

**Guide to Using Competency-Based
Qualification Standards**

Draft for Comment

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Guide to Using Competency-Based Qualification Standards

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Part I: Introduction

Purpose of the guide

This guide provides information on using **competency-based qualification standards** for evaluating the minimum qualifications of job applicants. We created this guide to provide agencies additional background information on competency-based qualification standards and their role in the overall examining process. While this guide does include qualifications-related policy information, it is not intended to be a complete resource on The Office of Personnel Management's (OPMs) qualification standards policies and procedures. For comprehensive information, please refer to the [Qualification Standards Policies and Instructions](#).

Introduction to competency-based qualification standards

What are qualifications?

In accordance with 5 CFR 338, OPM establishes qualification requirements for competitive service positions classified as General Schedule (GS) (or equivalent) white collar occupations in the Federal Government. This information is primarily used by Federal agencies when filling positions to determine whether job applicants meet the minimum requirements.

Qualification standards are used as a first step in identifying applicants who will perform satisfactorily on the job, and to screen out those who are less likely to do so. The requirements included in a qualification standard are only those essential for performing job duties. In other words, it is unlikely an employee would be able to perform satisfactorily in a position if he/she did not possess *at least* these qualifications.

What are competencies?

OPM defines a competency as a measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully. Successful job performance requires a broad range of competencies, such as technical knowledge, analytical abilities, and interpersonal skills. Competency-based standards capture the breadth of qualifications required to perform the work of an occupation. Evaluating applicants on competencies provides a more accurate assessment of qualifications. OPM has a long-standing, Governmentwide, occupational study program where we have identified competencies for many Federal occupations and have used this information in the development of the competency-based qualification standards.

What are competency-based qualification standards?

Most qualification standards permit applicants to qualify on the basis of education and training, or experience, or a combination of the two. They focus primarily on technical knowledge and are expressed in quantitative terms, such as number of years of experience or number of credit hours of coursework. While experience and education are useful to consider in reviewing an applicant's qualifications, focusing on only those factors may not cover all of the important competencies required for a job. The competency-based approach incorporates a focus on the quality, not just the quantity, of education and experience.

The Federal Government needs to focus on hiring people with a balance of technical and non-technical competencies; people with important general competencies such as customer service, teamwork, oral communication, and interpersonal skills. For decades, private and public sectors have studied and used competencies across HR functions. Competency-based assessment tools derived from a job analysis help managers identify the most qualified applicants for a position. All the competencies identified in a standard have been found to be critical for effective job performance for that occupation.

A competency-based qualification standard provides a flexible way for agencies to determine if applicants are qualified for a position because of the many options for assessing applicants against the standard (for example, ability tests, work samples, structured interviews). In addition, those same assessments also may be used for rating purposes, enabling a more seamless assessment process for both the applicant and agency. Part II of this guide will discuss assessment options in more detail. In addition, we have prepared a set of Questions and Answers (Q&As) on the competency-based qualification standards, available in [Appendix A](#).

Part II: Evaluating Applicants Using a Competency-Based Qualification Standard

This section provides information on the steps involved in evaluating applicants against a competency-based qualification standard. For complete information on the use of qualification standards, please refer to the [Qualification Standards Policies and Instructions](#). Once applicants have been evaluated favorably against the qualification standard, they are eligible for further assessment for placement into quality categories. For more information on assessing applicants under competitive examining, please refer to the [Delegated Examining Operations Handbook](#).

The following are the main steps in applying competency-based qualification standards:

Step 1: Refer to the applicable standard for the qualification requirements;

Step 2: Identify any additional qualification requirements for the position; and

Step 3: Determine assessment method(s) to be used.

Step 1: Refer to the applicable standard for the qualification requirements

Competency-based qualification standards are individual qualification standards, that is, these standards are NOT used in conjunction with any of the [Group Coverage Qualification Standards](#) established for many Federal occupations.

