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PROMOTIONAL GUIDE TO HIGHER SCORES AND TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

Study Worksheet

Many of you at some time in your life have put together a workout schedule for athletic activities. Included in this schedule were times when you were going to work out, what you would be doing and what your goals were. You should put together a similar study worksheet to help you in attaining your goal. Listed below are study strategies that can be used for the examination.

1. Time Management

You should set aside a specific time and place to study each day. If your goal is to study 8 to 10 hours a day, you should begin by studying 2 to 3 hours a day for a few days. It is just like an athletic workout, if your goal is to run 15 miles, you do not run 15 miles the first day. You gradually build up to it. It takes a lot of mental preparation and discipline to be able to sit in one place over an 8 to 10 hour period. Gradually, as you build up your study time, your retention of the material will also increase.

2. Eliminate Distractions

You should try to eliminate, as completely as possible, distractions from your study environment. These distractions compete for your attention and effect your attitude and memory of the material that you are trying to emphasize. You should also select an area with the least amount of distractions. Your study area could be a bedroom with a desk, the basement of your home, the attic, or anywhere else where you can devote your absolute attention to the task at hand. Proper lighting is important along with a comfortable chair and desk. Be sure that when you are studying, everyone else in your family knows that you are not to be interrupted.

Everybody has a different time of the day when he or she has extremely good retention capabilities. This time could be from 6:00 A.M. to 12:00 noon, or from 1:00 P.M. until 6:00 P.M., or from 9:00 P.M. until 3:00 A.M. Only you know that. As you begin to study, find out which time of the day is best for you, where you have absolute retention of the material that you are studying. It is highly recommended that you take a break every hour, whether it be for 5 to 10 minutes just to get up, walk around, get a breath of fresh air, get something to drink, and then go back to studying. For some people, these breaks might only be needed after 2 to 3 hours of studying. Again, this is a situation where you are the best judge of when a break is needed. Many times, an individual becomes fatigued while studying. At this point, the material is not absorbed as easy as it is when you are well rested. Sometimes the best thing to do is to step away from the material, get a good night's sleep, and start over the next day. Trying to force your mind to study will only hamper the progress you are trying to make.

Also, remember that a sound body equals a sound mind. You should try to maintain a regular exercise program in which you feel good about yourself. This will put you in a better frame of mind, which in turn will enhance your studying.

3. Pinpoint Resource Materials

It is extremely important that you have your own copies of the materials for the examination. We strongly suggest that you do not split the cost of the reference materials with another individual. This would mean that you will only have half of the reference materials at any given time. There will be a point at which you want to go on to study another reference material, and you will not have it close at hand. If you are serious about attaining your goal, you should have your own resource materials, used by you only.

Look over the resource materials for the examination to get a general idea of the content and organization of the materials before putting together your studying strategies. Begin by scanning the resource materials from beginning to end. By scanning over the chapters in the book, this will give you a general idea of what you will be studying. In most reference material, scanning is made much easier through the use of chapter headings.

Look over the major headings and also the smaller headings that describe important paragraphs in each chapter. Also take a look and see if the chapters contain summaries. By looking over these chapter summaries, you can get a quick overview of the important parts and reference points contained in the chapter.

After you are done scanning the resource materials, you will come away with an idea of how long it will take to go through the book from start to finish. You should set a goal to study between 60 and 100 pages per day. When looking over the reference material, identify chapters that are job related. Examiners in this day in age are required to do a job analysis for the position. This job analysis will give the tester an idea of the most important elements required for the job. When you look over the reference materials and you see areas that are covered in your day-to-day job duties, these areas should be emphasized in your studying.

4. Reading and Studying the Reference Material

After scanning the material contained in the reference book and getting an idea of what you will be expected to learn, you should now begin reading the material. The first time reading through the material it is suggested that you start with a pencil first and bracket information in paragraphs that you feel is important or star these areas. By doing this the first time through with pencil, when you reread the material the second time you can begin highlighting the material and can erase the pencil marks for areas that you now find are not as pertinent.

It is important that you have an understanding of the material that you are reading. If you come across new or unfamiliar terms within the material, you should look up the definition in the book, if it contains a glossary, or in the dictionary. When studying, concentrate on gaining an understanding of the material that you are reading; do not try to memorize. When you memorize a fact, you will only get a right answer if the question is about a fact.

One of the keys to successful test taking is understanding principles, not memorizing facts. If you understand all of the concepts and principles, you will get all of the questions right. Study as if you had to give a presentation of the material to a class. By doing this, you will concentrate better and will gain a more complete understanding of what you are reading.

5. Highlighting and Marking

There are many different ways to highlight and mark material in your reference materials. One way is to underline material by using a pen or pencil, underlining specific sentences in a paragraph. Another way is to use a highlighter to emphasize sentences that you feel are important within the paragraph. Many times, we have seen individuals who take a highlighter and highlight 80 percent of the book. This completely defeats the purpose. In contrast, there are those who highlight only 10 or 12 points within the reference material. This also defeats the purpose. Try to find a middle ground where you are highlighting only the material that you feel will be asked by the examiner.

