

Firehouse.com Article for March 2003

How to best prepare yourself to become a firefighter

By Steve Prziborowski

This article is going to focus on how you can BEST PREPARE yourself for the position of firefighter. Remember that the competition is very tough and you have to be able to show why you are the best candidate for the position. 3,000 people competing for 10 positions don't leave you with many margins for error. Think of the process of becoming a firefighter as survival of the fittest (or best prepared).

There are many ways you can prepare yourself to become a firefighter. Remember that you want to be UNIQUE in a positive way. You are truly competing against yourself, not the other candidates. The more you can prepare yourself, the better chance you stand at getting that badge! People ask me what classes to take to become a firefighter. My answer is that there is no "cookie-cutter" way to become a firefighter. What works for one person, might not work for you.

Many students just want to get the bare minimum, which I feel is an EMT certificate, a firefighter 1 academy certificate, and maybe a certificate of achievement in Fire Technology. Many just finish the academy and don't bother to complete the remaining three or four classes for their certificate of achievement. All of those qualifications should not be your stopping point; they are actually your starting point!

Why is that? Because look around at the competition. It seems like everyone has an EMT certificate, a firefighter 1 academy certificate, some fire technology classes, etc. Do departments require all of those things to take the test? Some do, some don't. Some require EMT certification or Paramedic licensure to take the test (bare minimum requirements). Some require one or both of those plus a firefighter 1 academy or firefighter 1 certificate. Some just require you to be 18 years old and have a high school diploma or GED. Think about it – if everyone has the bare minimum requirements or a notch above the bare minimum, what is going to separate you from them? **WHAT MAKES YOU *UNIQUE* COMPARED TO EVERYONE ELSE?**

That is what I want to concentrate on with this article. Personally, to compete in today's entry-level firefighter market; you should strive to obtain the following items (not in any particular order):

- **EMT certificate - MAKE SURE YOU DO NOT LET IT EXPIRE!**
- **Paramedic License - MAKE SURE YOU DO NOT LET IT EXPIRE!**
- **CPR for the Professional Rescuer (American Red Cross) or CPR Healthcare Provider (American Heart Association) – MAKE SURE YOU DO NOT LET IT EXPIRE!**
- **Firefighter 1 Academy certificate**

- **Firefighter 1 State certification**
- **Fire Technology – Certificate of Achievement**
- **Fire Technology – A.A. or A.S. Degree** – Even if you already have a four-year degree, I strongly suggest going for your two-year degree in Fire Technology. Why? Because it shows dedication to the career (my opinion). Some people ask me why should they get a two-year degree in Fire Technology, as opposed to just a Certificate of Achievement? Especially when they already have a four-year degree. Well, if you already have a four-year degree, you need to talk to a counselor at your local two-year college that offers a Fire Technology degree program. I bet you'll be able to transfer most of those units, leaving you with having to take one or two G.E. classes. One or two G.E. classes to get a two-year degree (as opposed to just the Certificate of achievement? That's a no-brainer. Do it! A Certificate of achievement in Fire Technology looks better than nothing. An A.A. looks better than a Certificate. A B.S or B.A. looks better than an A.A. degree. A Master's degree looks better than a B.S. or B.A. Get my point?
- **Volunteer experience** – I don't care what type of experience, just do something and do it well! Here is a great way to do something unique. People are always looking to become volunteer firefighters. That is great, but here you can really shine if you find some unique way to serve your community. I would suggest trying to have non-fire related volunteer experience to prove that you are "well-rounded." If you can also get volunteer fire experience, do that in addition. Besides trying to become a volunteer firefighter, contact your local fire department and see if they have volunteers in other areas of their fire department (as opposed to fire suppression) such as in administration, fire prevention, haz mat, training, etc. Many candidates don't realize the importance of a well-rounded background.
- **EMT experience on an ambulance or in a hospital** (full-time or part-time) – Firefighters respond to over 60% EMS calls in most jurisdictions. Do you think departments want inexperienced EMT's? Also, if you want to go to paramedic school, you usually need EMT experience.
- **Ambulance Driver's License** – If you want to work with a Private Ambulance Company in California (such as AMR), you will need an ambulance driver's license. It is available through any DMV office. Full-time firefighters working for a fire department that provides ambulance transportation services do not need ambulance driver's licenses. Each state might have different requirements relating to this area, so be sure you are aware of what is available to you.
- **Specialized Training Certificates** – If you live (or want to work) in California, examples include Public Education 1, Fire Prevention 1A, 1B, and 1C, Fire Investigation 1A and 1B, Auto Extrication, Rescue Systems 1, Confined Space Awareness & Operations, Swift Water Rescue, Hazardous Materials First Responder – Operational, Decontamination, Technician, or Specialist. These are classes certified through such agencies as the Office of the State Fire Marshal or California Specialized Training

Institute. If you live outside of California, there are similar classes available (they might have a slightly different name) through the Office of the State Fire Marshal.

