

Psychometric Testing Tips & Advice

Introduction

Psychometric tests are responsible for a great number of applicants being rejected from a job offer. The best way to pass your psychometric test is to prepare ahead, work hard on the day, and develop a good-practice test-taking approach. Print the tips below and follow the advice to be in with a chance of success. Psychometric tests are often just one part of an assessment centre, along with other tasks such as group work exercises, presentations and in-depth competency based interviews.

Most employers are using psychometric tests to measure the capabilities of applicants, compare the brightest candidates, and find the best match between employer and employee. Employers love psychometric tests because they are a quick, effective way to automate the process of sifting through vast numbers of job applications. Candidates are less fond of psychometric tests, but you can approach them with confidence by reading our top tips and advice below.

The term psychometric test is an umbrella term which covers ability testing and personality profiling. On this page we give tips of the two main categories of psychometric testing since you will probably encounter both.

Psychometric tests consist of two main types:

- ▶ aptitude tests (e.g. numerical, verbal, inductive reasoning)
- ▶ personality questionnaires (e.g. how you behave in situations)

Aptitude tests

Psychometric aptitude tests otherwise known as ability tests are designed to measure your cognitive capacity, for example numerical reasoning or verbal comprehension. Practising this type of psychometric test will help improve candidates' scores. You can start practising aptitude tests now by visiting www.shl.com.

Personality questionnaires

Personality questionnaires aim to measure character traits such as confidence, empathy, attitude to risk, and so on. They are called questionnaires because there are no right or wrong answers, however the recruiter will be looking to see how well you fit with their organisation. It is not possible to wildly influence the outcome of personality tests because to a large extent you are who you are. You can start practising personality tests now by visiting www.shl.com.

Aptitude Tests Generally

This section deals with psychometric aptitude tests in general, including online tests and assessment centre based tests. For tips specific to numerical and verbal reasoning please see below.

Tip 1. Practice

Practice is the most commonly advocated route to aptitude test success, and one very few people would dispute. Familiarity with the style and format of aptitude tests will help calm your nerves and will allow you to focus all of your attention on answering the questions. The last thing you want during your real test is to waste time getting to grips with it. Practising questions and seeing where you went wrong will hopefully prevent you from making the same mistakes in your real test. The first few times you try an aptitude test, the chances are you will get the timing wrong. Don't let the first time you sit a test be the one that counts.

Bear in mind that recruiters actively encourage all candidates to practise psychometric aptitude tests beforehand so they have results from a level playing field. They don't like having to compare results of people who have taken psychometric tests before with those who have not.

Tip 2. Know your test

Ring up before hand to ask what test publisher the employer will be using. Most human resource departments will be happy to tell you and even point you in the right direction for where to practice that specific type of test. Visit that company's web site and see if they make available any practice tests. SHL is a popular test provider and they offer practice tests on their website. It is also worth asking them if negative marking will be used in their test. It rarely is used, but they will take into account accuracy so don't frantically guess answers!

Tip 3. Don't get your friends to help

If your test is online, it might be tempting to get a friend to help out. Apart from being immoral, this carries a large risk of backfiring. Application processes that require the candidate to sit an online psychometric test usually then invite successful applicants to an assessment centre where they will verify your test performance. So they will soon find out if your online test was completed by you. Besides, the reason the company is putting you through a set of aptitude tests is to test if you would be able to perform in the advertised role. If you don't achieve the level they are seeking, you will probably struggle and be unhappy in that particular job role.

Tip 4. Make the most of online tests

If you have been asked to take an online test, as opposed to one conducted at an assessment centre, make the best use of this advantage. You have more factors in your control and you shouldn't neglect any of them. Make sure you will not be interrupted; let your friends or family know that you are not to be interrupted and turn off your phone. Make sure you are not hungry, thirsty, or need to go the loo. Plan a time when you will be alert, and prepare a cup of coffee in case you start to fade. Make sure you have everything you will need to hand; rough paper, pens, a calculator, a dictionary etc.

