

# Fire Academy Preparation & Success Tips

## By Steve Prziborowski

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## Tips To Help A Probationary Firefighter Succeed Once They Get Hired & Accepted Into The Recruit Academy

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The following items should also be adhered to if you are going through a college firefighter academy.

1. Always have at least one pen on you at all times. You can't go wrong getting on of the pens and clipping it to your t-shirt collar. You'll need a pen for writing down information on calls and for taking notes. Nothing more embarrassing than having to ask someone to borrow a pen.
2. Always have a watch with a second hand and one that glows in the dark. Besides needing it for taking vital signs once you're on the line, it is not a nice-to-have, but a need-to-have. You'll never know when you will need it, but if you don't have one, it is pretty embarrassing having to tell the person asking you to time something or what time is it, "I don't have a watch." Go to Costco (or a similar store) and buy a heavy duty, waterproof watch. I still have the same one that I bought in my academy 10 years ago, it works great.
3. Don't rely on your PERS (or other similar government retirement plan) to cover your retirement costs. As we are seeing now, our governor is attempting to alter/modify/delete our current plan. What we see today may not be the same when it comes time to retire. Continue to save, save, save for that rainy day.
4. Going with number 3 above, max out your deferred compensation plan from the first day you get hired. Once again, your government pension that you are promised upon retirement (which can be 90 to 100% of your last year's salary, depending on where you work), will look great the first five or so years after retirement, but it will not take long for that retirement paycheck to not look so good because of inflation, medical costs, and other related costs you will incur as you get older. Maxing out your deferred comp from day one is the smartest idea because you get used to not seeing the money. Trying to do it after you've been accustomed to a certain salary and way of life is almost impossible. Plus, understanding about how money and interest compounds/multiplies will make you want to do so as early as possible in your career.
5. I hear the same old complaints from our probies "I can't afford to put any money into my deferred comp, I'll get to it later." Yeah right, you will. Denial is not a river in Egypt... Start feeding that deferred compensation account to the maximum from day one. You'll never have a better opportunity to have your money multiply for such a long duration as if you started on day one.

6. Be nice to EVERY ONE you meet, whether they are in uniform or not. You never know who they might be and it is just the right thing to do.
7. Start learning the names and positions/assignments of all of the chiefs, all of the officers, and all of the firefighters that work in your new department. Why? Because it is the right thing to do and because you'll need to know them at some point anyway, why not start now? The sooner you start, the easier it will be, especially in larger departments. If you get hired by say the LAFD, with over 3,000 members, good luck. Do the best you can. Also start learning the names of the administrative personnel (secretaries, etc.) that you come in contact with during training, the hiring process, etc. They will assist you at some point in your career, start learning who they are, what they do, and how they can help you.
8. A good way to do number 6 above is to get a hold of a fire department yearbook (if that department has produced one) or some other document with pictures on it.
9. If you meet someone new for the first time (and there will be a lot of first times - you'll feel like an Alzheimer's patient for a while), take the time to extend your hand, shake their hand, and say something to the effect of "hello, my name is John Smith, I am one of the new probationary firefighters (or whatever your dept. calls you), I am pleased to meet you." Hopefully they will provide their name, if they don't, try to tactfully ask that question and then throw in something to the effect of "where do you work and what is your assignment." Some people might call that kissing butt; I think it is just common courtesy. Realize every department is different and this may not be accepted practice in some departments.
10. Realize that you will not have much (if any) available sick or vacation time. That said, try to keep the hobbies to a minimum that might injure you (skiing, motorcycling, snowboarding, etc.). If you don't have the time to use as sick leave, there is no requirement they have to keep your job. Wait the 12 to 18 months for probation to finish if you do something that has a high risk of injury.
11. Also, try not to plan any big trips. You won't have much vacation and some departments don't even allow trades or reduce trades for probies. In some departments, it is frowned upon for probies to take trades. Know your department's culture.
12. Learn as much as you can about your new department. Besides learning the names and ranks of personnel, learn about the history and about every possible thing you can. This information can be found out primarily just by showing interest and talking with the firefighters you work with. Most will love to talk about the history with you. Other good sources include department history books, yearbooks, the Internet, a fire dept. museum (if they have one), each fire station itself, etc.

