

FIRE SERVICES EXAMINATIONS BOARD

STUDY NOTE

EXAMINATION	STATION OFFICERS' EXAMINATION
PAPER	BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
SUBJECT	KEY SKILLS
ITEM	IN-TRAY EXERCISE
STUDY NOTE No.	3404

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY NOTE

This study note has been prepared as the basis of study in connection with the qualifying examinations for promotion.

Candidates will be expected to demonstrate knowledge of the information contained in the study note and understand how it should be applied:

The 'References' made at the end of the Study Note are included for information only and candidates will not be expected to study these as part of the bibliography.

IN-TRAY EXERCISE

1. Introduction

Paper 4 of the Station Officers Examination is concerned with Business Administration and comprises section 'A' and section 'B'.

Section 'A' will consist of two questions (Question 1 and 2) relating to the other bibliography of this Paper, and section 'B' will consist of four questions (Questions 3, 4, 5 and 6) relating to the 'In-tray Exercise'.

The 'In-Tray Exercise' (Section B) is designed to test your potential skill to analyse a number of problems or situations, assign a priority for dealing with each of those situations, make decisions, communicate decisions and actions in writing and manage the time available in an effective way.

You will have to deal with an assortment of matters that might be expected to be found on a Station Commanders desk.

The time allowed for the exercise is one hour thirty minutes and includes reading the instructions, analysing the material, considering and writing the responses and checking and correcting the work.

There is a five minute 'briefing period' between finishing Section 'A' and starting Section 'B'. This time will be used for the Supervisor to brief you on the instructions for the Section 'B' examination and for completing your candidate details on the necessary paperwork.

2. The Scenario

For the purpose of the exercise, the date will be that of the examination and you will be Station Officer Jackson, the Station Commander of Longham Fire Station, a four watch operational fire station within Wessex Fire and Rescue Service.

It will be your first day back at work after a week's holiday.

During your leave, several items of correspondence have accumulated in your in-tray and await your immediate consideration and appropriate attention.

3. The 'In-Tray' Items

The problems or situations that you are presented with in the 'In-Tray' Exercise are of the kind that could be found on a fire station and have to be dealt with in some way by the Station Commander, such as requests, correspondence and information.

The problems or situations vary in importance and may occur over a period of time requiring the use of a diary or work schedule, as they would do in a real situation.

You will have to use information, knowledge and understanding of fire service standards and procedures in order to deal with the problems.

In addition, some of the problems require data from a table or a report to be searched for or analysed to obtain the information to assist you in assessing the problem and determining a course of action or priority.

Some of the items may be related and as a consequence may have a bearing on the action to be taken.

4. The Question/Answer and Information Booklets

Just prior to the commencement of the 'In-tray' Exercise you will receive a pack containing a 'Question/Answer Booklet', an 'Information Booklet' a 'Diary' and a 'Rough Work Sheet'.

(a) The Question/Answer Booklet

The Question/Answer Booklet will contain:

- (i) The instructions relating to the completion of the 'In-Tray' exercise.
- (ii) The questions, followed by an appropriate space to respond in some detail to the questions. Only the space provided in the booklet will be available for you in which to provide your answer.

The Question/Answer Booklet will be printed on white paper.

(b) The Information Booklet

The Information Booklet will contain:

- (i) Up to ten 'in-tray' items that have accumulated in your 'In-Tray' in your absence. These will be printed on green paper; and
- (ii) *Reference Information* that you may need to refer to when working on a number of the 'in-tray' items. The Reference Information will be printed on blue paper.

(c) A Diary

The relevant part of a diary is provided. This is to log any forthcoming events/commitments as part of your answer and to assist you in the exercise.

Some events/commitments may already be entered in the diary. The Diary will be printed on yellow paper.

(d) The Rough Work Sheet

A rough work sheet will be available for you to use to prepare your responses; this paper will be collected by the supervisor at the end of the examination. It will not be marked as part of your submitted script.

5. The Four Questions of the 'In-Tray' Exercise

There are four questions to be dealt with in the 'In-Tray exercise' (questions 3, 4, 5, and 6)

- Question 3 will deal with a number of 'in-tray' items each of which will have to be individually analysed and prioritised;

- Questions 4 and 5 will relate to two new 'in-tray' items, which require more in-depth analysis. These items will require you to use the *Reference Information* in order to resolve them; and
- Question 6 is in two parts and will require written responses to one of the items dealt with in a previous question.

6. Allocation of Marks

The available marks for the 'In-Tray' exercise are as follows:

Question 3

Decision Making 30%

Prioritising 30%

Questions 4 and 5

Analytical Skill 30%

Question 6

Written Communications 10%.

7. Timing

As indicated in the introduction, managing the time available in an effective way, forms part of the 'In-Tray' Exercise. Accordingly you are advised to spend no more than:

35 MINUTES ON QUESTION 3

35 MINUTES ON QUESTIONS 4 AND 5

10 MINUTES ON QUESTION 6

8. Removal of Examination Material

You will not be allowed to take any of the examination material away from the examination room at the end of the 'In-Tray' exercise and candidates should note that any candidate who does would be liable to disqualification from the examination.

