

Oral Interview Preparation Tip #2:

Increase your Oral Interview scores with the “Introduction-Body-Conclusion” concept!

By Steve Prziborowski

It is safe to see that the oral interview is the most important and most critical phase of the firefighter testing process. You can be the most physically fit individual, have the highest written test score, and have the best resume when compared to all of the other candidates, but if you cannot successfully sell yourself during the oral interview, you will never get a chance to become a firefighter. Most fire departments usually score the oral interview as 100% of your overall score, which translates to your final ranking on the eligibility list. If you cannot effectively communicate your knowledge, skills, and abilities to the oral interview panel, you will not get the job!

Most candidates are able to get a passing score on the oral interview. When I say passing, I mean at least 70%. Yes, there will always be some that don't make the minimum score (which is usually 70%) to continue in the hiring process. Additionally, there will always be a small percentage (usually less than 10% of all of the candidates being interviewed) that are able to score in the high 90 percentile; high enough to get to the Chief's interview and eventually get the job. However, most candidates will probably score in the 70 to 80 percentile; good enough to pass the oral interview, but not good enough to be considered any further in the hiring process.

What makes a score in the 90 percentile? What makes an answer to an oral board question better than the other ones the oral board has been hearing? What differentiates an excellent answer to just a good answer? Those are all questions I plan to answer for you.

Another article I wrote (Oral Interview Tip #1), was titled “Don't just answer the question, answer the question!” What I was trying to get across was that with a little bit of effort, you can add some points to your overall score by being more-detailed (not rambling, but more-detailed and more thorough when answering oral board questions). In addition to that method, I want to introduce another concept that I think can also add some points to your overall score, putting you closer to that perfect score of 100%. This concept I like to call "Intro-body-conclusion," and it can be used any time you answer a question!

In my experience, when asked a question, most candidates go straight to the answer, without having set the stage or warmed up the panel members. Excellent athletes warm up before they play their game. Good musicians warm up before they go on stage. Excellent public speakers warm up their audience before they get into the “meat of the matter” or their best subject material.

Let me give you an example. You are asked the question, what is your greatest strength?

Oral Interview Preparation Tip #2:

Increase your Oral Interview scores with the “Introduction-Body-Conclusion” concept!

Most candidates would provide an answer by going right to the point. They would either reply something to the effect of "I'm dependable," "dependability," or "I would have to say my greatest strength is my dependability." Answering a question with any of the above responses would get you a score of somewhere in the 70 to 80 percentiles. Let's not even get into the fact that using an answer such as "dependable" could be considered using a clone answer (an answer many other people are using. While that is true, work with me while I use it as an example).

Remember what I talked about regarding "don't just answer the question, answer the question." Providing more detail (and a specific example) will help increase that score of 70 to 80% up into the high 80's or maybe even the 90's. So now you answer that same question – what is your greatest strength? - "I would have to say dependability, because I have been working at the same company, Starbucks, for the past seven years and have not called in sick once." Providing a real-life example and being more detailed just gave you a few more points. Enough points to get to the Fire Chief's interview and eventually get the job? Maybe, maybe not.

How do I then increase my score even higher, and get one of the top oral board scores? By following the "intro-body-conclusion" concept.

Put yourself into a classroom for a minute. If you had a teacher ask you to write a term paper or research paper, would you go straight to the story? No! You would first start out by writing an introduction (maybe a paragraph), then by going into your body (your outline; a couple of bullet points that you are going to expand on), and then by finishing it up with a summary or conclusion (maybe a paragraph). Thus, the name "intro-body-conclusion." Without properly setting the stage for what you are going to be talking about, or even wrapping everything up in the end, the reader is left in the dark about why this is important for them to read, what it is they are going to get out of reading your paper, and what you're key points were.

When I was in my first instructor training class, I remember hearing the instructor tell us a method that good instructors use when presenting material. He told us you first have to “tell them what you’re going to tell them,” you then need to “tell them,” and then you need “tell them what you told them.” The “tell them what you’re going to tell them” is your introduction, the “tell them” is your body, and the “tell them what you told them” is your conclusion.

