
Preparing for psychometric tests

Employers and careers services, amongst others, are increasingly aware of the value of psychometric tests. 'Psychometric' means the tests have been designed specifically to measure abilities, aptitudes, skills, interests or aspects of personality. The ones you will most commonly encounter are 'ability' or 'aptitude' tests.

THE ADVANTAGES OF PSYCHOMETRIC TESTS

- **Psychometric tests are an additional opportunity to demonstrate your skills**

In a careers or job interview, it is impossible to give the full picture of your skills and personality. A person's c.v. and qualifications may say very little about them if their strengths lie in areas which are not covered by conventional qualifications. Certain skills are, in fact, better measured using carefully constructed psychometric tests (e.g. problem-solving, spatial ability).

- **Psychometric tests provide a fairer assessment of your skills**

Psychometric tests provide an objective way of assessing your strengths and weaknesses. They are developed by trained psychologists using rigorous methods to ensure that the tests are unbiased and do not contain material which could favour certain candidates. The tests are 'standardised', meaning they have been tested on people of a similar age and background and performance is interpreted relative to that standard.

Psychometric tests are also objective in terms of scoring. Most tests use multiple-choice questions with set right and wrong answers, so there is no room for bias in marking.

- **Psychometric tests can help you understand more about your abilities**

Psychometric tests are useful to employers because, having identified which skills or 'competencies' are necessary to perform well in a given job, psychologists can provide tests which are tailor-made to assess those skills.

Finding a 'best-match' between person and job is a two-way process, however; a psychometric test may suggest that you are unsuitable for a certain job, but if the job does not use your skills and interests, you are unlikely to find it satisfying. It follows that in the case of personality tests, it is in your interest to be honest! It is worth remembering to ask for feedback from any psychometric test.

- **The answer is in the question!**

Most **ability tests** ask multiple-choice questions, where you have to choose one correct answer from several answer options. The answer options include 'distractors' - incorrect responses such as errors which are easily made or responses which resemble the correct answer in some way. There are many ideas about how to spot the correct answer from the distractors (such as spotting patterns in answers or selecting from 'middle' answers) but it is best to ignore this kind of strategy.

Psychometric tests are increasingly sophisticated and are designed to ensure that you cannot perform well by the 'multiple-guess' approach. Guidance on how to approach a test can be found in the section titled 'The test itself'.

There are no right or wrong answers to **personality questionnaires**. These are untimed and you are usually asked not to spend too much time thinking about each question but to give a quick and honest response. Do not try to second-guess the responses you *think* should be given – some personality questionnaires can detect deliberate distortion of answers and you could be asked to expand upon your responses in an interview.

WHAT DOES A PSYCHOMETRIC TEST LOOK LIKE?

Personality questionnaires and ability tests are either paper-and-pencil based or may be taken on computer.

Paper-and-pencil tests often come as a booklet with a separate answer sheet. The answer sheet usually has printed boxes and you indicate your answer to each question or statement by marking the relevant box. You are instructed what to do by a person administering the test.

Computerised tests come in different formats. You are given instructions either by an administrator or on the computer screen itself. In some cases, tests are completely computer-administered and you familiarise yourself with the instructions at your own pace and choose when to start the timed test. You usually indicate your answers by clicking on an answer option using the mouse.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

Ability tests typically measure three areas of skill:

1. **Verbal skills** – reading and understanding or deducing information.
2. **Numerical skills** – solving mathematical problems.
3. **Abstract or Non-verbal skills** – solving visual puzzles or problems by reasoning e.g. identifying the next shape in a sequence of shapes.

Examples of each of these types of test are given below, to give you an idea of the types of questions you may encounter. In each example, the correct answer appears in bold.

Verbal Skills

- You may be given a passage of information to read, followed by a number of statements to which you have to answer 'True', 'False' or 'Cannot Tell', on the basis of the information in the passage.

Example

The destruction of the world's forests has proceeded at an alarming rate over the past two decades, mainly as a result of economic pressures in the developing world. Forests of growing trees absorb carbon dioxide, but this is released into the atmosphere when they are cut down and allowed to rot, or burnt. The tropical rain forests, home to half the world's plant and animal species, are of special concern.

Statement: Growing trees contain carbon dioxide.

True

False

Can't tell

- You may be asked to find the relationship between pairs of words.

Example

find is to hidden as repair is to ?

- a) stolen*
- b) irregular*
- c) mend*
- d) lost*
- e) broken***

- You may be asked to find the common meaning between a list of words, and then identify a word with a similar meaning.

Example

<i>create</i>	a) <i>complain</i>
<i>make</i>	b) construct
<i>produce</i>	c) <i>expand</i>
<i>build</i>	d) <i>argue</i>
?	e) <i>copy</i>

Numerical Skills

- You may be asked to find the relationship between a series of numbers patterns of numbers, by indicating the next number in a sequence.

Example

5 6 8 11 ?	a) 13
	b) 14
	c) 15
	d) 16
	e) 17

- You may be shown some information and asked a numerical question based on that information.

Example

The table shows the price of shares in three companies.

<i>Company</i>	<i>Share price</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>45p</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>129p</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>88p</i>

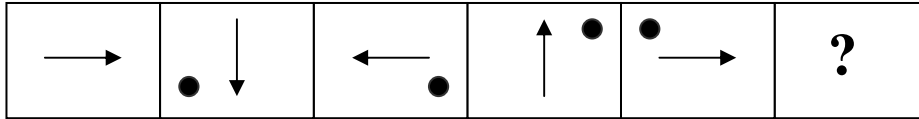
Question: What is the value of 90 shares in Company A?