9. Guidance in Relation to Question 3

This part of the examination will involve decision-making and prioritisation.

There could be up to eight different 'in-tray' items in the 'Information Booklet'.

You will be required to work through these 'in-tray' items and complete the FOUR tasks for each one within the recommended time allowed.

(a) TASK ONE – PRIORITY RATING

First, dealing with the 'in-tray' material will involve you in having to make judgments about the importance of the material in the 'in-tray' and the priority it has. Each 'in-tray' item will require you to assign a level of priority on a scale from:

- A - Urgent priority;
- B - Non-urgent but has a degree of priority;
- C - Routine;
- D - Low level of action required;
- E - No action required.

The Priority ratings will be pre-printed in the Question/Answer Booklet so you will only have to clearly circle your choice.

(b) TASK TWO – JUSTIFICATION FOR RATING

Second, you need to provide justifications for the PRIORITY RATING that you assigned in TASK ONE.

Your answers will need to be recorded in the space provided in the Question/Answer Booklet **and should be clear and concise by recording them in the form of brief bullet points.**

Note:

The justifications required would be for the rating you will have allocated in *task one* and *not* justifications for the Actions that you will list under *task three*.

(c) TASK THREE – ACTION

Third, you will be required to consider the information provided within the 'in-tray' item and make a decision how best to respond in the circumstances. The focus should be on what immediate action would be required to deal with the particular memo, letter, telephone message or request.

Your answers will need to be recorded in the space provided in the Question/Answer Booklet **and should be clear and concise by recording them in the form of brief bullet points.**

(d) TASK FOUR – DIARY

At this point any information given in the 'in-tray' items relating to forthcoming events should be entered in the 'Diary'.

All four tasks for each 'in-tray' item should be completed before moving on to the next one.

*You will be able to plan your responses using the rough work sheet provided **but watch the time**, as the rough work sheet will not be marked.*

10. Examples of 'In-Tray' Items in Part One

Appended below are three examples of how 'in-tray' items in Question 3 may appear.

In the first two cases, a model answer has been provided to show you the style and format that an answer could be in.

The response grid in the example model answers is how it will look in the Question/Answer Booklet.

Example 1

<p>INTERNAL MEMORANDUM <i>Wessex Fire and Rescue Service, Crestford Divisional Office</i></p>	
From:	Senior Divisional Officer Roberts
To:	Station Commander Jackson
Date:	20 February 2001
Re:	Messing Arrangements
<p>Please review messing arrangements at Longham Fire Station and report to me by the end of next month on the practical and financial implications of a change from Watch Messing to Station Messing.</p>	
<p>Signed Senior Divisional Officer Roberts</p>	

Example 1 - Model Answer

RATING	JUSTIFICATION FOR RATING	ACTION
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Necessary and important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy memo to watch commanders and station mess staff and request their views on the proposal. • Request details of mess accounts for all watches. • Prepare report with advantages and disadvantages of proposal together with a recommendation.
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No real time pressure since required at the end of next month 	
C		
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No immediate impact on service delivery 	
E		

Example 2

INTERNAL MEMORANDUM Longham Fire Station	
Date	19 February 2001
From:	Watch Commander Wilson
To:	Station Commander Jackson
Re:	Loose Floor Tiles
<p>I have to report that a number of the ceramic floor tiles in the corridor leading to the entrance to the appliance bay have worked loose.</p>	
<p>Signed Watch Commander Wilson</p>	

Example 2 – Model Answer

RATING	JUSTIFICATION FOR RATING	ACTION
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Significant trip hazard	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personally investigate and ensure that warning signs have been put in place
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Operational consideration	
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health and Safety issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Immediately notify all crew members of potential hazard
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Urgent and important	
E		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take steps to rectify as a matter of urgency

Example 3

16 The High Pavement Longham CRESTFORD CD3 4FJ
18 February 2001
Dear Station Commander
I am writing to complain about the damage done to our front garden privet hedge when a group from your station trimmed back the foliage to expose the fire hydrant sign. I appreciate as much as the next person how important it is that these signs are clearly visible, but our carefully maintained hedge has been decimated. Surely your officers can show some consideration for the concerns of householders about the appearance of things? It will take months of careful nurturing to restore the hedge to its former condition.
Yours sincerely Judith Messenger (Mrs)

Example 3 - Model Answer

The Model Answer for Example 3 has been left blank to enable you to complete the *four tasks* and time yourself as part of your examination preparation.

RATING	JUSTIFICATION FOR RATING	ACTION
A	•	•
B	•	•
C	•	•
D	•	•
E		

11. Guidance in Relation to Questions 4 and 5

This part of the examination will be concerned with planning, analytical skills and general knowledge of Fire Service standards and procedures.