Required competencies

Each standard identifies a set of required competencies and associated proficiency levels by grade. Competencies may be general (for example, Problem Solving), meaning they may be required for many occupations. Technical competencies (for example, Principles of Accounting) are required for a specific occupation or group of related occupations. OPM has identified the required proficiency levels for each required general competency. As technical competency requirements differ from agency to agency, and position to position, agencies are responsible for identifying the required proficiency level for technical competencies identified in a standard based on a job analysis. Applicants must demonstrate the required proficiency level on all required competencies to be considered further for the position.

Proficiency scale and definitions

For each competency, an individual may demonstrate proficiency through understanding and/or applying the competency. The five proficiency levels range from Level 1 - Awareness to Level 5 - Expert. Table 1 presents the proficiency level scale and definitions for both general and technical competencies.

Table 1. Proficiency Level Scale

Proficiency Level	General Competencies	Technical Competencies
Level 5 – Expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in exceptionally difficult situations. • Serves as a key resource and advises others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in exceptionally difficult situations. • Serves as a key resource and advises others. • Demonstrates comprehensive, expert understanding of concepts and processes.
Level 4 – Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in considerably difficult situations. • Requires no guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in considerably difficult situations. • Requires no guidance. • Demonstrates broad understanding of concepts and processes.
Level 3 – Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in difficult situations. • Requires occasional guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in difficult situations. • Requires occasional guidance. • Demonstrates understanding of concepts and processes.
Level 2 – Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in somewhat difficult situations. • Requires frequent guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in somewhat difficult situations. • Requires frequent guidance. • Demonstrates familiarity with concepts and processes.
Level 1 – Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in the simplest situations. • Requires close and extensive guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in the simplest situations. • Requires close and extensive guidance. • Demonstrates awareness of concepts and processes.

Agencies may supplement the scale with illustrations, that is, behavioral examples that represent a particular proficiency level. The illustrations are useful for making proficiency level determinations, and can be tailored to the specific occupation. Table 2 provides sample illustrations for the competency Interpersonal Skills at the Basic proficiency level, tailored to the occupation of Human Resources Management, 0201.

Table 2. Proficiency Illustrations for Interpersonal Skills at the Basic Level for an HR Specialist, 0201, Position

<p>Interpersonal Skills Shows understanding, courtesy, tact, empathy, concern; develops and maintains relationships; may deal with people who are difficult, hostile, distressed; relates well to people from varied backgrounds and situations; is sensitive to individual differences.</p>		
Level	Definition	Behavioral Examples
2 - Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies the competency in somewhat difficult situations. • Requires frequent guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers to assist employees in resolving problems with their benefits election. • Works with other HR staff on a cross-functional team to improve coordination of activities. • Works with others to minimize disruptions to an employee working under tight deadlines.

Education and experience

In addition to demonstrating the required competencies, applicants must meet experience and education requirements. Each standard identifies the specific qualifying education and/or experience by grade level. If an applicant fails to meet the required education or experience required for the occupation, he or she cannot be considered further for the position. Some qualification standards permit combinations of education and experience to qualify, as specified in the individual standard.

Experience

Experience may be described as general or specialized. General experience is progressively responsible experience that may have been gained in a variety of work situations. Specialized experience is experience that has equipped the applicant with the particular technical competencies to successfully perform the duties of the position and is typically in, or related to, the work of the position to be filled.

Education

Applicants may qualify based on education instead of experience at certain grade levels, as outlined in the particular standard. Occupations (for example, Accountant, 0510) that require specific education to qualify for a position retain those mandatory educational requirements. In other cases, education may be qualifying for a position in lieu of experience requirements.

Step 2: Identify any additional qualification requirements for the position

In some cases, the competency-based standard will include a technical competency (for example, Auditing) as a required competency. As the specific technical competency requirements differ from agency to agency, and from position to position, the employing agency is responsible for establishing the level of proficiency required at each grade level based on the requirements of the position being filled.

Further, agencies may supplement the required competencies with additional general or technical competencies, as needed, based on job analysis. It is important to note that any additional competencies used for making qualifications determinations must be required to satisfactorily perform the job, and will not be acquired through training or on-the-job experience. That is, those individuals who do not possess the competency at the identified proficiency level are unlikely to be able to perform the requirements of the job. As always, agencies may assess additional competencies for the purpose of placing applicants into quality categories (after qualifications determinations are made).

