

SO, YOU WANT TO BECOME A FIREFIGHTER?

5 guidelines to assist you in becoming a firefighter

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Becoming a firefighter is not an easy task. It takes a great deal of perseverance, patience, persistence, dedication and good old-fashioned hard work to become a firefighter. Nothing in life comes easy; especially when you want to have one of the best careers a person could ever dream to have.

How long will it take to become a firefighter? That question cannot easily be answered because it really comes down to “what you give is what you get.” Not every person that starts out to become a firefighter ends up becoming a firefighter. For that matter, not every person that ever goes to medical school becomes a doctor; not every person that ever goes to law school ever becomes a lawyer.

I cannot guarantee that you will ever reach your dream of becoming a firefighter. What I can guarantee you is that if you never give up on obtaining your dream of becoming a firefighter, then your odds of succeeding greatly increase. On the average, I would say it takes anywhere from three (3) to seven (7) years to become a full-time paid firefighter. Some do it less time, some do it in more time, and some never get the chance to do it at all. I have known people to take 10 to 15 years to become a firefighter. I have known people to give up after a year of trying to become a firefighter.

What’s the moral of the story? If you give up, you give up your dream. If you continue pursuing your dream and continue doing whatever it takes to achieve that dream, continuously working on improving your weaknesses, keeping up your strengths, and preparing yourself to be the best candidate that you can be, then you stand the chance of actually achieving that dream!

Beginning the process:

Once you have determined that it is your dream to become a firefighter, then it is time to put your money where your mouth is and start preparing yourself on a full-time basis. It is a full-time job just getting the job!

Here are some basic steps to assist you in becoming a firefighter:

1. Enroll as a student at a college offering a two-year degree in Fire Technology or Fire Science. This can be done in person or via most college websites. For a list of community colleges in California offering Fire Technology degrees, go to www.chabotfire.com/Links.htm
2. Begin taking classes to work towards your Associate of Arts (A.A.) Degree in Fire Technology.

For example, here is a sample plan of action for any future firefighter, using the two-year degree program curriculum from Chabot College in Hayward, California:

First semester:

- **Health 61** (EMS First Responder – the prerequisite to get into the EMT program)
- **Physical Education 2 – IFS** (Introduction to fire science conditioning)
- **Fire Technology 50** (Introduction to Fire Protection Organization – a prerequisite for the firefighter 1 academy)
- **Fire Technology 52** (Firefighter Safety and Public Education - a prerequisite for the firefighter 1 academy)
- **Fire Technology 53** (Fire Behavior and Combustion)

- **Sign up for and successfully pass the Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT).** For more information on the CPAT as well as a typical firefighter hiring process, go to www.chabotfire.com/Process.htm
- **Any general education units towards your degree** (for specific general education units, talk to a counselor or a fire technology coordinator at a college).
- **Start building up volunteer experience** (anything you volunteer your time for is highly looked upon by fire departments, and it doesn't necessarily have to be fire or EMS related). For various volunteer opportunities, go to: www.chabotfire.com/VolOpps.htm
- **Start learning as much as you can about the fire service and the job of a firefighter.** Visit your local fire stations and start talking with the firefighters to build contacts and learn more about firefighting as a career. Also, start visiting fire department websites to see how each fire department is unique and what they have to offer. For an extensive list of fire department websites, go to www.chabotfire.com/Links.htm
- **Start taking every firefighter examination you qualify for** (see section #3 below for more information). Yes, you may qualify for some that only require you to be 18 years old and have a high school diploma or G.E.D. Start learning about the firefighter hiring process by taking the tests. For more information on where to find employment as a firefighter, go to our website at www.chabotfire.com/Jobs.htm

Second semester:

- **Health 81 and 83** (EMT training course). For more information about the EMT program, as well as paramedic programs, go to: www.chabotfire.com/EMTcert.htm
- **Fire Technology 51** (Fire Service Operations - a prerequisite for the firefighter 1 academy)
- **Fire Technology 54** (Fire Prevention Technology)
- **Fire Technology 56** (Building Construction for Fire Protection)
- **Fire Technology 89** (Firefighter 1 Academy Introduction)
- **Any general education units towards your degree** (for specific general education units, talk to a counselor or a fire technology coordinator at a college).