13. It seems to me that many probies don't seem to care about the history (or at least they don't seem aggressive in learning about the history) of a dept. these days. History is there for a reason - we can learn from history and it also helps you talk with and understand people since history is contained every day in our conversations in some form or fashion.
14. If it is appropriate in your dept., try to attend EVERY department function. These can include: Holiday parties, union meetings, barbecues, recognition dinners, retirement dinners, etc. This is a great way to meet more of the personnel you have not yet met, to meet some of the retirees, to learn more about how the department operates, and to just be more involved to your department.
15. When appropriate, get involved. Many departments don't allow (or like) probies to get involved on committees, etc., but that doesn't mean you can't start learning about the different committees so you can start planting the seeds for when you get off probation. We are all looking for our members to get involved in some form or fashion.
16. Always have a full set of spare street clothes in your car, as well as numerous pieces of dept. clothing. When I got hired, I purchased 10 t-shirts and 2 to 3 each of sweatshirts, sweat pants, sweat shorts, etc. You're going to get stinky and dirty, and you'll want a clean change of clothes since you might not be able to launder your clothes every night after the academy.
17. While you're driving to the academy each day, and going to lunch with your classmates (assuming your dept. allows that), don't drive with your blinders on. Start learning the streets, the target hazards, etc. What a great way to start learning your way around town. On that note, try to spend your money (food, gas, snacks, etc.) in the dept.'s jurisdiction. Besides having the money go back to the city (that you'll indirectly benefit from in the long run), you'll get to learn the areas. This will come in handy.
18. On the same lines of number 14, buy a street map of your new dept.'s jurisdictional boundaries. Mark each fire station on the map and include the assigned apparatus. What a great way to learn where each fire station is and what units are assigned to each station. This will be a necessity. The last thing you want to do is get your station assignment and say "can you tell me how to get there?" That doesn't make you look to good. GPS devices are great – but nothing beats a paper map, especially one that is durable and even in book form, and will last the brunt of you writing on and using daily.
19. Also, take the time to highlight each main target hazard (schools, hospitals, shopping centers, large companies, major transit centers, city buildings, etc.) in your map book. Besides having to respond to them on calls, you'll probably be tested on them as well.

20. Additionally, highlight the primary streets in your map book so you can start memorizing them. Then do the secondary streets, etc.
21. Keep this map with you at all times and then with you when you work at the stations to study.
22. Learn the address of each station (if you're hired by LAFD, with over 100 stations, good luck). This will teach you basic address schemes (such as odd numbers are on the north and east side of the street and even numbers are on the south and the west side of the street) of the city and will start you learning your streets (which most departments require and test you on). Once you learn the street name, learn the cross street as well. And then, which way the numbers progress on the street (meaning the digits increase going north, or decrease going south).
23. Remember that it is tough to learn everything all at once. However, if you start small, at the time you get hired, and then think of it as "building blocks," you'll be surprised at how much you will learn and retain.
24. Always have spare money with you in case you forget your wallet. Try to keep a bunch of coins in your car, and also some small bills (in case you forget your wallet and need food, bridge toll, etc.). Go a step further and put some coins and money in a water tight container and carry it on your turnouts. This will be good once you get on line and are coming back from a 5 am run and you have just had your first trash fire and the captain tells you, "oh, your first trash fire? Perfect, you can buy us donuts." Instead of saying "can I borrow some money, my wallet is at the station?" You can say, no problem, I have money in my turnouts.
25. If you have extra uniforms, keep at least one shirt/pants in your vehicle in a secure space. Chances are you'll get the one you're wearing dirty at some point and need a clean set. Don't keep them visible because some thief would love to get their hands on it...
26. Always have a toiletries kit in your vehicle. I remember one probie asking me (when he was working at the station), "Cap, can I borrow your deodorant since I forgot mine?" I prefer the roll on deodorant and what do you think my answer was? NO!!! That's almost as bad as asking to borrow a toothbrush or towels. Oof.
27. Last, but not least, if you are issued a probie binder to get things signed off in, make copies of it on a regular basis. One of our probies lost (actually his car was broken into and they took the book and some turnouts) his book a couple of years ago - the one that had almost 18 months of probie sign-offs completed. He did not have a copy in a secure location. He was dancing around for a while and quite nervous until he was told it was ok. This could have easily gone against him.

