clearance. While a few conditions, such as bankruptcy, are obvious flags, smaller issues such as gambling have the potential to cause some issues.

Personal and Criminal Conduct
Infractions on a disciplinary record are viewed in context of the overall history. What investigators are interested in is assessing your moral character and trustworthiness. Disciplinary sanctions in college are also not automatic disqualifiers. Other matters investigated include use of information technology systems, psychological conditions, and outside employment or personal activities.

For a full list of investigative guidelines, including conditions that could either raise concern or mitigate concerns, review the Adjudicative Guidelines for Determining Eligibility for Access to Classified Information located on the State Department’s website.
**Interview Types**

**Screening Interview:**
The screening interview does just that—screen out candidates whose qualifications don't meet the job specifications. The first interview is typically conducted by a human resources professional and will probably focus more on your resume and qualifications than anything else. Screening interviews may be conducted in person, by telephone, or by video conferencing (see Telephone Interview and Video or Skype Interview sections).

- Articulate your skills and what you accomplished at each previous job experience.

**Second Interview:**
Second round interviews are often more difficult to prepare for because their purpose is more subtle—to determine which candidates will best “fit” with the company. Second interviews may be comprised of behavioral and competency-based questions (see Behavioral Interview and Competency-based Interview sections).

- Ask questions about the work environment.
- This stage may also include reference checks and testing.

**Case Study Interview:**
Consulting firms and certain financial institutions may include a case study or word problem based on a real-life or simulated consulting situation as part of their interview process. In this instance, the interviewer will present you with a case study and ask how you would approach and solve the dilemma at hand. The interviewer is simply trying to determine your analytical abilities through this interview method, so try not to get flustered!

- You can usually ask relevant questions in your efforts.
- There are a number of online and hardcopy resources available through the Office of Career Services to help you prepare for these types of interviews.
- It is also imperative to be part of a student study group and practice together since these interviews are very demanding.

**Behavioral Interview:**
In these interviews, the interviewer will ask you to talk about a real situation you’ve encountered and your response to that situation. A sample question could include, “Tell me of an incident when you failed,” instead of a hypothetical question such as “How you would handle a mistake or failure?” The employer assumes this will be a good indicator of how you would handle situations in the future.

- Stay calm and answer the question as completely as you can, using the SAR formula as your guide:
  - **S**—What was the situation or problem that you were presented with?
  - **A**—What action did you take? (Specifically highlight the skills used.)
  - **R**—What were the results of your actions? (Be specific and quantify results when possible.)

**Tips for Making the Process Smoother**

- Review the Standard Form 86 and begin compiling Information such as complete names, addresses, telephone numbers, and dates of birth for relatives going back at least 10 years.
- Carefully review your packet for completeness before sending it, with properly rolled fingerprints.
- Follow up after a reasonable amount of time (approximately one month).
- Keep track of where you live and of contacts who knew you when you lived there.

**Other Resources**