Selective factors

Selective factors are competencies or other special qualifications (for example, a foreign language) that an individual must have to be able to perform the duties of a specific position and cannot be learned in a reasonable amount of time on the job. Agencies must document through job analysis that individuals without the selective factors cannot perform the job. When selective factors are used they become a part of the minimum qualification requirements for the position; therefore, applicants who fail to meet them are ineligible for further consideration.

Step 3: Determine assessment method(s) to be used

Applicants must be evaluated on all required competencies, selective factors, and/or additional competencies added by the agency. Agencies are responsible for developing an appropriate assessment method for evaluating applicants on the qualification requirements. In most cases, agencies assess qualifications using occupational questionnaires that applicants complete when first applying for a position. However, the competency-based approach provides agencies the flexibility to assess applicants using other methods. Using effective assessment tools is one of the most critical parts of examining. For more information on assessments and designing an assessment strategy, please refer to OPM's [Assessment Decision Guide](#).

The competencies identified in the qualification standard are not the only ones agencies can assess applicants against. As stated in the [Delegated Examining Operations Handbook](#):

Minimum qualifications screening and subsequent assessment are two separate steps in the examining process. Screening for minimum qualifications is usually the first hurdle in the selection process. The first step is to sort applicants into two groups: ineligible and eligible. Applicants who do not meet the minimum qualification requirements are ineligible and thus “screened out.”

Agencies should continue to evaluate applicants beyond qualifications screening for purposes of making a final selection decision. To that end, agencies may set higher competency proficiency levels for placing applicants into quality categories. For example, a qualification standard may require the competency of Teamwork at a proficiency level of 2 – Basic. This requirement is simply for applicants *to be considered further* for a position. The agency may have job analysis information that supports a higher proficiency as a selective placement factor or might use higher proficiency levels for placing applicants into higher quality categories.

Effective assessment is a critical piece of the hiring process. OPM has developed a website, dedicated to assessment and assessment-related topics. This site contains the [Assessment Decision Guide](#) that covers the essential concepts behind personnel assessment in easy-to-understand terms. Also available is the [Assessment Decision Tool](#), a resource agencies can use to identify potential assessments for various competencies, based on a user’s specific hiring situation. In addition, [Appendix B](#) of this guide provides a list of assessment resources available online.

Competencies identified from OPM’s occupational studies

OPM has conducted a number of occupation-specific job analysis studies and has provided the results to agencies through the Chief Human Capital Officer’s (CHCO) Council website (www.chcoc.gov). The competency-based standard will provide a link to an occupational study, if available. Agencies may use the competencies identified as critical for a particular occupation and grade in OPM’s occupational studies for selection purposes without further job analysis in support of their use.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Assessment Tool	Any test or procedure (for example, ability test, structured interview, work sample) used to measure an individual's employment or career-related qualifications and interests.
Competency	A measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully.
Competency-Based Qualification Standard	A qualification standard used to determine if individuals are qualified for further consideration for a position, using a common set of competencies for the occupation.
General Competency	A broadly applicable competency (e.g., Problem Solving) that may be required for many occupations.
General Schedule	The broadest subdivision of the classification system covered by title 5, United States Code. It includes levels of difficulty and responsibility for covered positions for grades GS-1 to GS-15. It is designated by "GS" for both supervisory and nonsupervisory positions.
Grade	The numerical designation, GS-1 through GS-15, that reflects the range of difficulty, responsibility, and qualifications required of positions in the General Schedule classification system.
Job Analysis	A systematic method for gathering, documenting, and analyzing information about the content, context, and requirements of the job. It demonstrates the relationship between the tasks performed on the job and the competencies required to perform the tasks.
Personnel Assessment	A systematic approach to gathering information about individuals; this information is used to make employment or career-related decisions about applicants and employees.

