

Introduction

So, you've decided to serve your country. Congratulations! You're about to join a very distinguished group. Less than 2 percent of your fellow Americans have made the same commitment you're about to make. Whether you choose to serve only a single term of enlistment or you decide to make it a career; whether you serve in the guard, reserves, or active force; whether you serve at home or overseas, for the rest of your life you'll be a member of this proud tradition, America's veterans.

But before you can raise your hand and swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution, there is one big hurdle in your path, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). You must especially do well on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT), the four key subtests of the ASVAB that the services use to measure you against your fellow recruits.

That's right. Your recruiter might not have told you, but as soon as you said you were interested in joining, the military began measuring you against all its other potential recruits. Just like any other employer, Uncle Sam is trying to get the best and the brightest people. And once he gets the best and the brightest, he sizes them up and puts only the best of the best in the most sought-after positions. Do you want to be a jet or helicopter mechanic? Do you want to be a medical technician? Those jobs require a lot of expensive and time-consuming training. The military is going to use your AFQT score to decide whether it wants to spend all that money and time on you!

Maybe you're joining the military for the adventure. You want to be an Airborne Ranger. You want to get into the action. You might be thinking right now that the AFQT doesn't matter to you. You'd be dead wrong! Your AFQT score doesn't get thrown away as soon as you sign your enlistment contract and have your job locked in. Whether you enlist for a single term or stay until retirement, your AFQT score follows you for the rest of the time you're in the military. Do poorly on the AFQT and you could be crippled in your ability to get promotions, choice assignment locations, or reenlistment bonuses later.

If the AFQT sounds like serious business, that's because it is. But don't worry — you've made a great decision: you chose to pick up this book. And choices are what this book is all about. Choose to follow one of the programs in this book—the two-month, one-month, or one-week cram plan—and you'll be successful on the AFQT. And that will open the door to a whole world of more choices, because a good AFQT score gives you the freedom to choose what you want to do in the military, where you want to do it, and for what amount of money. So let's get started!

About the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB)

The first thing to understand about the ASVAB (the larger test that includes the AFQT) is that it's made for regular people, just like you. It isn't designed to test service members—it's designed to test people with no experience in the military. Moreover, this test is not designed just for high school or college students or for graduates—it's also designed to be taken by people who have been out of school for quite some time. The military is a big organization, and it needs people from all walks of life. So there is no reason to be intimidated by the ASVAB—it was written for you!

There are two kinds of ASVABs: the paper-and-pencil ASVAB and the computer adaptive test ASVAB (CAT-ASVAB). One test is not harder than the other; they ask the same kinds of questions. However, because of differences in the way each test is administered, you'll want to apply different strategies when taking each. For this reason, it's important to know which kind of test you're going to take.

And that leads to the second thing you need to understand about the ASVAB: Your recruiter wants you to be successful. He's graded based on the quality of recruits he brings into his service. The better you do on the ASVAB, the better the grade he gets. So if you need help or have questions, ask your recruiter! He'll be happy to help. And the first question you need to ask your recruiter is which kind of test you're taking—the paper-and-pencil or CAT-ASVAB.

Before we look at the two different kinds of ASVABs, there are some strategies that apply regardless of the type of test you're taking:

- **Be familiar with the test questions and format.** You're doing that right now! Complete one of the plans in this book, and you'll be ready.
- **Read every question carefully before you answer.** Make sure you understand what you're being asked.
- **Read all the answers.** Some answers are obviously wrong, but other answers look right, at least until you see the real right answer.
- **Stay alert.** A few hours doesn't seem like a long time until you spend it concentrating. Get a good night's sleep the night before the test. During the test, stretch in place or take deep breaths—whatever it takes to stay alert. *Remember:* This test is really important.

Now here's a look at the two different types of ASVABs.

Paper-and-pencil ASVAB

This is a classic, standardized test. If you've ever taken tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT), then the format of the ASVAB will be immediately familiar. You get a test booklet, optical scan answer sheets, and a pencil. This test is usually given at locations called Military Entrance Test sites, but it's also sometimes administered at high schools.

The paper-and-pencil ASVAB is divided into nine subtests. You complete one part before you move on to the next. You can't go back to a previous subtest once you've started the next subtest, but you can go back and review your answers in the current subtest while there is still time remaining. Here are the sections of the paper-and-pencil ASVAB, along with the number of questions and minutes allowed for each. (Note the four boldface AFQT subtests—those are the ones that combine to form your AFQT score.)

Subtest	Number of Questions	Number of Minutes Allotted
General Science	25	11
Arithmetic Reasoning	30	36
Word Knowledge	35	11
Paragraph Comprehension	15	13
Mathematics Knowledge	25	24
Electronics Information	20	9
Auto and Shop Information	25	11
Mechanical Comprehension	25	19
Assembling Objects	25	15

Altogether, the test will take about three or four hours to complete. Once you're done with the whole test, your answer sheets are sent off to be scanned and graded. You'll get your complete score in a few days, but your recruiter will probably get your AFQT score before you leave the test site. Don't be afraid to ask him how you did.