3950p **4050p** 4200p 4350p 4500p

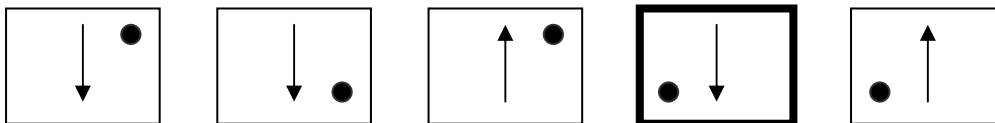
Abstract or Non-verbal Skills

- You may be presented with a series of shapes and asked to identify the next shape in the sequence.

Example

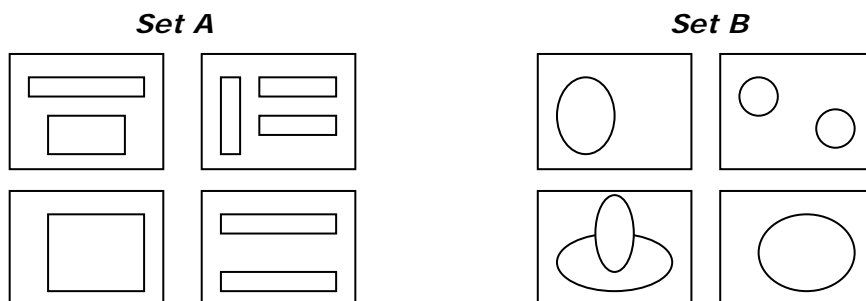


Which is the next shape in the sequence?

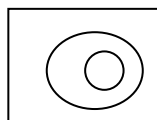


- You may be presented with two sets of shapes and asked to identify whether further shapes belong to one of the sets, or don't belong to either set.

Example



Which set, if either, does the following shape belong to?



Set A

Set B

Neither

WHAT CAN I DO TO PREPARE FOR AN ABILITY TEST?

General preparation

- Test-taking is a skill which can be developed. You can improve your performance with practice, so start preparing as early as you can.
- Ask for sample tests from your careers service and practise taking them. In the case of prospective employers, find out what kind of tests you will be required to do and ask if example questions are available.
- Spend time looking at the formats of different tests and answer sheets. This will help you to become more comfortable with them so that you feel on familiar ground when you see the test paper.
- Practise timing yourself. Pacing yourself is a vital skill in timed tests and it is a skill that you can improve with practise. Practising with other people is a good way to create test conditions.
- Review basic maths, particularly calculations you know you find difficult. Think of possible mathematical operations that could be required and practise them. Make sure you can interpret graphs, tables, pie charts, etc.
- Improve your vocabulary and comprehension by reading. Look up the meanings of words you are unsure of. Practise reasoning through what is clearly true or untrue from passages of information. Review your understanding of grammar and practise spotting associations between words or types of words.
- Take care of your physical health and get several good night's sleep in a row before the test.
- If you have experienced serious problems with nerves or sleeplessness around exams, it is worth getting advice about how to deal with this in advance.

On the day before the test

- Check the time and place of the test, and make sure of your travel arrangements.
- Review anything you feel you need to, but don't overdo it; set yourself a certain amount of time to do this and then allow yourself an evening doing something completely different.
- Try to build a positive mental attitude; think positively about your abilities and try to stop negative thoughts. Distract yourself by doing something that you know you will enjoy e.g. read a good book, watch a film, do something that makes you feel good about yourself.
- Eat a good meal and get a good night's sleep.

On the morning of the test

- Breakfast is important but avoid 'heavy' foods which can make you feel tired during the test. Some people consider unsugared foods, such as cereal and bananas, good 'brain food'.
- Collect everything you need to take into the test. Some people like to take a drink or something sweet into a test. Don't forget your glasses or hearing aid, if you wear them.
- Try to remain calm and to maintain a positive mental attitude.
- Leave yourself plenty of time to get ready and get to the test centre so that you do not panic.

The test itself

- Listen to and read the test instructions carefully. If you are unclear about something, ask.
- You will be given time to read the instructions before the timed part of the test begins. Example and/or practise questions are usually given to help you understand what you have to do. Do work through these to make sure you are clear about what the test requires you to do.
- Try not to pay attention to other people taking the test around you. Remain focused on the test.
- Ability tests are usually strictly timed, so it is important to work as quickly and as accurately as you can. If you are stuck on a question, do not waste time on it; go on to the next one and come back to it at the end if you have time.

- The best approach with multiple-choice questions is to try and work out the answer yourself, and then see if your answer is one of the given options. If your answer is not one of the given options, check your reasoning or calculations. If you are absolutely stuck, make an educated guess rather than picking an answer randomly; eliminate answers you know to be wrong and then go with your best guess from the remaining options. In the case of True/False questions, absolute words such as 'always', 'never', 'only', 'must', 'completely' sometimes provide clues to the correct answer.
- Only change your answer if you are sure you have made a mistake. If you are unsure, it is probably best to stick with your first answer.

PLEASE NOTE: These points are for general guidance only. You should always follow the specific instructions you are given for the test or questionnaire you are taking.