

ABCs of Immigration: US Citizenship Naturalization Test Redesign

by Greg Siskind

USCIS announced this week the release of a new naturalization exam it claims is ``standardized, fair and meaningful."

Q. How will the naturalization test change?

A. *English Reading and Writing.* The reading and writing portion of the proposed new English test is similar to the existing test. Applicants will still have up to three chances to read and write a sentence correctly in English. Now, however, USCIS will provide applicants with study materials for the proposed test including a civics-based vocabulary list, and the list of sentences will focus on civics and history topics, rather than a list of sentences that cover a range of topics.

Civics. The proposed format for the new civics test will still consist of 100 civics questions and answers. USCIS will place these questions and answers, along with a study guide on the Internet and elsewhere in the public domain to help applicants prepare. Applicants must still answer six out of 10 questions correctly during the naturalization interview.

English Speaking Test. The English speaking portion of the test will still include the questions normally asked in the naturalization interview.

Q. What are the new civics questions and English vocabulary list items?

A. USCIS will make the vocabulary list available shortly before the pilot begins.

Q. How were the questions developed?

A. *English Items.* A panel of English as a Second Language (ESL) and other test development experts chosen by the association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) developed the English items. The TESOL panel established an English language level for the test consistent with Department of Education reporting levels for adult basic education.

Civics Items. The TESOL panel also assisted in drafting and reviewing civics questions using a content framework identified by the Office of Citizenship from a review of government authorized civics and citizenship texts, the U.S. Department of Education's National Standards for Civics and Government, the current naturalization test, and the study guide developed by a panel of experts assembled by USCIS in 2004. [The press reported this week that one of the questions on the exam -- what is the longest river in the US -- was mistakenly answered as being the Mississippi River . It is the Missouri River . The USCIS has not yet made this correction nor is it clear that they have informed examiners about the error --Ed.].

Q. Why does USCIS believe the new questions are an improvement over the old questions?

A. According to the USCIS, by weighing the questions on the new civics and U.S. history test USCIS will ensure that all test forms are at the same cognitive and language level.

Q. How will the interview process change for applicants?

A. The interview process will not change.

Q. What will USCIS pilot?

A. USCIS plans to pilot 144 U.S. history and government questions and approximately 35 reading and 35 writing items. The topic areas include principals of American democracy, system of government, rule of law, rights and responsibilities, American History, and geography. About half (57 questions) include rephrased versions of questions on the current exam. Pilot participants will receive advance copies of the history and government items for self-study. USCIS will also make public a list of the vocabulary words that comprise the reading and writing test, but not the actual test itself.

Q. How were the questions selected?

A. The TESOL panel assisted USCIS in drafting and reviewing civics questions using best practices and conventional sample techniques, such as regression analysis, currently used in private industry.

Q. Where are the test sites?

A. The pilot program will run in 10 cities that were randomly selected based on geographic region and citizenship application volume. The ten pilot sites are: Albany , NY , Boston , MA ; Charleston , S.C. ; Denver ; El Paso , Texas ; Kansas City , Mo. ; Miami ; San Antonio , Texas ; Tucson , Ariz. ; and Yakima , Wash.

Q. How were the 10 pilot cities selected?

A. USCIS randomly selected a representative sample of 10 districts by geographic region and the volume of applications that were processed in each office to conduct the pilot.

Q. How will USCIS conduct the pilot?

A. USCIS must administer about 5,000 tests to achieve a representative and significant study.

- Pilots could begin in early 2007. USCIS currently is training the test administrators on the new exam process.
- USCIS will mail a notification to all applicants scheduled for an interview at the pilot sites during the pilot period informing them that they have the opportunity to participate in the national pilot program.
- Applicants will receive a letter explaining the pilot and study questions.
- Applicants who take the pilot but fail one or more parts will have the opportunity to take the current test or part of the current test immediately during the interview, thus giving them an additional opportunity to pass the naturalization test.
- Many of the questions on the pilot test and the current test cover the same subjects, so additional preparation is expected to be minimal.
- Once pilot results have been analyzed, piloted items will be revised accordingly.

Q. Must applicants participate in the pilot?

A. No. Applicants will have the choice to decline participation in the pilot test. For those who decline, they will be given the current test.

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