Term	Definition
Proficiency Level	A level of expertise or mastery demonstrated through understanding and applying a competency.
Qualifications	Competencies, education, and/or experience that an applicant must possess, at a minimum, to be eligible for hire or promotion under the competitive service.
Quality Ranking Factor	A competency that will enhance performance in a position and is used to identify the highest quality applicants. Quality ranking factors are not used to screen out applicants.
Required Competencies	The competencies identified in the qualification standard that are required to perform the work of an occupation.
Selective Factor	Competencies or special qualifications (for example, a foreign language) that an individual must have to be able to perform the duties of a specific position and cannot be learned in a reasonable amount of time on the job. Selective factors are applied in addition to the qualification requirements. Applicants who do not meet a selective factor are ineligible for further consideration.
Series	A group of positions in a specialized line of work with similar qualifications requirements. Series are designated by a title and number (e.g., Accounting, 0510; Secretary, 0318; Microbiology, 0403).
Technical Competency	A competency that covers specialized knowledge (e.g., Network Management, Principles of Accounting) that is required to perform the duties of a particular occupation, or group of similar occupations.
Uniform Guidelines	A set of principles that assist employers, labor organizations, employment agencies, and licensing and certification boards in complying with Federal law prohibiting employment practices that discriminate on the grounds of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. They provide a framework for determining the proper use of tests and other selection procedures: http://www.uniformguidelines.com .

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Questions & Answers (Q & As)

Question: Why did OPM revise the qualifications for these occupations?

Answer: OPM revised the qualifications standard to incorporate competencies that have been found to be critical for effective job performance for that occupation. Competency-based standards capture the breadth of qualifications required to perform the work of an occupation. Evaluating applicants on competencies provides a more accurate assessment of qualifications.

Question: How were the competency requirements identified for each occupation?

Answer: The competency requirements were identified based on a Governmentwide occupational analysis study. The results of the study were reviewed to identify the competencies that are most important, required at entry, and measurable. Certain competencies, such as writing, were eliminated from consideration because they are impractical to assess through minimum qualifications screening.

Question: Do agencies have to assess applicants on all the requirements?

Answer: Yes, an applicant's eligibility is based on meeting the minimum proficiency levels required for all of the competencies, as well as the experience and/or education requirements.

Question: Can agencies supplement the minimum qualifications?

Answer: Yes, this has not changed. Agencies may continue to supplement minimum qualifications with additional requirements (i.e., selective factors) identified through job analysis. Selective factors become part of the minimum requirements for a position.

Question: What is a selective factor?

Answer: A selective factor is a "screen-out" (i.e., if an applicant does not meet a selective factor, he/she is ineligible for further consideration).

Selective factors:

- are essential for successful performance on the job (i.e., if individuals do not have the selective factor, they cannot perform the job);
- are almost always geared toward a specific technical competency/knowledge, skill, or ability;
- require extensive training or experience to develop; and,
- cannot be learned on the job in a reasonable amount of time.

Question: What else can an agency do to supplement the qualification standard?

Answer: Agencies may continue to use quality ranking factors, if supported by job analysis. Quality ranking factors significantly enhance performance in a position, but, unlike selective factors, are not essential for satisfactory performance. Applicants with higher proficiency levels on a quality ranking factor are placed above those with lower proficiency levels. Agencies may not rate qualified applicants ineligible solely for failure to possess a quality ranking factor. With quality ranking factors, the focus is on the level of proficiency the applicant brings to the job. This flexibility continues to ensure managers can specify the competencies that significantly enhance performance in a given position.

Question: Must agencies evaluate current employees using the new qualification standards for the position they currently hold?

Answer: Agencies are not required to re-evaluate individuals who currently occupy a position in a covered series. Also, agencies are not required to re-evaluate employees for promotion when they are in a career ladder position where competition is not required for promotion. Agencies must use the new standard when evaluating the qualifications of applicants applying for positions in the covered series, including situations where employees apply to be promoted.

Question: Can the employing agency change the required competencies or proficiency levels?

Answer: No, the employing agency must assess applicants on all of the competencies for the required proficiency levels. However, if a standard contains a technical competency (for example, Principles of Accounting) the agency must set the proficiency level based on the requirements of the position being filled. In addition, if the agency adds any additional competencies as selective factors, the agency must also set the proficiency level, based on a job analysis.