# Reasons Why Firefighters Get Terminated During The Recruit Academy Or Probationary Process

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You've worked your tail off to obtain the career you've always wanted – a firefighter working for your dream department! Countless hours spent away from family members. Countless hours studying and preparing for every phase of the hiring process. Countless miles spent driving to different cities to take written tests, oral interviews, physical ability tests, and to visit fire stations to get more information on how to prepare yourself for a firefighter position with that department. Countless dollars spent on gas, fire service books and publications, and education / training.

All of it paid off; you obtained the badge of a firefighter with your dream department! Then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, you are released during the recruit academy or the probationary process. You're devastated! Your whole world has crashed down upon you! What will I do now you say?

Let me begin by saying this article is not meant to be negative. It is meant to be an eye-opener for you to learn from to ensure you do not find yourself in the same position. Getting terminated from a fire department does not mean you will never be hired by another fire department, but the cards are really stacked against you at this point. I have personally known people to get terminated during the academy and/or probationary period and then get rehired as firefighters for other fire departments. It is not impossible to get rehired by another department; it is just not as easy as it sounds. Learn from the mistakes and misfortunes of others so that you do not find yourself in the same position!

In no specific order, here are 15 reasons why people resign, leave, fail out of the fire academy, or are terminated during probation:

1. **Poor physical condition during the academy** – If you are not in excellent physical shape prior to starting the academy, don't expect to be successful!
2. **Immaturity** – I don't think this was too much of a problem until about the last 10 years or so. In my opinion, this is because many candidates used to come into the fire academy with military experience and/or life experience. This is just not the case today. I was hired into my first firefighter position at the age of 27. While I wish I could have been hired at a younger age (so I could retire at an earlier age), I do think it worked out for the better. In that time frame from when I was 18 until I was 27, I had the chance to finish my A.A. Degree, my B.S. Degree, my Paramedic license, my Firefighter 1 certificate, take countless firefighter tests, and also experience what it was like having to live on my own and pay for my bills (as opposed to having to rely on mom and dad). During this entire time, I also worked full-time to not only pay the bills, but also prove to a fire department that I understood responsibility,

3. **Injury** – If you experience an injury (especially one that causes you to miss any time from the academy) don't expect them to guarantee you a position in the next academy! I have known candidates that have experience injuries during the academy that have made them lose their positions in the academy, due to their inability to complete the academy. Some of those individuals have been lucky enough to have been offered a position in the next academy. They better appreciate that kind gesture for the rest of their career! To the best of my knowledge, a department is not obligated to keep you if you get injured during the academy.

In many fire departments, the probation period doesn't even begin until you have completed the academy. Injuring yourself during probation and after completing probation is usually not an issue if the injury occurred on the job. However, doing something stupid off duty and injuring yourself (even after probation) can potentially cost you your job if you run out of sick leave and/or long-term disability. Choose your actions and hobbies wisely!

