



# Examination Preparation Booklet

## How to Take an Oral Exam

Booklet No. 11



CIVIL SERVICE EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION, INC.  
LOCAL 1000, AFSCME, AFL-CIO  
Danny Donohue, President

Booklet #11

# **How to Take an Oral Exam**

The CSEA Examination Preparation Booklet Series is designed to help members prepare for New York State and local government civil service examinations. This booklet is designed for practice purposes only and its contents may not conform to that of any particular civil service examination.

Copyright, Reprinted August 2000  
Not to be Reproduced Without Permission

## HOW TO TAKE AN ORAL EXAM

For many people the prospect of having to take an oral examination is not pleasant. Oral exams, by their very nature, tend to provoke a great deal of anxiety.

The process is a much more personal one than other methods of promotional testing, and can seem more intimidating. It has been our experience, however, that people can lessen their anxiety considerably, and perform very well on oral examinations if they prepare properly for them.

This booklet is designed to help prepare people for taking entry level oral examinations given by the New York State Department of Civil Service. Information in it may be very helpful for other situations as well, but our focus here is on entry level New York State oral exams.

We suggest you read this booklet several times before you take your oral exam, and strongly recommend practicing with the mock oral questions we've included, as well as making up your own mock oral questions. We've repeatedly seen that the more effort people put into preparing for an oral exam, the more relaxed and confident they are the day of the examination.

Good luck!

## THE PROCESS

Oral exams usually take place at various State office buildings throughout the State, although they are some times given at college or other institutional settings. If you live in New York City or Albany, it's highly unlikely you would have to travel a long distance for your exam. If, however, you live in a small town, or in a city where orals are not often given, then you may have to travel a considerable distance. Keep this in mind when your oral is scheduled, and give yourself enough time to get to the site and relax (or make an attempt to relax) for a little while before the exam. It seems to be a fairly common phenomenon that people often don't allow themselves enough time to relax before the exam, and this can really hurt their performance. No matter where your oral is, allow enough time to find the place, park your car, get the bus or subway, or whatever. You don't need to put any extra pressure on yourself. If your oral is scheduled for late morning or late afternoon, you may want to bring a snack with you to help even out your blood sugar levels in case the orals are running late. You don't need to contend with a headache, "spaciness" or a grumbling stomach. It's also not a good idea to make inflexible plans to meet someone after the oral. If the oral runs late, you may be preoccupied with worrying about that person.

You'll usually have to go to a receptionist first, where you'll be fingerprinted (you wouldn't want someone else to take this oral for you, would you?), and shown a list of your examiners. There are three examiners who may be from State service, private industry, non-profit organizations or academia. You have the right to reasonably object to having a particular examiner serve on your oral board if he or she is a personal or business acquaintance and you feel you would not be treated fairly. It's good to keep in mind, however, that the examiner has already seen your name, been given a chance to disqualify himself or herself, and has stayed on the oral board. That, of course, doesn't mean that you should automatically accept him or her. It's a judgment call, and up to you. Fortunately, this type of situation is not all that common, and usually works out well. If you're well prepared, and know what you're doing, it's much more difficult for subjectivity to play a large role in the grading, as we'll see. One word of caution, however. Sometimes candidates become a little too confident when they have a friend, or someone they know thinks well of them, serving on their oral board. If you're in that situation, forget about any special consideration from them. Your friend has specific criteria he or she will have to rate you by.

Keep in mind that you may have to wait a while for your oral, and don't let that rattle you. Practice breathing deeply and thinking positively while you're waiting.

The format for oral exams varies. In one type, you may be sent readings in the mail ahead of time, with specific questions you know you will need to answer during the exam (this was the format of the last Administrative Aide exam). In a second type, you may be put in a different room before the exam, given a question or two, and some time to prepare an outline of an answer. In a third type, which is uncommon for entry level orals, you may be given an in-basket exercise or budgets or case studies to analyze, and, in a

fourth type, you may be expected to answer questions directly, with no time for preparation.

Once you're in the examination room, the lead panelist or the receptionist will introduce you to other members of the oral board. Try and remember that they are just people. Smile, say hello and look directly at them. It's fine to shake hands, although we encourage candidates to discreetly dry their palms before they enter the examination room so the examiners won't feel they are shaking hands with a clam.