Third semester:

- **Fire Technology 90A, 90B, 90C** (Firefighter 1 Academy)
- **Fire Technology 91A** (Wildland firefighting)
- **Fire Technology 91B** (Haz Mat first responder - Operations)
- **Fire Technology 91C** (ICS-200; basic ICS)
- **Start looking for a job as an EMT with an ambulance company to gain experience and to help you prepare for paramedic school and a career in the fire service** since Emergency Medical Service responses make up 70% or more of our call volume. For more information on where to find ambulance companies who are hiring EMTs, go to: www.chabotfire.com/Jobs.htm

Fourth semester:

- **Fire Technology 55** (Fire Protection Equipment and Systems)
- **Fire Technology 95 and 96** (Fire Department work experience, which you can enroll in for up to 4 semesters, gaining valuable experience for your resume as a student firefighter). For more information about the Chabot College Fire Department work experience program, go to: www.chabotfire.com/Academy.htm
- **Any general education units towards your degree** (for specific general education units, talk to a counselor or a fire technology coordinator at a college).
- **Start looking at getting into a paramedic program.** For a list of paramedic programs, go to www.chabotfire.com/EMTcert.htm

NOTE: The exact order of classes may vary slightly, based on your ability to successfully enroll and pass the classes, and also at the college you choose. Not every class may be offered every semester. Some students are able to handle the above course load per semester, some can handle more classes per semester, some students can handle fewer classes per semester. Also, the above classes reflect the two-year degree in Fire Technology at Chabot College; some other colleges may have a slightly different program.

Already have a two year or four year degree in a non-fire discipline? Many people ask me when they are starting out why they have to get a fire technology two-year degree when they already have a degree in another discipline. Some think it is a waste of time, some think they know what they need to know, some do not have the time to go through more college, some just do not provide a good answer. While the fire service is looking for educated personnel, we are also looking for personnel who have shown a commitment to the fire service. One way to show your commitment to the fire service is by obtaining a two year degree in fire technology, which should include EMT training, academy training, and education and training in the basics of becoming a firefighter and preparing for future promotional opportunities.

If you have a degree already, here is my suggestion: take your transcripts down to a counselor to see which general education units will transfer over to the college you are applying to be a fire technology student at. Most of your general education should transfer in; I did this when I started out at Chabot College in the early 1990's, after having received my four year degree. I went to a counselor, and they accepted all but six units of my general education. So, to get a two year degree in fire technology at Chabot College (as opposed to just a Certificate of Achievement, or no piece of paper whatsoever), all I needed to do was take two, three unit general education classes. That was a no-brainer, and it showed my commitment to the fire service. Also, imagine not having a fire technology degree when you are in the oral interview, and the oral board asks you "you have a four year degree in Sociology, great. Now, tell us how that applies to the fire service? While I think you can relate a degree in any discipline to the fire service, I think it is tough to really convince the oral board that the fire service is your career choice when you have no formal education in fire technology and you are expecting us to take a chance on someone who has not shown a commitment to the fire service. I would rather take a chance on hiring someone who has completed a two-year degree fire technology program at a community college, including a firefighter 1 academy. I want a proven commodity, so to speak.

3. Start taking as many firefighter entrance examinations as you qualify for. Every city or county that has a fire department usually has their own testing process that occurs once every two to four years. For example, if you want to work for the Oakland Fire Department, then you will have to participate in their firefighter examination process. If you want to work for the Santa Clara County Fire Department, you will have to participate in our process. Timing is everything.

Some of the requirements to be able to file an application at various fire departments can include:

- Minimum age: 18 or 21 years old
- Valid California Driver's license
- Current EMT certificate
- Current Paramedic license
- Firefighter 1 academy completion certificate
- Firefighter 1 State certification
- Current CPR certification

Some departments require one or more of the above qualifications. It is feasible that you may qualify to take a firefighter entrance exam even before you start taking classes at a

community college. Is it realistic to get hired as a firefighter without any training or education? No, while it is not realistic, it is not impossible. However, remember that having the above qualifications only allow you to participate in the hiring process; they do not guarantee your success. The term “qualified” is very subjective. A fire department is hiring a person, not a resume. Thus, don’t try to be the one with the most education, certificates, etc. While it is important to show your passion or commitment to the fire service by taking fire classes and obtaining certificates, those alone will not guarantee you a position as a firefighter since you still have to successfully pass ALL phases of the hiring process. In most fire departments, the oral interview makes up 100% of your final ranking on a hiring list. If you can’t sell yourself to the oral board, and convince them you are worth taking a chance on and that you will fit into their culture, all the education and certificates don’t mean a thing.