Tip 5. Realistic simulation

Find out when your real psychometric test is and try to practice at the same time of the day. Also sit your practice psychometric tests in one go; don't take a break half way through because you won't get to do that in the real test! If you have been asked to take your psychometric aptitude test online, practice in the same room as you will sit your real test.

Tip 6. Ask for a dictionary

In most tests conducted at an assessment centre, you are allowed to ask the invigilator for a dictionary or calculator (in both numerical reasoning and verbal reasoning tests). This may sound bizarre to be allowed a dictionary in verbal reasoning tests but they are trying to test your comprehension and reasoning skills more than your vocabulary. Their thinking may be that in real life you'd have access to a dictionary, just as in real life you'd have access to a calculator. This is especially important to remember for candidates whose first language is not English.

Tip 7. Stay focused

Concentration and stamina are as important in timed psychometric aptitude tests as is natural intelligence. If your concentration wanes during your test, you will waste valuable time. You must treat the psychometric test like a sprint; you should be mentally exhausted at the end of it from concentration. If you have to take several tests over the course of the day at an assessment centre, try to rest between tests and treat the day more as a marathon comprising several short sprints. Psychometric tests are a competition and you should treat them as such.

Tip 8. Ask for feedback

Some time after your test (normally a couple of weeks) most assessors will provide feedback on your performance. This information is extremely valuable if you are to learn from mistakes and know what questions to concentrate on next time. Assessors following British Psychological Society good practice are obliged to provide you with individual feedback so don't be afraid to ask.

Tip 9. Write Some Questions Yourself

If you have allowed enough time before your aptitude test that you have practised all the practice tests you can find, a useful exercise next is to write some questions yourself in the same style. This is a sure way of getting your head into their way of thinking, and finding out where it is possible to go wrong (for example not interpreting the data in the table correctly). This will also show you how important it is to read and understand the question wording: try writing a question that has only one possible answer to it, it's difficult to remove any ambiguities. Swap questions with friends; you will learn lots from this process. And going through each other's tests might even shed light on faster ways of going about the same problem if each person shares their working.

Tip 10. Early Bed

It's the same with any test: if you are tired, your mental performance slows down and you can lose concentration. Losing concentration when the timer is ticking means you lose the opportunity to score points.

Tip 11. Know When to Move on

Sometimes you will get started on a question not knowing how long it might take you. Doing lots of practice should help you to judge if a question is going to be particularly labour-intensive, but if you find yourself over a minute into one question and are still not confident you are going about the question in the right way, leave it and move on. Usually all aptitude test questions are weighted evenly. Your valuable time will probably be better spent on a different question.

Tip 12. Go to the Loo

It is easy when at an assessment centre to lose track of how many cups of coffee and glasses of water you have had. The last thing you need is an uncomfortable bladder distracting you during your test. The time of your tests is usually scheduled on the program you are given before your assessment day, so plan ahead. If your tests are online, this is obviously which is easier to control. This advice of being comfortable before you start obviously applies to thirst and hunger too.

Tip 13. Ignore Other People

Try to block out distractions at the assessment centre. If you notice that someone else has turned a page before you, or that everyone else has left their calculator on the table whilst you think you need it, try to ignore them. As soon as you lose concentration, or get flustered over what other people are doing, you will be losing time. If someone is making noises though, politely ask the invigilator to have a word with them. A few minutes of being distracted might make all the difference.

Tip 14. Speak up if you are not happy

This is best done when you sit down to take your test but the test has not started, perhaps when the invigilator is introducing the test. Pay attention to your surroundings; are there any distracting noises, do you have a wobbly table, is there a draft? If you politely ask to move seats, no one will really think anything of it, and if it means you are not distracted during your test, the difference might even equate to a few extra marks.