Don't be surprised if the room looks like a set for a low budget TV talk show. The panelists will be sitting behind a desk, and you'll be seated in a chair in front of them about four or five feet away. The oral is taped for your protection, so there may be a tape recorder on the desk in front of you, or a microphone hanging down from the center of the room. Ignore it. Actually, some people are so nervous they never notice.

Once you've been introduced, the lead examiner may take the time to explain a little about the process, or the questioning may begin right away. One panelist will begin the questioning, and the other panelists will contribute follow up questions. People sometimes get defensive and think that they've done something wrong when the examiners ask follow up questions. It's part of the oral exam process. You should also expect that some rather abrupt switches in the direction the questioning takes may occur. If that happens, it's because of the short time allotted to an oral, usually 30-50 minutes. There's a lot to be covered, so abrupt changes in the line of questioning may occur. Don't jump to the conclusion that you've done something wrong. It's also important to remember that the timing and the pace of the oral is their responsibility, so don't concern yourself with these. It's also good to remember that each oral board has its own personality and style, so avoid making comparisons with your oral exam and the orals of others.

When the panelists have concluded that they have enough material to make a determination, they'll ask if you have anything to add. They aren't asking this because they are so impressed with you that they want to hear more, or because you messed up so badly they're giving you one last chance. They're asking because they're supposed to ask. It's best not to talk yourself out of a good impression at this point. Unless you can think of some incredible omission that will dramatically increase your score, smile, say "no thank you" and get the hell out of there. (That last part was a joke. You should leave in a confident, dignified manner. You can shake hands again if you'd like, smiling and looking directly at all three examiners).

Once you leave, they each rate you independently and then discuss their findings. There are three categories, and for each category the following rating system is used:

<u>Satisfactory Range</u>		<u>Unsatisfactory Range</u>	
Outstanding	10	Somewhat Inadequate	6
Very Good	9	Markedly Inadequate	4
Good	8	Wholly Inadequate	2
Passable	7		

The three categories are:

- I. The ability to comprehend administrative and managerial problems and propose reasonable solutions (or the ability to reason clearly and make sound judgements)
- II. The ability to present ideas clearly and effectively.
- III. The ability to establish satisfactory relationships with others.

In order to pass you must get a combined raw score for the three categories of 21. Since there are three examiners, you'll need a combined score of  $21 \times 3 = 63$ , in order to pass. This is usually then converted to a percentage basis, and you need a percentage score of 70 to pass.

You have a perfect score when you walk in. They subtract points based on your performance. For a competitive oral, the final score is averaged with your written score, to obtain your score for your place on the promotional list. For the qualifying oral, all you have to do is pass. Most entry level orals are qualifying orals. A numerical score has already been obtained from the written exam, and people are called to orals on the basis of those scores. Depending on their performance on the oral exam, they are then either kept on the list, or eliminated from the list.

While the oral exam process is designed to be as objective as possible, an appeals process exists for those cases where a decision may have been erroneous. While one should definitely think positively about these things, it's still a good ~a to know about the appeals process. If a candidate fails, he or she can ask to review the comments of the board. The examiners are required to make extensive notes detailing objective evidence of a candidate's performance which has influenced their rating. This means the candidate will be sent only the negative comments of the board. (Keep this in mind if you have a friend with a very poor self concept who didn't really want the job anyway, but is thinking of sending for the comments.) If a candidate has a score between 60 and 70, he or she can appeal directly to the Civil Service Commission (NYS Department of Civil Service, Building 1, State Campus, Albany, New York 12239). If a candidate receives a score below 60, he or she will need to first prove to the Civil Service Commission that "Manifest Error" has occurred. During an appeal, the candidate is allowed to review the tape recording of the oral, accompanied, if he or she wishes, by an advocate, representative, friend, or just someone the candidate trusts, who can help review the tape in a logical and systematic manner. The candidate is allowed to review certain sections of the tape several times if he or she wishes, and to take notes. Candidates are then given a week to draw up an appeal based on their observations, and must submit it to the Civil Service Commission within that time period. It is not a totally pointless exercise, although it is quite a bit of work, as candidates do win appeals on a regular basis, which is why the appeals process exists.

We feel strongly that if you think positively, and review this material regularly before your oral, you can significantly reduce the odds of ever having to use the appeals process.

If you can see the whole process as a “game,” then you can concentrate on playing the game well without becoming bogged down in the “heaviness” of it. You want to come as close as possible to giving them what they want. What do they want?