If an agency plans to use the required competency(ies) for category rating, the agency will determine the proficiency level(s) associated with each quality category.

Question: How will agencies assess the qualification requirements?

Answer: Agencies are required to use validated (i.e., job-related) assessment procedures when examining applicants for competitive service positions. These assessment procedures must comply with the requirements in 5 CFR part 300, and the Delegated Examining Operations Handbook, 2007 (DEOH, 2007) (Chapter 2, Section C), and be consistent with the technical standards in the Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures (Uniform Guidelines) (see 29 CFR Part 1607).

Examples of assessment procedures include:

- job knowledge tests
- occupational questionnaires (rating schedules)

- ability tests
- work samples
- situational judgment tests
- structured interviews

For more information refer to the [Delegated Examining Operations Handbook](#) (DEOH) and the [Assessment Decision Guide](#).

Question: Must agencies continue to use either the Administrative Careers with America (ACWA) written tests or the ACWA rating schedules when using these standards for an ACWA-covered position?

Answer: The ACWA written tests and the ACWA rating schedules are two assessment tools that are validated for use with the professional and administrative positions found at Appendix D in the DEOH, 2007. Agencies are not required to use ACWA and may use an alternative assessment tool. As noted, assessment procedures must comply with the requirements in 5 CFR part 300, and the Delegated Examining Operations Handbook, 2007 (DEOH, 2007) (Chapter 2, Section C), and be consistent with the technical standards in the Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures (Uniform Guidelines) (see 29 CFR Part 1607). For additional information, please see the memo from OPM at www.chcoc.gov/Transmittals/TransmittalDetails.aspx?TransmittalID=2064.

Appendix B: References

Sources of Guidance for Qualifications and Hiring In the Federal Government

The Handbook of Occupational Groups and Families

The [Handbook of Occupational Groups and Families](#) defines the occupations and occupational groups and lists the series names and codes used in classifying both white collar and trades and labor jobs in the Federal Government. It can be found at www.opm.gov/fedclass/gshbkocc.pdf.

Qualification Standards Policies and Instructions

Qualifications policy established by OPM for General Schedule (GS) (or equivalent) white collar occupations in the Federal Government. This website is available at: www.opm.gov/Qualifications/policy/index.asp.

Delegated Examining Operations Handbook (DEOH)

The [Delegated Examining Operations Handbook](#) provides assistance to agencies with delegated examining authority. It provides agencies with guidance, options, and, where necessary, specific operational procedures that ensure that examining programs comply with merit system principles, laws and regulations. The DEOH can be found at: www.opm.gov/deu/Handbook_2007/DEO_Handbook.pdf.

Sources of Guidance for Assessments

OPM's [website](#) provides assessment information and resources for the Federal community. The site includes the *Assessment Decision Guide* that covers the essential concepts behind personnel assessment in easy-to-understand terms. Also available is the *Assessment Decision Tool*, an interactive tool is designed to help human resources professionals and hiring supervisors/managers customize their assessment strategies based on specific competencies and other factors relevant to their hiring situations.

The [Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures](#) (29 CFR Part 1607) provides a set of principles for determining proper test use and selection procedures, covering topics such as validity, test fairness, and adverse impact. You can find the Guidelines (and other Government documents related to the Guidelines) at www.uniformguidelines.com.

Another source of guidance is the Department of Labor's [Testing and Assessment: An Employer's Guide to Good Practices](#). The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) developed this document to assist managers and human resource professionals in making assessment-related decisions. This publication is available online at www.onetcenter.org/dl_files/empTestAsse.pdf.

The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) publishes the [*Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures \(4th Edition.\)*](#) The Principles discuss validation research and personnel selection, specifying principles of good practice in the choice, development, evaluation, and use of personnel selection procedures. It is available on the SIOP website at www.siop.org/Principles/principlesdefault.aspx.

Several organizations publish guidance on testing standards, including the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), which jointly developed *The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* available at www.apa.org/science/programs/testing/standards.aspx. The *Standards* provide information on how to develop, evaluate, and use tests and other assessment procedures in employment settings.

Please note that this section is for informational purposes only, and is not an endorsement of any particular publication.