Tip 15. This is not the Only Test

If you are not confident in your performance in a particular psychometric test, push it aside and move on. Remember that employers will be considering collectively your scores in psychometric tests in addition to interview performance. Remember this and you should be able to tackle each test with a focused non-panic-stricken mind.

Numerical Reasoning Tests

This section of tips deals specifically with numerical reasoning aptitude tests. If you need to know about verbal reasoning, scroll down. Generally applicable psychometric aptitude test advice is given above.

Tip 16. Understand the Questions

If you practice some psychometric aptitude tests, you will see for yourself how easy it is to be caught out by not reading the question properly. This includes not recognising the units, not seeing the applicability of a graph or table (e.g. dates), and making assumptions about implied meaning. It is worth re-reading the question after you have answered it to check you have understood it since this will take a split second but away the time spent on that question.

Tip 17. Take Your Own Calculator

If you are sitting your numerical reasoning test at an assessment centre, the chances are you will be told you have to use the calculator they provide to you. However take your own just in case. You will be familiar with the functions of yours and the locations of buttons will be instinctive, enabling you to save a few vital seconds over the other candidates. If your psychometric test is online, obviously you can use your own calculator.

Tip 18. Know Your Calculator

If you are allowed to use your own calculator (often not the case at assessment centres), or you are sitting your numerical reasoning tests online, make sure your calculator is both familiar to you and has large buttons and a clear screen. Don't use the calculator on your mobile phone for example! This will all help save time and will reduce the chances of calculator entry mistakes.

Also, make sure you are familiar with all the useful features of your calculator. The numerical reasoning tests you will have to face probably won't have lengthy statistical analysis and complex functions. But as a minimum make sure you know:

- ▶ How to use the bracket function to deal with calculations involving multiple stages.
- ▶ How to enter values to multiple memories and recall them.
- ▶ Powers. This is useful, for example, in calculating compound interest over multiple years.

Tip 19. Use the Rough Paper

In most psychometric aptitude tests you will be allowed to use rough paper for your working. Sensible use of this will cut down mistakes and save you time if you have to go back to a mid-point in a calculation. The extent to which you write down your working obviously has to be balanced with taking too long on each question; you will get a feel for how much you need to write down when practicing some aptitude tests for yourself. Writing things down also helps you spot mistakes with units, which are all too common if you do all the work on your calculator. Sometimes, the working for one question will be required in the working for the next question, so if you already have it written down, you don't have to repeat that part of the calculation.

Tip 20. Consider Only the Options Available

This applies to numerical reasoning tests only, since the most common form of verbal reasoning tests only ever have three options; True, False and Cannot say. In some numerical questions you can immediately discount some of the available options using deduction or common sense. In ratio questions particularly (e.g. what is the ratio of A:B:C:D) you might not have to calculate all of A, B, C and D. If you've calculated A and B and you can see that only one of the options available is your answer for A:B then click that one and move on! This is a good time-saving technique.

Tip 21. Time Allocation for Numerical Reasoning Questions

For numerical reasoning questions, have a quick look ahead at the next few questions to see how many questions a figure applies to. It is common for one figure to apply to three or four questions, in which case it is worth investing time to absorb what the data is telling you before launching into the first question. Then on each question, you can refer back to the data but at least you know where to look and what you are looking at. A typical example of time allocation for a set of three questions might be:

- 3 seconds scanning ahead to see how many questions the figure relates to;
- 15 seconds studying and absorbing the graph/table/data;
- 10 seconds reading and understanding the first question;
- 60 seconds answering the question and quickly referring back to the data;
- 10 seconds reading and understanding the second question;
- 60 seconds answering the question and quickly referring back to the data;
- 10 seconds reading and understanding the third question;
- 60 seconds answering the question and quickly referring back to the data.

That’s about three and a half minutes to answer three questions, which is about right for a typical set of three numerical reasoning questions.

