

The Coast Guard Advancement Game  
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This initial draft was sent to the data contributors and other select people so they may ask questions in an effort to refine this document with inquiries.

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The Coast Guard Advancement Game  
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The Coast Guard enlisted advancement system is analogous to any other game. If you want to succeed, you need to know the essentials and work towards your success. I classify those essentials as:

- Knowing the Rules of the Game
- Interpreting the SWE stats from PSC(adv) and sizing up your competition
- Preparation

Your preparedness directly reflects your chances of advancement. No one is saying it's an easy row to hoe. Remember these words of May V. Smith ... *the only place success comes before work is in the dictionary.*

This is a three-part treatise on the advancement game. In part one, I'll discuss the Rules of the Game. In part two, I'll try to be prophetic to illustrate how to size up you're your competition using the SWE stats from PSC(adv). Part three will offer some techniques you can do to help you achieve the goal of advancing in rate.

Some of this material will be a regurgitation of the published materials in various Commandant Instructions and Commandant Instruction Manuals. Some material originated on the Internet, specifically at the Personnel Support Command's website and Training Center Petaluma's website. All the references used in the preparation of this treatise will be compiled at the end of these pages.

Your responsibility to earn a place at this game is outlined in Change 41 to the Personnel Manual<sup>1</sup>. This paper will not address those issues.

It's time we begin our journey through the advancement game.

## **Part I – Rules of the Game**

The Coast Guard's advancement system is the fairest of all the military services. There are quirks in the game that has its fair share of complainers, but I hope to dispel the urban legends in parts two when we size up the competition.

As you advance in your Coast Guard career you will become more knowledgeable towards the advancement system and will be in a position to mentor your charges for their success. As we proceed we shall review the congruent chapters of the Personnel Manual<sup>2</sup>, and any updates affected by change 41<sup>1</sup>.

There are two ways to be advanced in grades E-5 to E-9 in the Coast Guard

- Participation in the service wide competition and be selected to advance.

- By special authority of the Commandant

The Enlisted Person of the Year is awarded the next rate by the Commandant's special authority<sup>3</sup> with a notable exception.

Advancing by participation in the service wide competition has multiple factors earning a maximum of 200 points based on the various weighted factors.

### **Exam Factor**

The exam factor has a maximum of 80 points. This is by far the greatest number of points in the advancement game. The exam factor points are computed using a modified T-score<sup>5</sup>, which linearly transforms the normalized standard scores as illustrated below:

$$E = \left[ 10 \left( \frac{\text{score} - \mu}{\sigma} \right) \right] + 50$$

$\mu$  = average raw score  
 $\sigma$  = standard deviation  
 E = the Z-score

The Z-score measures the distance one's test score is from the average. The range of earned points in the exam factor is 20 to 80 with 50 being the average.

There is no need to study any formula in part one. Their usage will be illustrated in part two.

### **Enlisted Employee Review Factor**

The Enlisted Employee Review has a maximum of 50 points and is computed using the formulae<sup>5</sup> below:

$$M = \left[ \frac{21D}{4K} \right] + 13.25$$

D = average Raw Marks adding the total of each form and dividing by the number of forms.

K = Number of sub-factors on mark sheet

The number of sub-factors since 8/2005 are:

- 19 for E1-E3
- 25 for E4-E6
- 25 for E7-E9

“Personnel Service Center (PSC) will publish the elements that go into a member’s final multiple twice during the Service wide Cycle (SWE). The first time is on the member’s Personnel Data Extract (PDE), which is when the member must take corrective action if it's incorrect. The second time is on the member's Profile Form, if the member took the SWE, which shows all points creditable and the final multiple<sup>1</sup>.”

A member receiving a four in every subcategory for each evaluation period averages to 34.25 earned competition points. A seven in each subcategory for each marking period averages to the whole 50 points.

### **Sea/Surf Time Factor**

The Sea/Surf Time factor has a maximum of 30 points and is computed as illustrated below:

- You earn two-twelfths of a point for each month of sea duty earned after 1 Feb 1994.
- You earn one-twelfth of a point for each month of surf duty earned after 1 Jan 2000 for those holding the proper coxswain qualification codes and assigned to a designated surf station or NMLBS. This is further limited to a maximum of 15 points in a career. The combination of surf and sea points is restricted to a maximum of 30 points in a career.