Take that same method and apply it to public speaking (which is what you are doing in an oral interview). Excellent speakers don't just start talking about their main topics. They always attempt to warm-up the audience with some jokes or some other material that will set the stage for what they are going to talk about (I usually don't advocate using jokes in a fire service oral interview). Two of the best late night television hosts, Jay Leno and Dave Letterman are good examples of this. For about the first five or so minutes of their show, they take the time to warm up their audience by telling jokes, to get them ready

Oral Interview Preparation Tip #2:

Increase your Oral Interview scores with the “Introduction-Body-Conclusion” concept!

and excited for their main show. They are motivating the audience to get them ready for what they really want to cover that night. Consider that their “introduction.”

I have been to many rock concerts over my lifetime and this concept is also applied in this arena as well. The audience usually knows when the headlining act is getting to hit the stage. The lights go down. There is usually some form of entrance music playing. Then, the announcer gets on the microphone "Oakland California, you've wanted the best, you've got the best.....the hottest band in the world, KISS!!!!!" The audience goes nuts. The audience is motivated and standing up, watching the performance and focusing on the performers. Consider that their “introduction.”

Think of the above items in the same fashion as you would your introduction while beginning to answer your oral board question.

As for the body of your answer, I'm not really going to discuss that at this point because I think most of us have no problem coming up with an answer to a question. Some answer the body with a simple answer; some provide a more detailed answer.

Now, for the conclusion of your oral board answer to a question. You've given an introduction. You've talked in detail (and did not ramble on-and-on or go off in any tangents), and now it is time to bring this question to a close. Think back to writing that term paper. This is your conclusion, your summary, your chance to bring everything to a close, your chance to reiterate your key points and end this question so you can go on to the next one. How can I successfully wrap this question up and sound organized and well spoken?

Every good thing must come to an end. Every good speaker summarizes their body of their speech and finishes up with some words that leave the audience wanting more and remembering what it was they came to hear. Every good musician / band leaves the stage with at least one song as an encore and with thanking the audience for coming there, leaving the audience wanting more. Consider this their conclusion

ANSWERING AN ORAL BOARD QUESTION:

Now let's look at the same question, "what is your greatest strength," and attempt to answer it using the "intro-body-conclusion" concept. Let's dissect it piece-by-piece.

- **INTRO:**

"While I believe I have many strengths that can relate to the fire service, let me concentrate on my dependability and how it relates to the fire service."

- **BODY:**

Oral Interview Preparation Tip #2:

Increase your Oral Interview scores with the “Introduction-Body-Conclusion” concept!

Dependability is not only my greatest strength, but also one of my core values. I pride myself in being dependable. For example, I have been working at Safeway Stores for the last seven years now, and I have never called in sick or missed one day of work because of injury or illness. I make it a point to keep myself healthy and also realize that people are counting on me in some form or fashion, so I do what I have to do to make sure I am dependable, whatever the situation is.”

- **CONCLUSION:**

“Dependability is one of the greatest strengths a firefighter can have. Whether it is showing up to work on time to relieve the person going off duty, following through on orders given to me by a superior officer, or working as a part of the team either on the fireground or around the fire station, being dependable is one of the most critical traits a firefighter can possess, and I believe I can bring that strength to the (include the name of the fire department you are testing for).”

SUMMARY:

That may seem to be a long-winded answer, as opposed to just stating a one-word or one sentence answer. However, does it not sound a bit more organized, detailed, thorough, and complete?

While I imagine there may be a couple of oral board questions that can be answered with a simple one-word answer (such as yes or no), I believe you can use the intro-body-conclusion format when answering any question, and make yourself sound more organized, and also help you stand out when compared to the other candidates.

When testing with hundreds if not thousands of other candidates, it is paramount to stand out in a positive and unique way. Answering your oral board questions using the intro-body-conclusion method will help you stand out in a positive and unique way, while also making you sound professional and organized. You only get one opportunity at the oral interview; properly prepare yourself and answer the questions with the “intro-body-conclusion” concept and you should see your scores increase drastically.