You may wonder, why should I get some of the above qualifications if they are not required by the department I am testing for, or why should I get those qualifications (such as a Firefighter 1 certificate or paramedic license) if the department that hires me will put me through that training anyway? Well, first of all, not every department will put you through that training. Plus, that training will allow you to look more attractive or at least equal when compared to your competition (many of whom will look very attractive, at least on paper). Why go through an academy at a college before getting hired, since most departments will put you through their own academy? For two primary reasons:

1. Think of going through a college fire technology two year degree program and firefighter academy as being similar to a baseball player going through the minor league baseball system, preparing themselves to be a professional baseball player. How many professional ball players do you know that go straight from high school to pro baseball? Very few. And of those very few, how many have successful careers lasting more than ten years? Even fewer. Most successful professional baseball players have “honed” their skills by playing minor league and college baseball. Think of a two year fire technology program at a community college like minor league baseball. I don’t know about you, but I would rather make my mistakes at the college level, not during my probationary period at the fire department (which can lead to termination).
2. When you get hired, it will make that recruit academy they are paying you to go through easier, since most college firefighter 1 academies are more challenging and demanding than many paid fire department academies. Having been through a college academy and degree program will make your paid academy go much smoother since you’re just refreshing or relearning concepts or skills you should have learned at the college level. Much less stressful than trying to learn something new once you get hired and then have to maintain an 80% average on your daily quizzes during the academy to keep from getting terminated. Additionally, passing a college firefighter 1 academy tells a department that you are trainable and have the basic skills to enter and hopefully pass the academy.

Other qualifications some fire departments list as “highly desirable” include:

- Bilingual ability in any language.
- Volunteer or paid firefighter experience.
- Volunteer/community service experience in areas other than fire or EMS.
- Fire Technology courses completed from a community college.

KEY POINT: You can have the best resume in the world (meaning you are very qualified on paper), but it will not guarantee you a career as a firefighter. YOU STILL HAVE TO SELL YOURSELF AND YOUR QUALIFICATIONS TO THE ORAL BOARD DURING THE ORAL INTERVIEW. See the oral interview information below for more information.

It is up to you to score highly in all phases of the hiring process which can include (but are not limited to) the following events:

- **Application filing** (submitting your completed application and resume by the filing deadline).
- **Application Screening** (to ensure candidates meet the minimum qualifications and to sometimes select only the most qualified candidates).
- **Written Examination** (usually a 100 question multiple choice test of various subject areas such as math, English, problem solving ability, mechanical aptitude, reading comprehension, ability to follow directions, etc.).
- **Physical Ability Test** (consisting of various events to ensure you meet the minimum physical performance requirements).
- **Oral Interview** (usually making up 100% of your overall ranking on the hiring list. Used to evaluate such areas as oral communications, ethics, problem solving ability, decision making skills, maturity, and ability to get along well with others).
- **Chief's Interview** (a second level interview for those candidates selected to continue in the process. Usually with the fire chief or some other high-ranking chief officers. This interview is usually designed to get to know you better and find out more regarding your suitability to work for that department).
- **Background Investigation** (designed to do a full investigation on areas such as your educational history, work experience history, credit history, driving record, personal characteristics and attributes, etc.).
- **Psychological Examination** (designed to determine your suitability as a firefighter based on psychological questions).
- **Medical Examination** (designed to determine your fitness for duty through the means of a full body examination and medical screening).
- **Recruit Academy** (if you're lucky enough to successfully pass all of the above phases, then you are usually eligible to receive a job offer and appointment to a recruit academy lasting anywhere from 8 weeks to 20 weeks. This recruit academy sponsored by the hiring department will provide you with firefighting knowledge, skills, and abilities from A to Z)
- **Probation Period** (successfully completing the academy allows you to start working as a probationary firefighter. Probation periods last anywhere from one year to three years. This period is designed to determine if you are suitable for permanent employment).

For more specific information about the above phases of the hiring process (including resources to assist you with each of the phases), go to www.chabotfire.com/Process.htm

How do I find out which fire departments are accepting applications and what are the requirements to become a firefighter with that department?

- Subscribe to firefighter examination notification services such as www.firecareers.com or www.firerecruit.com – both services are worth every penny of their price. They save you the time and effort of calling each fire department and asking when they are next hiring. Both of these services provide websites with notifications of when departments nationwide are accepting applications.
- Contact individual fire departments and their respective city (or county) personnel (or human resource) offices. To find out how to contact them you can either do a search on the internet or look in the blue pages of the phone book (which are the government pages). Typically the personnel department (or human resource department) for a jurisdiction handles the testing process for positions within the fire department. Ask them when they will next be testing for the position of firefighter, what their qualifications are to become a firefighter, do they accept interest cards (if so, can you leave your name with them so you can be notified of their next exam?), and any other relevant questions you may come up with.