### THE CRITERIA

As we mentioned, there are three main categories of criteria that are used to rate candidates. The first criteria is the **ABILITY TO COMPREHEND ADMINISTRATIVE AND MANAGERIAL PROBLEMS AND PROPOSE REASONABLE SOLUTIONS** (sometimes called the **ABILITY TO REASON CLEARLY AND MAKE SOUND JUDGEMENTS**). For this category the candidate should be able to show the panel that he or she:

- is realistic, practical and resourceful.
- is analytical and thoughtful.
- can develop and evaluate alternatives.
- is aware and sensitive to implications of the problems presented, and the solutions suggested.
- is perceptive and consistent.

In meeting the criteria for this category, it's best to remember that they are not going to give you questions of a highly technical nature. In the words of the Department of Civil Service, "Broad and controversial problems which are related to the duties of the position are used in oral tests. Questions should lead to further discussion and development by the candidates. Questions to which there are definite and generally acceptable answers are usually not suitable for oral tests." So don't worry about memorizing all sorts of technical information. The written portion of the exam was supposed to take care of that. Don't, however, go to the other extreme and tell anecdotes or relate everything to the job you are currently in. It's one of the most common mistakes that is made, and it's a serious one. For example, if you're asked to discuss a major problem you see facing New York State today, and your reply is concerned primarily with what is going on in your particular office, you'll be perceived as having too narrow a viewpoint.

Obviously you should listen carefully to the questions. Sometimes people "space out" at the worst times. If that happens it's not a major problem. Simply ask them to repeat the question rather than try to stumble through. There's no harm in asking an examiner to repeat a question. It's also important not to interrupt or jump to conclusions, and to be sure to ask for clarifying information if you need it.

For this criteria it's important that you try and imagine all of the people involved in a hypothetical situation. What are their needs and points of view? Then you can base your response on consideration of their needs and points of view, keeping in mind that your solution shouldn't be costing the taxpayer outrageous amounts of money, or involve

giving up your responsibility to do the job.

The second criteria is THE ABILITY TO PRESENT IDEAS CLEARLY AND EFFECTIVELY.

This means that the candidate:

- can present ideas in a clear and persuasive manner.
- can organize his or her thoughts.
- is clear, logical, articulate and enthusiastic.
- thinks before speaking.

For this category, it's really important that you avoid, at all costs, using a monotone. That's probably the one trait that hurts candidates most. You must use a voice level and tone that shows some enthusiasm and interest (remember this is a game). It's also important to avoid using initials or agency or State jargon, as panelists may not know what you're talking about. Practicing mock oral questions can help you avoid these behaviors. It can also help you determine whether you're talking too fast or too slow, and whether your tone of voice is appropriate.

It's also important to remember that the panelists realize that you are on the spot, and that you don't have a lot of time to think before you make a response. You don't have to be perfect, and you can make mistakes. Recovering gracefully from the mistakes and calmly focusing your attention back on the exam is most important. Ironically, it's usually the fear of making a mistake that causes candidates to make more mistakes than they normally would. It's critical to remember that you are not expected to be perfect.

It is common for examiners to qualify something they've said, or play Devil's Advocate by bringing up conditions or ideas contrary to your position. If they have qualified a question, by changing the situation or providing you with additional information that would affect your response, acknowledge that you realize the situation has been altered. You can say something like, "Yes, that changes the situation. If this were the case, then I would do that".

If they are qualifying questions or playing Devil's Advocate, they are looking to see if you are either too rigid – sticking to your position no matter what – or too wishy washy – too willing to abandon your previous line of reasoning. Listen carefully to what they're saying, and avoid getting defensive. Remember, it's all part of the testing process. You have to demonstrate that you can reasonably weigh other alternatives, without being too quick to abandon your answer. Often your initial response will be perfectly acceptable – they are simply trying to see how carefully you've thought it all through, and how you react to the inclusion of additional information, or to potential disagreement.

If you realize you're off base, or you've jumped to an incorrect conclusion, it's so important to remember that the board knows you have to reply without lots of time for

careful consideration of the question. Don't be afraid to admit an error in judgment. It's not fatal. But don't dwell on it. You must remain calm and composed throughout, or at least appear that way.