After highlighting the material, you will find that there are certain areas that are extremely important. In your final days of studying, this is where you should concentrate your studies. Another good idea is to make notes within the pages. These notes, whenever possible, should be in your own words.

6. Study Sheet

A study sheet is a notebook in which you take each reference material and note certain pages and paragraphs in each chapter that you feel you will need to review more thoroughly. By doing this, you target areas in the reference material in which you need a more complete understanding instead of just reading the book cover to cover. For example, the book you are studying might be IFSTA Company Officer. On a page in your notebook, you would annotate: Chapter 1, page 22, paragraph 3. You would then proceed to another area that you don't understand, which might be Chapter 4, page 29; another area Chapter 6, page 42, paragraph 2. By doing this, you will pinpoint areas in which you need to reread the material. As your studying increases, these areas should be down to zero by the time you are ready to take the examination.

7. Note-taking

There are many effective ways to take pertinent notes.

- A. Outlining chapters in the book in your own words or making notes from specific statements within the paragraphs. This might be just one statement from a single paragraph, or it could be 2 to 3 sentences in the paragraph. Whenever possible, you should try to summarize and detail your notes in your own words. By doing this, you will gain a better understanding of the material.
- B. Use index cards for note taking. For example, you might write out a sentence that states, "What is the gallons per minute for an 1 ½" line at 40 psi?" You can write the question on the front of the card and the answer on the back. You may also make index cards from specific sentences contained within paragraphs of chapters that you have highlighted and you feel are important. When you make 100-200 index cards on a specific book, it gives you a quick way to review. Be sure to mark the chapter and page number on the back of your card for an easy reference. For example, you have now made up 300 index cards on IFSTA Company Officer and have gone through these cards 2 or 3 times. You should then start taking out the cards that you feel you have a complete understanding of and only concentrate your studies on the cards in which you are still having difficulties. By doing this, you are making most of your time management. There is no need to go over index cards or notes on material in which you have already gained an understanding.

8. Study Groups

Study groups can be a way of increasing your learning ability by studying with others. If you are in a study group, be sure to pick only partners who are serious about obtaining their promotion. Do not pick individuals who are barely studying and will use your group as a way to increase their knowledge. Study groups should be used to increase your knowledge of a reference material that you find difficult but one that someone else in the group has a better understanding.

There are many ways to conduct a study group. For example, you can emphasize one particular book at each study session or two to three. You may want to have an individual put together a 100-question test on the material that everyone in the group can take home after the session and complete. If you pick one reference material, you can go through the book chapter by chapter. If there are 3 to 4 people in the study group, each person can take one or two chapters and target questions to the group about the material contained within those chapters.

By participating in a study group, you will prepare yourself more intensely and more thoroughly. Nobody likes looking like the “dunce” of the study group, and this will help you focus your attention better. If you find that individuals within the study group are holding back other individuals, it may be a good idea to ask these individuals to leave the study group. You do not want to be held back by individuals who are not serious.

9. Study Guides

Study guides are important aspects of the studying process. These guides will pinpoint areas in which you are weak and will show you where you need to increase your studies in order to gain a better understanding of the material. Do not use these study guides as a single way of studying and forget about reviewing the reference material.

10. Cross-reference Study Book

Many examinations will include 6 to 8 reference materials. Due to the nature of firefighting, many of the same topics will be covered in different books. If you find conflicting statements in different reference books, write down the conflicting information and from which book it is contained. For example, if one book states that 1 ½” hose at 40 psi will deliver 150 gpm and another book states that 1 ½” hose at 40 psi will deliver 175 gpm. Make a notebook containing these conflicting statements. Many times an examination will specifically quote one reference material. Even though another reference material may contain the same information with a slight variance, during your protest the only answer that will be correct will be the one from the specifically stated from that reference book.

Focus Your Attention on Attaining Your Promotion

Everybody in his or her life, whether it is personal or athletic, has always wanted something extremely bad. You know the desire, the want, and the focus that you had when you wanted to attain this goal. You must have that same attitude when preparing for the promotional examination. You have to devote your time and your effort and it will require much personal sacrifice to attain this goal. During this time, many personal sacrifices will have to be made. These sacrifices include your social and family life. Remember that not only will you receive an immediate raise in salary, which will last the rest of your career, but it will also determine the pension that you retire with.