4. Begin preparing NOW for your background investigation. This means the following:

- a. **Maintaining a clean credit and financial history.** Take the time to obtain a credit report on yourself from one of the major companies. Doing this will allow you to see (in advance) what your credit history looks like, prior to the background investigator seeing it. If you have outstanding debt, start composing a plan to eliminate that debt. Close any credit cards you are not utilizing. Pay your bills on time!
- b. **Maintaining a clean driving record.** Many candidates have been eliminated during the background investigation for excessive accidents (regardless of who was at fault), and excessive traffic related citations (speeding tickets, moving violations, etc.).
- c. **Maintaining a clean law enforcement record.** What this means is don't get arrested, drive while you are under the influence of alcohol, take any illegal drugs, or do something otherwise stupid you're going to regret for the rest of your life. Think twice before getting into a fight or driving home after having some alcoholic drinks. Performing (and getting caught) any of the above items can virtually eliminate your chances of getting hired as a firefighter.
- d. **Maintaining an up to date list of relatives and friends.** During a background investigation, you are going to be asked to provide names, addresses and phone numbers of your relatives and close friends so that they can be contacted to vouch for your character and background information you have documented.
- e. **Maintaining an up to date list of your employment history.** Typically, you are going to be asked to provide information from each employer you have worked for over that past 10 years. Some departments require you to provide information from EVERY job you have ever held! Some of the information to obtain now includes name, address and phone number of employer, exact dates employed, exact title(s) you held, exact salaries you were paid, duties and responsibilities, and name of your supervisor.
- f. **Maintaining an up-to-date list of your educational history.** Typically you are going to be asked to provide information from every educational institution you have attended

(after and including high school). Information requested can include name and address of the school, number of units completed, degrees obtained, etc.

5. Other relevant information to assist you in becoming a firefighter:

- a. Think twice about getting that visible tattoo or getting your body pierced in visible areas. Some fire departments have rules that prohibit visible tattoos or body piercings.
- b. If you presently smoke, attempt to quit. Many fire departments require you to sign a document stating you have not smoked for the past year, and that you will not smoke at any point while you are employed by their department.
- c. Buy yourself one nice outfit to wear to the oral interviews. This includes a nice suit (pants and coat), dress shirt, tie, polished dress shoes, dark socks, etc. Basically a conservative look. Keep the jewelry to a minimum. For females, a nice pant suit or dress that makes you look professional (not something you would wear out on a date or to a cocktail party). Besides firefighter oral interviews, you can use that suit for weddings, funerals, and other important events. Invest in your wardrobe and it will pay dividends.
- d. Keep yourself appropriately groomed. Many fire departments have rules prohibiting facial hair (except for a moustache). While some of you might enjoy wearing that goatee or beard, realize you'll have to shave it once you get hired. Get used to not having it now. Wearing a goatee, beard, or even long hair to an interview or during any phase of the hiring process, can severely reduce your chances for getting hired with that department.

NOTE: You might be wondering why I included the above information regarding grooming and personal attributes. While it is a true a fire department is not legally allowed to discriminate based on appearance (among other things), realize that perception is reality. That means that you can be the best paramedic in the world, but if you have tattoos and body piercings all over your body, you're potentially going to be perceived negatively. I'm not saying that's right or wrong; I'm just saying it is human nature and reality. Avoid the whole situation entirely and just be conservative in your approach. Remember that it is important to stick out in the hiring process; and that means in a positive way, not a negative way! Stick out in a positive way such as having a unique background of experience or other qualifications to bring to the table such as being bilingual or having your paramedic license.

- e. Start educating yourself on the job of a firefighter and the operations of a fire department so that when you are talking to firefighters, visiting fire stations, and participating in the various events of the hiring process (such as the oral interview), you can talk in an educated way and actually sound like you know what you're talking about. Knowing the difference between an Engine and a Truck is important **PRIOR** to the oral interview. One way to learn as much as you can about the job of a firefighter and how the operations of fire departments can be similar yet different, start visiting websites of fire departments. For a list of fire department websites throughout California and the United States, go to: www.chabotfire.com/Links.htm

- f. Start keeping yourself up-to-date on what is going on in the fire service. Have your fingers on the pulse of the fire service by subscribing to the numerous free email mailing lists that provide valuable information such as fire service news stories, employment opportunities, volunteer opportunities, training opportunities and other relevant fire service information to help best prepare you to become a firefighter. For a list of numerous FREE email mailing lists, go to www.chabotfire.com/Email.htm

Remember that nothing worth having in life is going to come to you easily. It is up to you to remain positive, remain focused, and remain motivated to continue doing what it takes to become a firefighter. There are going to be many frustrating and disappointing moments while testing to become a firefighter; the key point is that you recognize your weaknesses, be open to constructive criticism, and continue to pursue that dream of becoming a firefighter. Once you give up, you give up and let someone else take your spot riding on that fire engine you dreamed of riding on!

For further information about the Chabot College Fire Technology Program or to find valuable information to assist you in your pursuit of becoming a firefighter, visit: www.chabotfire.com