4. **Background check reveals more information after hiring** – When you complete a job application as well as a background packet, there is usually a spot at the bottom where you have to sign it and date it. Most applications and background packets also have wording to the effect of “any falsifications or misrepresentations are grounds for not getting hired and/or termination once you are on the job.” Be honest!
5. **Unable / unwilling to follow orders or follow the chain of command** – This isn't rocket science. The fire service is still a paramilitary organization and will probably continue being one for many years to come. Get used to it and make the best of it. You might not think of your Captain giving you an order when you are asked to clean the bathrooms, but in reality it is. One of the things that really frustrates me is when I ask a firefighter to do something (which doesn't have to be done at this moment, just by the time we get off duty in the morning) and I either have to ask them to do it a second time or I find out the next shift through some other means that the request was never followed through. Do your job; it isn't that difficult! Don't make your Captain feel like they are a babysitter.
6. **On duty and off duty personal conduct (including Alcohol and Drug usage, Arrest and/or convictions)** – I know of a recruit that had just finished his academy midterm and went out drinking with some classmates. He didn't make it home that night because he had the privilege of spending the night in the county jail after getting pulled over for driving under the influence. He didn't make it back to finish the academy either because the department decided they were going to cut their losses and let him go. Even if the person was off of probation, his job still might have been in jeopardy. Many people forget that most fire departments require all members to always have in their possession a current driver's license.

If you get your driver's license suspended, you run the risk of termination or loss of pay (depending on the memorandum of understanding/agreement and/or the department rules

and regulations). Also, if you get arrested, and you cannot make your scheduled work day, most departments will consider it to be abandoning your job – something else that is grounds for termination. Remember that you can't hide getting a D.U.I. (or other traffic related violations) because most departments participate in the DMV pull system which means the department will be notified of any traffic related incidents you are involved in.

7. **Poor academic performance in the academy** – Most academies require a recruit to keep an 80% average on the written examinations that are administered almost daily and to pass the final written examination with a score of at least 80%. Many candidates say “I don't do well on written tests, but I do great at the physical hands-on stuff.” Well, that might be fine and dandy, but if that is the excuse that you are using because you don't do well on written examinations, you need to find a way to increase your scores! As a firefighter, you will be taking written examinations throughout your career (promotional examinations, EMT continuing education, annual training classes / mandates, etc.) so you better do what you have to do to get better at them.
8. **Not completing academic assignments during probation** – Most fire departments have some form of probationary sign-off binder that you are required to complete. Get your assignments done in advance to allow you extra time to study for your tests and to plan ahead for those days where your crew doesn't have time to let you get those sign-offs done. As is customary in most fire departments, some Captains make an added effort to train their probationary firefighters and get their sign-offs completed and some Captains make an added effort to not do their job and not find the time to train their probationary firefighters. Take advantage of those motivated Captains who will go above and beyond their call of duty to push you to become the best firefighter you can be.
9. **Excessive absences during the academy and probation** – Keep yourself healthy and fit! Missing even one day of the academy can be the end of your career with that department. Eat healthy, exercise appropriately but not excessively, get plenty of sleep, and try to stay away from sick people! I know a probationary firefighter that got into a motorcycle accident halfway through probation, and ended up having to miss approximately four months of work. Now realize that they did not have that much sick time to utilize (they did not even have a month of sick time accrued yet). They were able to secure other people to work their assigned duty days (as shift trades).

While the department wasn't obligated to do this for a probationary person who did not have the sick leave accrued, the department was nice enough to accommodate this excessive trade request (some departments require the fire chief to approve more than so many trades in a row or a certain time period). Now while the person has to pay back all of those shift trades, they at least still have a job and they didn't have to take leave without pay for over three months (hard to pay the bills when you aren't getting paid).

Realize though that the person couldn't get any of their probationary sign-offs completed during the time they were sick and couldn't make their mandatory monthly testing they were required to be at with their classmates. Because of this, the department extended their probation to give them more time to make up their missed tests and missed sign-offs, which some departments would not have bothered to even do. What's the moral of the story? Keep yourself healthy, keep your name in good standing at the department, keep up on all of your sign-offs, and wait to buy or use the toys that can cause you to miss time from work (motorcycles, skis, snowboards, jet skis, personal watercraft, etc.) until you have completed probation!