- **Bilingual Ability** – If you don't presently speak a second language, immediately attempt to do so. Many departments give preference to bilingual candidates when hiring and some departments in Southern California (Santa Ana F.D., Garden Grove F.D., etc.) require EMT, FF-1, & a fluency in a second language just to take the test! Some people think they have to speak Spanish to be bilingual. While Spanish is an excellent second language to learn, there are other languages. A good friend of mine speaks Russian. How many other candidates speak Russian? Probably very few. Does that make him unique in a positive way? YES! He might be the only person on the Stockton Fire Department that speaks Russian (as opposed to a number of firefighters that speak Spanish).
- **Clean driving record** – This includes no accidents and no traffic tickets. Why is this important? At some point, you will be driving fire apparatus. If you have proven yourself to be a driver with accidents and traffic tickets on your record, how are you going to prove you're going to be an excellent driver that the public and your crew demands and deserves? Nobody is perfect. If you've had issues in the past, now is the time to prove to the fire departments that you really want to become a firefighter and that you've turned your life around. I wouldn't want someone that can't drive his or her personal vehicle safely, driving our crew around the city in our \$300,000 fire engine!
- **Excellent Physical Fitness** – If you don't have a physical fitness routine now, you need to get one! Pair up with a buddy or two and get a routine. Preferably you are able to get guidance from a professional on what to do and how to do it to obtain the maximum results. Weight lifting alone won't cut it! You need to have a combination of aerobic activities, cardiovascular activities, and muscular / strength-building activities. Don't forget your diet!
- **Memberships & Affiliations** – Start getting involved in the Fire Service. What are you waiting for? There are organizations you can join as a student that will give you more insight on the career you plan to spend the rest of your working years in (at least I assume you do). Many of these organizations provide a monthly newsletter. Examples include:
 - State Firefighters Association
 - International Association of Arson Investigators
 - National Fire Protection Association
 - National Association of EMTs

Being a member of various fire-related organizations is another way you can be unique, while also educating yourself on the fire service.

- **Fire Service / EMS Publications** – There are many of them that you can use to better educate yourself on current trends in the fire service. Some of the best choices include:
 - Firehouse Magazine

- Fire Engineering Magazine
- American Fire Journal
- Journal of Emergency Services Magazine (JEMS)

Firehouse Magazine even has email update services (free of charge) where they send you daily fire service related news updates.

NOTE: I've had entry-level firefighter oral interviews in the past where they asked me what are some current trends in the fire service. Because I was a subscriber to the above publications (and others), I was able to talk about the information (such as current fire service trends) that is contained in each monthly issue. Doing so showed the oral panel that I was motivated at keeping myself up-to-date with the fire service, and I was willing to invest in my future.

Now I apologize if I discouraged any of you after looking at that list. ***If anything, I hoped I motivated you to strive to be the best you can be!*** Don't think you have to get every one of those items done to become a firefighter. Some get hired with very little (or none) of the requirements and some have almost all of the requirements. **THERE IS NO GUARANTEED FORMULA ON BECOMING A FIREFIGHTER!** I'm just trying to give you suggestions to help guide your way. Remember, having some of the above requirements might allow you to take the test (minimum requirements) or compete with the other candidates, but getting hired still comes down to that 10-20 minute oral interview that is weighted 100% of your overall score.

If you cannot sell your qualifications or market yourself properly, you're not going to get the job! Just because you have it on paper or have done it in the past, doesn't mean you can communicate effectively what you have done. That communication is done in the oral interview, whenever you encounter a person related to the organization you're attempting to get hired onto, on your application, and on your resume (if you're allowed to turn in a resume).

SUMMARY: The information contained is my opinion, based on my experience and education. Remember the saying about opinions, they're like stomachs (I know I changed the word that usually goes there) – everyone has one! There are many right ways to do something. Not just the way that a firefighter told you, whether they are your neighbor, your friend, or a relative. Remember that what worked for that person getting hired, might not work for you. They did something right to get them their badge. Respect their opinion and listen to what they have to say.

I CHALLENGE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU TO FIND OUT AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ABOUT BECOMING A FIREFIGHTER! I am a **resource** to you, just like many other firefighters or ex-firefighters are. The information I provide you with is for you to use, as you feel appropriate.

YOU CAN LEARN SOMETHING FROM EVERY FIREFIGHTER OR EX-FIREFIGHTER. Talk to as many people as you can to get information

on becoming a firefighter. That way, you will not get locked into just “one person’s opinion.” *Remember – you are in control of your own destiny! What you make of your life is up to you and the effort and hard work you put into getting what you want.*