If you do realize you've been approaching a question incorrectly, you can say something like, "But it has just occurred to me that if (blank) were true I would act differently. I would (do blank)." If the worst happens, and you get flustered or completely lose your train of thought, don't panic. There is a graceful way out. Breathe deeply. And remember, what seems like minutes to you is actually just a few seconds to someone else. But if you are really stuck and can't remember what you wanted to say – and this isn't that common – it's a good idea to say something like, "excuse me, I need a moment to collect my thoughts". This shows poise and confidence. If this should happen, most oral boards will usually try and help people out in situations like this, prompting them or asking another question.

Practice can make a big difference in developing the ability to present ideas clearly. Again, by practicing mock oral questions with friends or with a tape recorder you can work on speaking habits that need to be changed, and get used to hearing yourself answer these types of questions

The third criteria is **THE ABILITY TO ESTABLISH SATISFACTORY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS.**

This means that the candidate:

- demonstrates the ability to work well with others.
- is sensitive to the needs of others, and can enlist their cooperation.
- is self confident, and can inspire confidence in others.
- displays poise, tactfulness, decisiveness and objectivity.

It's so important to keep in mind that the examiners recognize that you're under a great deal of stress. Many of them have had to take oral exams themselves, so they understand. As examiners, they feel the pressure to make a proper decision. Keep this in mind, and try to make the situation as comfortable for all concerned as possible. Try not to view the examiners with fear or resentment, but as people. The more successful you can be at doing this, the more relaxed you'll be.

It's important to appear to be confident during the exam, without appearing to be arrogant. Since it is an artificial, contrived environment, however, candidates often have trouble feeling comfortable. The result can be either appearing to be arrogant and pompous, or appearing to lack self-confidence. This is one of the reasons that practicing with mock oral questions is so important. Because of the personal nature of oral exams, one's self-concept can play a critical role. Practicing with mock oral questions will not only build your confidence, but you'll get used to hearing yourself answering these types of questions, and you can then get feedback on whether you're projecting confidence,

arrogance or lack of confidence. Along the same lines, observe during the mock orals whether you are being too passive or aggressive. Try not to control the oral exam and remember that the responsibility for the “flow” of the oral belongs to the examiners. Listen carefully to what they say while taking deep breaths to help you relax.

All of this may seem like too much to keep track of, but practice with the mock oral questions will help make clear what behaviors, if any, you'll need to work on.

It is important that you dress conservatively and appear clean and neat. You should make eye contact with all the board members – don't exclude any of them. You should smile, but not all the time. (You may need to practice smiling when you're under pressure) It's important not to fuss with your jewelry, hair or eye-glasses. You shouldn't wisecrack or make small talk.

You should watch the board for reactions, but not dwell on their reactions, or get overly sensitive. If someone frowns, don't automatically change what you're saying, as they could be thinking about other things.

### ADDITIONAL PREPARATION

Before the exam, there are some things you can do to help prepare.

It can be very helpful to read a Duties Description or Classification Standard for the position you're testing for. A Duties Description should be on record in your personnel office. They sometimes rely on these in making up the exam, and studying what the position involves should give you additional insight into what they're looking for. We suggest you try making up your own mock oral questions from these descriptions.

If readings or exam material are sent to you ahead of time, don't put off looking at them until the last minute. That is so common, and only increases the amount of anxiety people have. Again, we've found that the best way to prepare for an oral exam is to practice and make up mock oral questions before the exam.

Finally, it's an important part of the preparation process to work on alleviating high anxiety levels you may be feeling in thinking about taking the exam. While a certain amount of anxiety is understandable, sometimes candidates become so anxious that it becomes harmful to their performance. If you feel extremely anxious, we suggest you read the following section several times and increase the amount of time you spend working on the mock oral questions.

## ANXIETY

Actually, a little anxiety can be good -- it can put you at your physical and mental best. Unfortunately, the strong emotional reaction people sometimes have to taking an oral exam can significantly negatively affect their performance.

We're going to talk first about some of the worst fears people have, and what you can do should they happen. We'll also describe some things you can do to relieve tension.

Over the years we've found that some of the most common fears people have in taking an oral (besides failing, of course) are:

- shaking or trembling hands
- shaking and cracking voice
- not being able to speak
- losing your train of thought, going completely blank
- boring the examiners
- babbling, mispronouncing words
- tripping, falling down, walking into the wall

You have to remember that you may make a few minor mistakes or display a few nervous symptoms. That's normal, you won't fail because of them. And it's a very, very small possibility, but something like tripping could happen. You have to be sure that you don't let an incident like that unnerve you and affect your performance. You're faced with a choice. You can become unhinged and compound your error, or you can recover gracefully. Depending on what you do, the examiners will either quickly refocus on your ideas or be forced to fixate on your mistake. Don't let one mistake lead to a chain of others.