Within the Information Booklet there will be two 'in-tray' items that you will have not dealt with in Question 3. These items will form the basis of the work in Questions 4 and 5.

The 'in-tray' items for Questions 4 and 5 will be similar to those shown as examples earlier in the study note but may be more complex in nature.

Your task is to respond to the particular requests or instructions and record your answers in the specific space that is provided in the Question/Answer Booklet.

In order to provide the answer, you will be required to examine the 'in-tray' item carefully to establish correctly what information is being requested.

In the past, candidates have failed to answer the question correctly because they did not pay sufficient attention to reading the 'in-tray' item to establish what was actually being required or asked for.

Secondly you will have to examine/analyse/search for information from the 'Reference Information' shown on the blue paper at the back of the Information Booklet to establish its relevance. There may be more than one piece of 'Reference Information' that is applicable.

This 'Reference Information' may be a report, a table containing information or a chart of statistics. These are provided to assist you in assessing the problem and determining a course of action or priority.

Some of these items may be related and as a consequence will have a bearing on the action to be taken.

Thirdly, you may have to cross check diary entries in order to answer the question in the most effective way.

You have to decide what is relevant and how all the information should be used.

Finally, you will have to use your knowledge and understanding of Fire Service Standards and Procedures to provide the best response.

Your answers will need to be clear and concise by recording them in the form of brief bullet points.

Additionally, in question 5 your answers will have to include specific categories of information. These categories are pre-printed in the Question/Answer Booklet and could for example be a request for a date or for particular arrangements for health and safety etc.

*As in question 3, you will be able to plan your responses using the rough work sheet provided **but watch the time**, as the rough work sheet will not be marked.*

12. Guidance in Relation to Question 6

This part of the examination is concerned with written communication skills.

You will be required to write TWO short pieces of communication, which relate to the scenario of one of the 'in-tray' items that you dealt with in either Question 4 or 5.

You will therefore be familiar with the situation and will have analysed the problem in some depth. You will need to refer back to your findings for the item in order to complete the communication effectively.

The correspondence required may be a:

- (a) report; and/or
- (b) letter; and/or
- (c) memorandum.

The Examiner will be looking to establish if you have demonstrated:

- (a) An appropriate style for the Content of the communication.

You will need to modify your language and terminology depending on who the letter or report is intended for, for example by adopting the appropriate tone in addressing a senior officer or by avoiding technical language when corresponding with a member of the public.

- (b) That communication is coherent, logical and clear.

Your piece of written correspondence is intended to inform a specified person of a particular scenario, or sequence of events, of which that person has no knowledge. The letter, report or memorandum should therefore proceed in a logical and chronological sequence that makes the information accessible and easy to understand.

- (c) That there is a basic skill in grammar and punctuation.

A single page will be allocated in the Question/Answer Booklet for each item of communication so they will need to be concise and to the point.

There will not be the need to write out addresses etc for your communication, as they will have already been pre-printed for you.

*As in questions 3, 4, and 5, you will be able to plan your responses using the rough work sheet **but watch the time**, as the rough work sheet will not be marked.*

13. Preparing for this Section of the Examination

If you do not have the experience of dealing with this type of question in an examination, or do not have to deal with 'in-tray' material in your current post this type of examination could appear daunting unless you have undertaken some preparation.

An 'in-tray' exercise is a practical exercise with the emphasis on your judgement to use your knowledge and understanding of fire service situations to provide a solution.

You can and should take steps to improve your knowledge and understanding of typical 'in-tray' material at work as part of your examination preparation.

It would be useful for you to seek the help and assistance from your Station Commander by asking to be made familiar from time to time with the real problems and situations that are in the Station Commander's actual 'in-tray'.

Ask how and why the problems were prioritised and dealt with by the Station Commander in a particular way and consider how you would have dealt with the same situations and why.

Clearly, your Station Commander's 'in-tray' could include a very wide range of items dealing with all sorts of issues and you would not be able to familiarise yourself with all the possibilities.

In an 'in-tray' exercise the emphasis will be more on your ability to deal with whatever comes up, rather than on the content. You are just expected to use your common sense, judgement and knowledge of fire service procedures to deal with each 'in-tray' item.

Practice reading letters and memo's to be able to quickly see the points at issue and the pitfalls that may present themselves if they are not dealt with in a particular way.

Look at reports and other sources of data to get an understanding of what they have been prepared to show or represent. Fire report statistics are a good example.

Practice writing quickly and to the point. The time allowed in the examination is finely balanced and requires you to make a decision and write it up without the time for padding.

Consider the various job roles both above and below that of Station Commander and what sort of problems or situations should be delegated down to a Watch Commander or passed up to a more senior officer for attention.

Finally, practice dealing with a number of problems in a time frame that is akin to the time allowed for the examination in order to build up experience of working to time pressures.

References

Fire Service Examinations Board