Tip 22. Financial Times Graphs

It’s important to be able to quickly digest and interpret presented data such as graphs, histograms and tables. One of the ways you can improve your speed in an aptitude test is by reducing the time it takes you to take in the information presented in the numerical reasoning questions. You will soon find it second nature to check what the axes are and in what scale, check if the graph has been rebased or not, check if numbers are given in different units, and check what is an estimated projection compared with what are recorded values. All these things help you to quickly answer numerical reasoning questions, and you can improve your data interpretation skills by reading figure-based news in for example The Economist or the Financial Times. You can also use the data in the pages of these publications to practice converting from one currency to another, which commonly comes up.

Tip 23. Human Error

When performing calculations in your calculator, for example summing a long list of numbers, read the numbers directly from the monitor screen/test paper instead of your rough working. It is easy to misread your scribbles. Also it cuts out one opportunity for human error (the incorrect writing down of numbers onto paper).

Tip 24. Check Units and Bases

A commonly used technique to test candidates is to present a table of numbers in a thousands for example. A sloppy test taker will miss this and give the wrong answer. The wrong answer is usually one of the options, so make sure you register all the information presented in tables and graphs. Practice will help train you into looking for these details.

Tip 25. Know Your Percentages

One of the most common areas of confusion and sources of mistakes in numerical reasoning questions is understanding how to apply percentage calculations to information given in a question. It is essential to understand whether you are being asked to work out a percentage change from A to B or if it’s from B to A. This will determine whether the correct calculation is $A \div B$ or $A \times (1-B)$. Let’s consider two examples.

“In 2009 sales were £1,000, which was an increase of 10% from sales the previous year. What were the sales in 2008?”

The correct calculation is $\pounds 1,000 \div 1.1 = 909.091$. Why is it not $\pounds 1,000 \times 0.9$? Because that would be a decrease of 10% applied to £1,000, not an increase of 10% applied to an unknown number. Let’s consider a second similar question.

“In 2009 sales were £1,000. If in 2010, sales decrease by 10%, what would be the sales in 2010?”

Since this is a decrease of 10% from one number to another, we start with the reference number and multiply by (100 - 10)%. So in this second example, the correct working is $£1,000 \times 0.9 = £900$.

Remember: it is all in the wording of the question. Understand what the reference number is and understand what the product number is.

Tip 26. Do Sanity Checks

After spending valuable minutes understanding a graph or table, it would be foolish not to spend a couple of seconds checking your answer. This does not mean going through all the working again (that would be a waste of time), but you should spend a few seconds re-reading the question to make sure you have indeed calculated what is being asked, and have a go at estimating a range for where a sensible answer should lie. This serves a quick check to ensure you haven't done anything silly, or got your units wrong. And hopefully you will move onto the next question with a positive confidence.

Tip 27. Use a Calculator which displays the last entry

With data interpretation questions it is inevitable that you will have to at some point add up (or subtract, or similar) a large list of entries from a table or graph. It is very easy in this type of calculator-entry work to miss out an entry or accidentally take an entry from an adjacent column. If you use a calculator which displays your last calculation or entry (all scientific calculators do this) you can use this feature to check where you go up to and also check that your last entry was correct. Basic calculators do not do this.

This tip only really applies to online psychometric tests because for those conducted at an assessment centre, you will usually be told you have to use the calculator provided.

Verbal Reasoning Tests

This section of tips is specifically intended for verbal reasoning aptitude tests. If you require tips on numerical reasoning or psychometric aptitude tests generally, see above.

Tip 28. True, False or Give Up

The trick to verbal reasoning questions is to always remember the strict meaning of the three possible responses. They are:

- ▶ True means the statement follows logically given the information contained within the passage.
- ▶ False means the statement cannot logically follow given the information contained within the passage.
- ▶ Cannot Say means you are not given enough information in the passage to decide.

The key to all of these is you must consider ONLY the information given in the passage.