A common fear people have is worrying about shaking or trembling hands or legs. Some people do tremble a little at the beginning of the exam. But if your hands are folded neatly on your lap, it won't be noticeable. If your legs tend to turn to jelly when you're nervous, avoid shoes with high heels.

A shaking voice is more noticeable, and more common, particularly at the beginning of the exam. If this should happen to you, you have to remember that it's a common occurrence, and not let it unnerve you. Make sure you continue to make strong eye contact. Next, lower your pitch, pull in your stomach and increase your volume slightly. This works very effectively. In most cases, however, a shaking voice will disappear naturally very soon after you've started speaking. And if you've been practicing orals with friends or with a tape recorder, you should be more confident, comfortable and less susceptible to a shaking voice.

Going completely blank is probably the worst fear people have. It's important that you remember that a pause is not really as long to the examiners as it is to you. Don't be afraid of silence -- in an oral you do need time to organize your thoughts. And it's much better to take the time to reflect rather than babble. It's not that common, but if you really do go completely blank, most examiners will try to prompt you or ask another question. Or you can say something like, "I need a few moments to collect my thoughts." It is not fatal. But how you react to it is important -- if it should happen, don't let it unnerve you. Again, in orals it's important to not let one mistake unnerve you and lead to a host of others. You're not expected to be perfect.

Don't worry about boring the examiners. The only way you could bore them or make it harder for them to pay attention would be to talk with a monotone. But if you've practiced ahead of time, you'll know how to avoid that.

If you mispronounce a word or say words in the wrong order, don't apologize -- just repeat the sentence or word correctly and continue on. If you make total nonsense of a sentence, just say, "I'm going to go over that again -- it wasn't clear."

It rarely happens, but what if you do trip, fall down or walk into a wall? The worse your mistake, the more important to maintain your composure. Remember, they can't fail you for being a klutz. But if you allow it to totally unnerve you, your performance will suffer. Remember, even if any of these things do happen -- and they shouldn't -- how you react to them~is most important.

A problem some people have when they're nervous is getting a "dry mouth." There is water available in a pitcher, or you can inconspicuously rub your tongue against your teeth to make saliva flow.

What steps can you take to help alleviate anxiety before and during the exam? Obviously, being well prepared by practicing oral questions before the exam will help a great deal. If you have readings you were to study ahead of time, don't put them off, and don't "cram" for the exam the night before -- do something to relax.

Breathing deeply is very effective for relieving tension. Tension reduction exercises are also very effective. If you can, do them in the car, waiting room, or rest room before the exam. For example, you can stretch your arms either out in front of you, or out to the sides as hard as you can, count to five, and slowly release them.

Once you're in the exam, exhaling slowly will help to relax you. Avoid clenching your fists, wringing your hands, or gripping the arm of the chair.

An effective and inconspicuous way during the exam to relieve tension is to inconspicuously press your thumb hard against the side of your index finger. In the meantime your face is composed, your body posture is good and your mind is focused on what is happening in the exam. Don't forget the importance of breathing deeply.

Finally, try and place the exam in perspective. The examiners want to see you do your best. If you find yourself extremely nervous, to help you gain perspective think about

something that is really dangerous or horrible. And remember, if you work to prepare well for the exam, you increase your odds of success, and you should do well.

## MOCK ORAL QUESTIONS

The following are mock oral questions for you to practice with friends, or with a tape recorder, or both. We know we're becoming tedious about this, but we can't stress the importance of practicing with mock oral questions enough. We also strongly recommend that you make up your own oral questions as well.

An oral exam is stressful for many reasons, but one of the most common problems is the strange feeling many people have when they actually hear themselves answering these questions. By practicing before the exam, the whole process won't seem so strange, and you'll feel more comfortable. Even more importantly, you'll get a lot of practice in organizing your thoughts, thinking about these issues and speaking extemporaneously. You'll also increase your confidence level.

Question #1: Name one problem currently facing New York State, and describe how this problem impacts upon New York State government.