Examination Test-Taking Strategies

1. Make sure that you understand the testing format. If the exam is being proctored, make sure you listen to all of the instructions. Carefully read all the directions that are given.
2. Make sure that you are making your answers in the correct section of the answer key. Look at the answer sheet to determine if the items are arranged vertically or horizontally.
3. During the examination, check your watch periodically so that you can keep track of the time remaining.
4. When you receive the examination, scan over the entire test and determine the number of questions contained. This will give you an idea of how long you will have for each question.
5. Read each question carefully. Try to answer the question before you look at the choices. If you know the answer, compare it to the available choices and choose the most correct choice.
6. Find and underline words that harden or soften statements. Words such as “all”, “never”, “none” and “every” harden a sentence by indicating there are no exceptions. As a rule, alternatives with these words have a lesser chance of being correct. Words such as “sometimes”, “may”, “generally”, and “possibly” soften a statement and leave more room for the alternative to be correct. “And” means that one element of the alternative must be present or true in addition to the other for the alternative to be correct. “Or” means that there is a choice of situations. Only one element of the alternative must be present or true in order to be correct.
7. When you go through each of the questions on the examination, answer the easy questions first and leave the more difficult ones until you have answered all the questions that you are sure of. This will prevent you from spending too much time on any one question and will ensure that you will have time to respond to and receive credit for every question that you answer correctly. Whenever you do skip a question, be sure to identify it as skipped in your test booklet, and do not forget to come back to it. For example, you may want to put a small slash on the left of the number on your answer key. Do not put the slash to the right of the number since these exams are graded by computer scanners and this slash could be interpreted as an answer. Sometimes after going through the questions in the examination, another question will bring to mind the answer to a previously skipped question.
8. Test-taking surveys have shown repeatedly that the first answer that comes to your mind is usually the correct one. When you change it later, you will often change it to an incorrect answer. If you are looking over a question and you are not sure what the answer is, put a slash next to the alternative that first came to your mind. When you go back over this question and still are not sure which choice is correct, you will remember which one came to your mind first.

If you finish the examination before your allotted time, go back and review the examination. Do not go back to change answers unless you are absolutely sure that the answer is incorrect. For example, if

you meant to be “B” down and instead marked “C”, change it. When reviewing, ensure that you have answered the question that corresponds to the number on your answer sheet.

9. When marking your answers on the answer sheet, be sure to erase any errors completely. Again, computer scanning is used to determine correct answers on your answer sheet. If you leave any type of mark or shadow in an answer that you erased, the computer may interpret it as having two answers for one question and you will receive no credit.
10. If you come to the end of the examination and find that there are 10 minutes left and you have 20 questions to answer, quickly speed-read all the questions and put an alternative down. On the vast majority of promotional examinations, they are graded on the number of correct answers compared to the total number of questions. You are not penalized for guessing. Be sure to fill in an answer for every question.

Test Anxiety

Anxiety is the strongest deterrent to successful test taking. It interferes with your ability to effectively use your cognitive processes. Anxiety blocks the search and retrieval process, so that knowledge held in your memory bank is inaccessible. We have seen cases where an individual has a thorough knowledge of the material but gets into the examination and freezes or their mind goes blank.

At the start of the examination, the best way to relax yourself is to take 4 to 5 deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly. This will relax your entire body. If during the examination you feel that you are experiencing anxiety, stop and take 30 seconds to repeat these deep-breathing exercises. This will calm you down and allow your mind to think more clearly. A mind under high anxiety is one that is not thinking rationally and you will not make correct choices. Knowing what to expect and being prepared for the examination is the best defense against test anxiety, that worrisome feeling that keeps you from doing your best.

General Pre-Test Tips

1. Be sure you know the location of the examination. It is a good idea to make a test run and determine the amount of time it will take you to reach your destination. Find out where you can park. Remember that if the exam date is on a weekday at 9:00 a.m., you must factor in rush-hour traffic. It never fails that someone will get into an accident the day that you are taking the most important exam of your life. Allow yourself an additional 45-50 minutes if you will be driving during a busy time period. Plan to arrive at the examination sight at least 30 minutes ahead of time.
2. Relax the night before the examination. Allow both your mind and body to rest. Don't study at all that night. You will be nervous the day before and the day of the examination. Much of this nervousness and high anxiety will cause you to use your stored energy. The night before the exam, it is recommended that you have a pasta dinner to load up on carbohydrates to give you that extra energy you will need for the test.
3. Be sure to get a good night's sleep. It is also recommended that you have a friend or fellow firefighter call you to make sure that you don't oversleep.
4. On the day of the examination, be sure to eat a good breakfast. However, do not eat in such quantities that you feel bloated or stuffed
5. Get up early enough to allow for a leisurely trip to the examination sight. It is also suggested that you meet someone at a set location where you can then follow each other in your own cars. This way, in the event that one of your cars breaks down, you can ride in the other car and make it to the examination on time.
6. Dress comfortably. Unless you have to go directly to the examination from an on-duty status or have to report for duty immediately after the test, dress in a relaxed, but not sloppy, style. Remember that the written examination is not a style show.
7. Avoid the use of stimulants or depressants, either of which may affect your ability to think clearly during the test.
8. Approach the test with confidence and the determination to do your best.
9. Think positively. Concentrate on what you know rather than on what you think you do not know.