

County of Ventura
COUNTY EXECUTIVE OFFICE
Human Resources Department

Preparing for an Oral Examination

The following information will help you better understand the oral examination process. It will explain the purpose and function of the oral examination and will provide general information to help you practice and prepare.

Purpose of the Oral Examination Process:

An oral examination is an extension of the application process and is used to evaluate an applicant's ability to successfully perform a job. Candidates are asked job related questions by a panel of subject matter experts (usually three) who evaluate and score candidate responses that reflect their knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) to perform the duties of the job. Panel members may take detailed notes of each response. All applicants are asked the same questions in the same order. Also, the panel is deliberately not given a copy of your application or resume; therefore, it will be up to you, by way of your responses to their questions and to brief them on your qualifications for the position.

Preparing for an Oral Examination:

Although candidates will not know exactly what questions the panel may ask, there are ways that you can prepare in order to fully demonstrate your qualifications at the examination. Following are some recommendations:

- Study the job announcement thoroughly. In general, the beginning of the examination asks about your background. Be prepared to provide a concise statement of your education, training and experience and how they have prepared you to be successful in the position.
- Specifically, review the typical duties section of the announcement and be prepared to brief the panel on specific similar functions you have performed in your current and past employment.
- Review and study the knowledge, skills and abilities described in the announcement. The topics in this section are used to develop the oral examination questions. Be prepared to speak to each of them. For instance, if one of the KSAs is supervision, be prepared to share with the panel your training, education and experience that relate to your ability to perform supervisory functions.
- Also, develop a mental list of any volunteer experience, related degrees, special training, certificates and specific coursework you have completed that may be relevant to the job. Then take each item on your list and ask yourself "What did I learn from the experience? What problems did I encounter and how did I overcome them? What were the most complex tasks and projects I completed? And what was my contribution to the organization or class?" Answering these questions can help you identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities you have developed or enhanced that would help you perform the job.
- Learn about County Government and specifically about the department where the position is located. Being aware of your applicable skill sets makes a difference in how you perform in the oral exam and, if hired, can make the transition to or within County employment smoother and easier to navigate.

- Develop mock questions and practice answering them verbally and/or giving a presentation in front of others. Candidates often find it helpful to simulate the environment that they will face at the oral examination.

Types of Questions Common to Oral Examinations:

1. **Experience-based** oral examination questions inquire about the breadth and scope of your application of job related knowledge, skills and abilities. Examples include:
 - *What office equipment have you used on the job and what kinds of routine tasks did you perform using this equipment?*
 - *Describe your experience classifying, cataloguing, reviewing, and evaluating books within a large-sized public library system.*
2. **Knowledge-based** oral examination questions ask you to demonstrate a level of familiarity with the terminology, practices, concepts and theories related to the career field in question. For example:
 - *What accounting practices would you use to ensure that budget reporting obligations are fulfilled?*
 - *What are the most important factors for a Social Worker to consider when attempting to establish a working relationship with a client, and why?*
3. **Behavior-based** oral examination questions require you to apply your knowledge, skills and abilities in a job-related situation. The two types of behavior-based interview questions are **past behavior** and **situational**. Examples include:
 - *Tell me about a time when you provided exemplary customer service. What were the circumstances, what did you do and what were the results? (past behavior)*
 - *An important client arrives at the office and demands to see your supervisor without an appointment. How would you handle this? (situational)*
 - *Describe a decision you made that was unpopular and how you handled implementing it. (past behavior)*
 - *Have you had to convince a team to work on a project that they were not thrilled about? How did you handle it? (past behavior)*
 - *If you disagree with your supervisor about a decision or practice, how would you handle it? (situational)*

On the Day of the Oral Examination:

- Get plenty of sleep the night before and eat a good breakfast/lunch.
- Be sure you have detailed driving and parking instructions for the location of the oral examination, also have the recruiter's telephone number with you in the event you encounter an unanticipated delay.
- Plan to arrive 30 minutes before your scheduled oral exam and allow time for traffic, parking and check-in.
- Have proper identification as indicated in your invitation letter.
- Typical dress for an oral examination is business attire. Where your attire falls within this range should depend on the job for which you are interviewing. Management positions will require

more traditional attire, such as business suits, whereas entry level positions will require business attire such as slacks/skirts/collared shirts/blouses. Very casual dress, such as wearing t-shirts, jeans, shorts or flip-flops is not appropriate.

- When you reach the oral examination destination, inform the receptionist of your arrival. You will be instructed where to wait. Take this time to gather your thoughts, get comfortable and review your notes. Turn off your cell phone prior to the oral exam. You should refrain from making or receiving any calls while you are waiting to begin your oral exam.

During the Oral Examination:

- Offer a firm handshake and a pleasant smile when introducing yourself to the panel.
- Be sure to direct your responses to all the members of the panel, not just the member that asks the question. Additionally, make eye contact with each member of the panel. Don't focus on one member.
- The panel members will most likely be taking notes while you respond to a question. Don't let this distract you.

After the Oral Examination:

- Once the oral examination has concluded be sure and thank the panel for their time and offer each a firm handshake.
- Because the oral examination process is competitive, all exam content must remain confidential. You will not be able to take notes during the oral examination, and you may not discuss any of the content of the examination with anyone. If you are found to have discussed content related to the examination, you will not only put yourself at a disadvantage by helping other candidates to score higher than you, but you will also be disqualified from participating further in the examination process.

Tips for Answering Oral Examination Questions:

- Listen carefully to each question and make sure you understand exactly what is being asked. Oral panel members cannot interpret questions for you, but if you do not hear all of a question, or are not sure if you understand a question, ask for the question to be repeated.
- Answer the questions as if the panel members do not know you or your work experience, even if they do. Do not assume the panel knows who you are and what you have accomplished. Your application is not reviewed by panel members so they know nothing about you.
- Don't undersell yourself. Be proud of what you have done and accomplished and be excited to tell the panel about it.
- Pay particular attention to key words, directional words, and multiple parts of questions.
- Pause briefly after a question is asked. Take a few seconds to compose your thoughts, quickly review in your mind the parts of the question or the main areas of information that you need to cover, and organize how you will go through this before you begin to answer the question.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, try not to panic. Just give the best answer that you can for the question. Try not to ramble if you do not know or are unsure of the answer to the question. If the question asks about a situation that you have not experienced, consider if there are similar situations you could discuss and then answer the question as to how you would address the situation if you were presented with it for the first time.

- Answer the question in a logical and organized manner so your answer will be clear to the panel and so you do not forget to mention something. If the question includes more than one part, be sure to cover all of the parts in your answer.
- Monitor how much time you take to answer each question. The panel will tell you the total amount of time that you have for the oral exam and the total number of questions. It is up to you to decide how much time you want to spend on each question.
- Be positive and enthusiastic. Frame your responses in a positive light. If the information is negative, think about what you learned from the situation and convey this to the interviewer.
- Typically the first question in an oral examination is an opener, an opportunity for you to highlight your unique qualities that you bring to the position. This question is the perfect time to give a brief overview or presentation about your special skills, talents, experience, etc., that you feel make you a strong candidate.
- Avoid the use of slang, obscenities and phrases such as “um”, “ah”, “you know”, and “like” to fill in between your statements.
- Keep professional body language at all times. Try not to fidget during the oral examination or stare off into space. Pay attention to your posture and how you are seated. Avoid slumping, crossed arms, leaning backward, etc. Likewise, avoid displays of nervous mannerisms such as nail biting, hair twisting, knuckle cracking, etc.
- Link the requirements of the position to your background, showing how your previous experience and knowledge will help you manage the task successfully. Be ready to provide examples.