As we said before, the questions are often quite broad. A question like this is so broad, in fact, that many people have a hard time answering it. Probably the most common mistake people make with this type of question is to answer it from a very narrow perspective, talking about problems they experience in their office daily – time cards not filled out correctly, being overworked, the problems their office may be having with a computer, etc. What this question requires is the ability to see "the big picture." This is difficult if you're not familiar with current events in State government. Most of us are pretty familiar with what is happening, but if you feel you could use some help in this area, it's a good idea to regularly read about State concerns in the newspaper, your union newspaper, or State publications. If you'd like to know more about the structure and organization of New York State government, the League of Women Voters puts out an excellent overview titled, "New York State: The Citizens Handbook." If you know you have an oral coming up, it's a good idea to keep informed, and to discuss issues with your friends. If you've done that, this type of question shouldn't be too difficult to answer. You should remember that you don't need to be an expert, just informed.

For most oral questions, there is no one right answer. There are many different approaches you can take, as long as you are logical and consistent. For this question, there are many possible answers.

We've chosen to answer by focusing on the financial pressures facing the State. Federal cutbacks, recession, and a shrinking tax base have all contributed to the fiscal problems. Yet the public sector must continue to provide those services the private sector can't provide – services for the elderly, disabled, mentally ill, and the poor. The State must support educational institutions, highways, prisons, and aid to local government. And government must provide these services, which become more expensive every year, with fewer resources available to it.

For the second part of the question, you're supposed to describe how the problem impacts upon New York State government. Obviously, if government is faced with these fiscal problems, it will be forced to make difficult choices. In order to get the money it needs to provide services, it may be forced to either borrow money, cut some services, or raise taxes.

At this point you've answered the question, but it's likely that the examiners would ask follow-up questions. They may ask, for example, if there are any things you think government could do to help it meet the needs of its citizens. Again, there would be many ways to answer this. One approach would be to discuss the importance of eliminating waste, and of government agencies carefully reviewing their budgets for any unnecessary expenditures. You could mention the importance of good planning in government, so that the resources we do have are used most wisely. Or the need to be imaginative and resourceful -- perhaps innovative programs could increase productivity. Or you could suggest that some agencies pool their talents and resources to more efficiently find solutions to common problems. Any of these would be acceptable, as would others.

It's likely you had different answers for this question, and that's fine. What you are attempting to demonstrate is that you are familiar with the problems facing New York State today, and you understand how they affect government. You must show you have a broader perspective than just your office or agency.

Question #2: You work in an agency where each unit has its own typing and stenographic services section. Because of an acute shortage of office space, a recommendation has been made to create a centralized word processing center to serve the needs of the entire organization. It is hoped that the creation of this center could assist the agency in avoiding a costly move into more expensive office space. You are assigned to assist your supervisor in developing and initiating a plan of action to establish a centralized stenographic and typing services unit. How would you approach this assignment?

For this type of question, you would most likely be given the question in advance, and given some time to organize a response. Again, there are lots of ways to approach a question like this. However, it's not as broad as the first one, and it's clear that you will have to organize your approach well.

While there are many ways to organize a response, we'll give you a model that you may be able to apply successfully to other questions of this nature.

The first thing you need to do is translate the situation into "real life." All it's describing is a recommendation to create a centralized word processing center rather than continue allowing each unit to have its own typing and stenographic pool.

A possible reply:

1. You'd want to survey the organization first, to determine the amount and timing of the work, where it's being done, who's doing it, and what equipment is being used.
2. You'd want to then consult with the people involved to get their input -- heads of units, workers, planning bureau people. This will also make them more interested and vested in the success of the project. You might want to find out if other agencies have done this successfully, and get their advice on how to proceed. (This is a particularly good point to mention -- it shows resourcefulness)
3. You'd want to cost out the present operation. How much does it now cost? You'd also want to see exactly how much space is currently being used.
4. After careful analysis, you'd want to develop a plan of operations to create this centralized word processing center, using timetables, based on all considerations, including location and equipment.
5. Cost the new system before you go any further. Sometimes an idea sounds great, but could actually end up costing a lot more money. And the purpose of doing this is to avoid a large expenditure of money. It's also critical, of course, to make sure that the new space for the pool will actually take up less space than the old arrangement.
6. If the cost and space savings are beneficial, obtain approval and assist in implementation. People often overlook this step. Avoid the temptation to play governor or commissioner -- don't neglect going through "the proper channels."
7. To allay possible antagonism, explain potential advantages to all concerned before the program is implemented. Changes can be difficult. In this case unit heads may object to losing their pools, and people may like where they are presently working. You'll have to make it very clear that this is being done because of financial reasons. It's important in oral exams that you not neglect the needs of people in discussing your possible solutions. That's a common mistake

– both in oral exams and "real life" – and be sure you don't get so caught up in your solutions that you neglect the most important component – other workers, clients, and the public.