10. **Failure to perform** – This idea is pretty straightforward. You were ranked number one because of what you said during your 20-minute oral interview. You told the department how great you were and how awesome of a firefighter you would be. Now, you can't even properly throw a ladder or don your SCBA in the required time frame of 60 seconds or less. Failing the manipulative (hands-on) skills tests you will be put through daily, weekly, and monthly can and eventually will, lead to you being asked to leave.
11. **Not asking for help** – Don't wait until the last minute to ask for help with either the book stuff or the hands-on stuff! Most people ask for help after it is too late. Recognize your deficiencies and weaknesses early and accurately so you can work towards improving on them.
12. **Family pressure / responsibilities** – Your family is your most important responsibility in life. They should be there before you became a firefighter and after you retire from your firefighting career. Make the time to keep them happy and balance all of your personal and professional responsibilities. The fire service already has a high divorce / separation rate; don't add your name to the list. While it is always tempting to work that extra overtime shift because you need the money (or the money has already been spent), I doubt you would be able to find a firefighter on their death bed stating "I wish I had worked that extra overtime shift." I bet they would instead say "I wish I would have spent more time with my family." If you need the money that bad, and you can't live off of your salary without the overtime, you either need to find a new career, have your spouse get a job, or learn to control your spending habits.
13. **Not being a team player (loner)** – The fire service is not the best place to be if you are a loner. In some ways, the fire service of today almost enables this to happen because of privacy enhancements that are being built in the newest fire stations (individual bathrooms, individual bedrooms, etc.). Many firefighters complain that those things have taken away from the team-concept and team-building environment, and I kind of agree in some respects. Regardless, on probation, remember there is a fine line between being too social and anti-social and with understanding your place as a member of the team.

14. **Finding out this was not the career they wanted actually be in** – Strange as it might seem, many people don't realize this until they either start the academy or get out of the academy.
15. **Bad / poor attitude!** It is very easy to let go of someone with a bad attitude; it is sometimes difficult to let someone go because of a positive / good attitude. I'll go miles to help someone that wants to be helped, someone that has a great positive attitude, someone that understands their weaknesses and is trying their best to improve, and someone that you can see is sincerely doing what it takes to succeed. However, I find it difficult to go out of my way to assist someone who needs help when they have a bad / poor attitude, when they think they know it all, when they don't see or feel that they are in need of improvement, or when they appear that they lack the motivation, drive, or perseverance to succeed. Can you blame me? Realize that if you are not meeting the minimum standard or expectation level, even a great attitude can only go so far; you still have to perform.

Remember and stay clear of the above 15 reasons why people resign, leave, fail out of the fire academy, or are terminated during probation so that you may get your career as a firefighter off on the right foot. Remember that you are considered to be an "at-will employee." while in the academy and during probation. This means you can be terminated at any time during your academy or probation. The Department is not legally required to tell you why. You can show up at shift change, be called to the Captain or Chief's office, and be handed your pink slip and sent back out the door. Keeping a positive attitude, keeping your mouth closed (except when appropriate to ask pertinent questions) and keeping your eyes and ears open will go a long way to passing training and probation!

Special thanks go to Thomas Dominguez, Former Fire Captain, for sharing these thoughts.

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For additional firefighter preparation information, visit my website – [www.chabotfire.com](http://www.chabotfire.com) - on there, you will find lots of great things, such as:

- A free monthly newsletter, "The Chabot College Fire & EMS News."
- 3 Steps to becoming a firefighter (a great roadmap to assist you).
- The Firefighter Hiring Process Components link (detailed info on each of the phases of the testing process).
- Links to many free email lists and other free firefighter preparation resources.

Please watch out for two Firefighter preparation books I am publishing to be released this fall:

- The Future Firefighters' Preparation Guide; and
- Reach For The Firefighter's Badge!

Please feel free to contact me (contact info below) if I can be of any further assistance. Take care.