Tip 29. Take Everything Literally

A robot would do well in verbal reasoning tests since it will not take anything for granted, it will not make unjustified assumptions, and it will be literal almost to the point of being obtuse. Take every word literally and remember you are asked to answer the questions based on only what is given in the passage. Think to yourself “Am I being told this statement is absolutely 100% true or being told this is absolutely 100% false?” If neither, the correct answer must be Cannot Say. The statements are True or False only if the information in the passage tells you as much. Practice some questions for yourself and check our solutions. You will be caught out if you start making assumptions about information not explicitly given in the text passage.

Tip 30. Time Allocation for Verbal Reasoning Questions

For verbal reasoning questions, your approach to time allocation should be slightly different to that for numerical questions. Again, have a quick scan ahead to see how many questions the passage relates to; it is typically three to four. With verbal reasoning tests however, the bias of time spent reading the passage should be towards the first reading and understanding. Then when it comes to answering a particular question, you know where to check the wording/ meaning of the passage in order to answer the question. So, for a typical set of three questions, the time plan might look something like this:

3 seconds scanning ahead to see how many questions the passage relates to;

60 seconds reading and understanding the passage.

5 seconds reading and understanding the first question;

35 seconds answering the question by finding the relevant sections in the passage.

5 seconds reading and understanding the second question;

35 seconds answering the question by finding the relevant sections in the passage.

5 seconds reading and understanding the third question;

35 seconds answering the question by finding the relevant sections in the passage.

That's about three minutes to answer three questions, which is about right for a typical set of three verbal reasoning questions.

Personality Questionnaires

This section deals with the personality questionnaire side of psychometric tests.

Tip 31. Get to the Assessment Centre Early

You will perform your best when you are calm and focused on the test in front of you. If you have just rushed through the door and are worrying about putting on your name badge, you are not going to give your test your best performance.

The personality test itself will unlikely be timed, however this does not mean you can spend all day considering your responses. The instructions for the test will probably tell you to answer quickly because the first answer that comes to mind is usually the one most reflective of your true feelings.

Tip 32. Answer Honestly but With the Company and Position in Mind

It is very difficult to distort the results of a psychometric personality questionnaire, however if you research what sort of person the company is looking for, you can emphasise those particular qualities in yourself. For example if you know a company is looking for someone who is empathetic and caring, remind yourself of that before you take the test and it should be at the forefront of your mind when answering questions. You can consider carefully your response to each question as most personality questionnaires do not have a time limit.

As well as keeping in mind the culture of the company, consider the role for which you are applying. For example a new graduate probably should not answer "Strongly Agree" to the question "I prefer to give orders rather than receive them". But a manager's role would require some agreement with that statement.

The other thing to bear in mind is that the test instructions will usually tell you to answer in the context of work, not your social life.

Tip 33. Don't sit on the fence

Try not to answer too many questions with the response "Neither Agree nor Disagree" otherwise you will be in danger of appearing to be indecisive or afraid of conviction. It also makes it difficult for the test administrator to establish what you're really like and if they don't get a strong positive match to a role, they will put you in the 'no' pile.

Tip 34. Don't be a Drama Queen

Conversely to the previous tip, you must also avoid answering too many questions with “Strongly Agree” or “Strongly Disagree”. This might make you appear unrestrained and too assured in yourself.

Tip 35. Be Consistent

Personality questionnaires deliberately ask the same question more than once but phrased slightly differently. They do this to reinforce your responses and check you are answering truthfully. This means you should be consistent in your responses. Reminding yourself of the organisation's culture can help with being consistent.

The personality test report seen by the employer will show how consistent you have been in your responses.

Tip 36. Answer in a Work Context

You will be told this before you start your test but it is important to bear in mind, especially when you find yourself thinking “it depends” for an answer. The employer is interested in only how you might perform at work, so try to keep your responses in keeping with your work personality. This approach will also help you imagine yourself in the scenarios presented and decide on your response.