8. Finally, it's important to evaluate the project once it's in place, to make sure it's working the way it should.

We don't expect that you would have had this kind of detailed response worked out – but it is a very good, systematic way to approach questions of this nature. And because the question has been answered so comprehensively, it would be difficult for the board to ask difficult follow-up questions.

Question #3: Planning, training and labor relations are important functions in government today. Pick one of these areas and discuss its relevance and value to New York State government in the 1980's.

This is another question that expects you to have a good overview of government. If you can see the "big picture," you should do well. Remember, unless they specifically ask you about your agency, and they may, don't answer this question by talking about your agency. If you have trouble briefly describing functions like planning, budgeting, evaluation, training and labor relations, it would be a good idea for you to read a little about them before the exam, particularly if you're taking an exam for an entry level professional position. You don't have to be an expert, but you should be able to define them.

Again, there would be many ways to approach a problem of this nature. If you were to pick planning, for instance, one good approach would be to relate the importance of good planning to government in an era of fiscal cutbacks. Because government must, in effect, do more with less, it's critical that there be sound planning at all levels, in order to make the best use of the resources we do have. Good planning will help government to eliminate waste, save money, use its resources wisely, and perhaps even increase productivity in some instances. The follow-up question here might ask you to provide some examples. There are many different examples you could use --avoiding duplication of services by planning carefully, discovering good new ideas and perhaps increasing the productivity and morale of workers by including them in the planning process, planning carefully to avoid unnecessary expenses that can occur when some critical component has been overlooked, planning with good time lines so that projects aren't unnecessarily delayed (adding to their initial cost), and so on.

If you were to choose training, you might want to relate the training to the fiscal realities facing the State. Again, there are many ways you could approach this. One way might be to point out that training in some instances may actually improve the performance and

even morale of employees, resulting in higher productivity or better service to the public. Examples could be more technical training for people in technical positions, supervisory training, enhancing communications and interpersonal skills for workers who must meet with clients often, or stress reduction techniques. There are many possibilities.

A “Devil’s Advocate” question you might get at this point may ask, “In a time of fiscal cutbacks, shouldn't the expenditure of monies on training be a low priority because it's a waste of monies the State could use to provide other services?”

What you don't want to do here is to appear either too rigid or defensive – “Absolutely not, training is a very high priority, and it would be foolish not to recognize that.” Or be too wishy-washy – “You’re right, I hadn't thought of it that way. Actually, it should be a low priority.”

Listen carefully to what the examiner is saying, but don't be too quick to discount either what they are saying or what you have said. A very reasonable response to this type of question might be that you recognize the importance of spending money as wisely as possible, and that it is likely that there would be some situations where training would not be the answer, or the wisest way to spend money. But in other instances, judicious use of training could allow the State to make the maximum use of the resources it does have, and could bring very favorable, cost effective results that might be worth, in the long run, far more than the training itself would cost. You might suggest that departments take a careful look at each suggested program, and perhaps do a preliminary cost/benefit analysis, to determine if the program would be truly beneficial. Once the program is in place, evaluations could be done during and after it to gauge whether the desired results were achieved.

There are many ways to answer the labor relations question as well. You might want to discuss the importance of good labor relations as necessary if government is to provide the public with required services. Good labor relations are important if we are to avoid interruptions in service, or changes in the quality of services delivered by government. And you may want to relate the importance of labor relations on an agency basis as well. If relations are good between supervisors and employees, less grievances will be filed, resulting in less time, money and effort being spent in handling grievances. And the morale, and performance, of employees should be better if they are not in major conflicts on the job with other workers. All of this can, of course, be related to the State's financial condition. Good labor relations, not only between unions and the State, but between employee and supervisor, can result in significant savings of money and also good service to the public.

We've tried to give you an idea of how to approach oral exam questions. Thinking positively and practicing questions like these with friends or a recorder is the best way to prepare for an oral examination. These practices will improve your skills, increase your confidence, and reduce your anxiety levels.

Taking an oral exam can actually be a very positive learning experience, if approached with the right attitude. Remember that thinking Positively and visualizing success on the oral can be extremely helpful.

Thank you and good luck!