Here are a couple strategies that will help with the paper-and-pencil version of the ASVAB:

- **Watch the time.** Once you're out of time for a section, you aren't allowed to go back.
- **Answer everything.** There is no penalty for guessing. If you have 30 seconds left and you still have ten questions blank, just fill in anything. Each question has four choices, so a guess will be right 25 percent of the time; odds are that, out of ten questions, you'll get two or three questions correct. That's better than zero, right?

Computer Adaptive Test ASVAB (CAT-ASVAB)

The CAT-ASVAB is given at a Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). That's the same place where you get your physical, haggle with military personnel managers over your enlistment contract, and travel to your service's basic training site. (You might take the test on one day and come back to do all this other stuff on one or more other days.) As the name suggests, you take the computer adaptive test on a computer. The questions and answers appear on a computer screen and you use a mouse and/or keyboard to answer the questions. You'll also be given a pencil and as much scratch paper as you need. What is most interesting about this test is that it adapts to you as you take it. If you get a question wrong, the next one will be easier. Get a question right, and the next one will be harder. But you get more points for the harder questions than you do for the easier ones.

The CAT-ASVAB is divided into ten, rather than nine, subtests, though the actual questions are the same as in the paper-and-pencil ASVAB. (The four AFQT subtests are in boldface.)

Subtest	Number of Questions	Number of Minutes Allotted
General Science	16	8
Arithmetic Reasoning	16	39
Word Knowledge	16	8
Paragraph Comprehension	11	22
Mathematics Knowledge	16	20
Electronics Information	16	8
Auto Information	11	7
Shop Information	11	6
Mechanical Comprehension	16	20
Assembling Objects	16	16

A few other things are different about the CAT-ASVAB:

- Once you confirm an answer to a question, you can't go back and review or change your answer.
- You don't have to wait for all the time to elapse for a section—you move to the next subtest as soon as you're done with the previous one.
- The CAT-ASVAB takes less time to complete than the paper-and-pencil ASVAB—about an hour and a half.
- You don't have to wait for your score—you get it at the end of the test.

Because the test is adaptive, there are some strategies that are unique to the CAT-ASVAB:

- **Take your time on the first few questions in each section.** The harder questions are worth more than the easier ones. You want to get to the hard questions quickly so you can complete as many of them as possible. The only way to get to harder questions is to answer the easier ones right first.
- **Don't guess unless you have to!** Wrong answers bump you down to the easier questions, which aren't worth as much. Unless you're sure you don't know how to answer the question, take the time to find the right answer.
- **Answer every question.** Guessing is worse than knowing the right answer, but not answering at all is worse than guessing. Just as in the paper-and-pencil test, each question has four possible answers, so a guess will be right 25 percent of the time. If you can eliminate one or more of the answers as definitely wrong, those odds go up.

Your Score

No matter which type of ASVAB you take—the paper-and-pencil ASVAB or the CAT-ASVAB—you'll get two scores:

- A compilation of your scores for all the subtests of the ASVAB
- A score indicating how well you did on the four core subtests of the AFQT

Both scores are a percentile, between 1 and 99. They indicate the percentage of people who took the test in 1997 who did worse than you. So, if you get an 80, that means 80 percent of people who took the test in 1997 did worse than you. Congratulations! You finished in the top 20 percent!

This population-based scoring method is both good news and bad news. It's good news because you don't have to do perfect on the test to do well. You just have to do better than most of the people who took the test over a decade ago. It's bad news, however, because this scoring method makes it difficult to know how many right answers you have to get to score well. There are some good estimates available on the Internet. (Rod Powers provides an excellent estimate system at <http://usmilitary.about.com/od/joiningthemilitary/1/blaftscore.htm>.) Unfortunately, there is no foolproof way to convert your number of right answers on any given section to your final AFQT score; the U.S. military has never published its scoring system. This is why the practice tests in this book don't include a grading scale.

Of the two scores you'll receive after taking the ASVAB, the AFQT score is, by far, the more important score. It determines which services and jobs you're eligible for. The other subtests in the ASVAB just help the recruiter and the personnel manager at the MEPS understand what things you're good at. If you walk into the MEPS with no idea what job you want to do in the military, your recruiter and the personnel manager will use your scores in the other, non-AFQT subjects of the ASVAB, to help you decide. But if you don't do well enough on the AFQT, many doors will be closed to you, because the best jobs only go to the best and the brightest—those with the highest AFQT scores.

If you aren't happy with your score, you can take the ASVAB again, but you have to wait a month. If you want to take the test again after that, you have to wait another six months.

What score do you need to "pass" the AFQT? Well, just to get into a service, these are the minimum scores.