Do not confuse Sea/Surf time with Sea Duty Eligibility or Surf Duty Eligibility for advancement per 5.C.15<sup>1</sup>, which is computed to four months prior to the exam month. Sea/Surf Time factor is computed to the terminal eligibility date.

### **Time in Service Factor**

The Time in Service factor has a maximum of 20 points and is earned at the rate of one-twelfth of a point per month for each month of service to the terminal eligibility date.

### **Time in Grade Factor**

The Time in Grade factor has a maximum of 10 points and is earned at a rate of one point per six months time in grade to the terminal eligibility date.

## Awards Factor

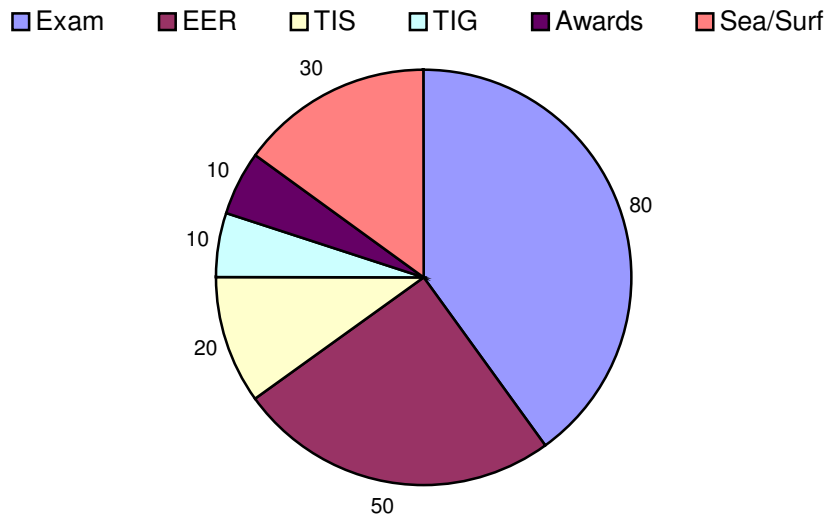
The awards factor has a maximum of 10 points and is earned using the following table:

Points	Award
10	Medal of Honor
6	Gold Lifesaving Medal and other Military awards having higher precedence
5	Bronze Star
4	Purple Heart, Meritorious Service Medal, Air Medal, and Silver Lifesaving Medal
3	Commendation Medal from any U.S Armed Forces
2	Achievement Medal from any U. S. Armed Forces
1	Combat Action Ribbon, Commandant's Letter of Commendation Ribbon, CG Good Conduct Medal, and CG Reserve Good Conduct Medal.

**Note:** Other Services' Good Conduct Awards are not creditable for points.

There are areas in the advancement system the member has direct control over, some the member has indirect control, and some the member has no control. Learn to control the things you can and influence the one you have indirect control. There is nothing you can do for the “chance” items in the advancement system.

## Advancement Points Pie<sup>1</sup>



Looking at the pie, you see what the Coast Guard values most in determining your advancement potential. In descending order, Exam, EER, Sea/Surf, TIS, TIG, and Awards.

You control your SWE points. If you study enough, you can maximize the points by distancing yourself from the competition. The information I'm imparting isn't to discourage you, but to inform you on how you can maximize your points. There will be more on this in Part II, Sizing up the competition.

You somewhat control the EPEF section by your actions. You can and should ask your marking supervisor, what *consistent* behavior on your part earns a six. You can read the evaluation sheet yourself, but your interpretation and your supervisor's interpretation may differ slightly. It's best to communicate your desire to learn more as to improve your own leadership skills.

You somewhat control the Surf/Sea points by asking for those billets that give those points on your dream sheet. It's a very limited control on your part.

Also included in the somewhat control category would be the Medals and Awards. Typically Medals and Awards are right place, right time points, unless your behavior is such to warrant a Commandant's Letter of Commendation. The Medals and Awards<sup>4</sup> manual will illustrate the requirements for the various awards.

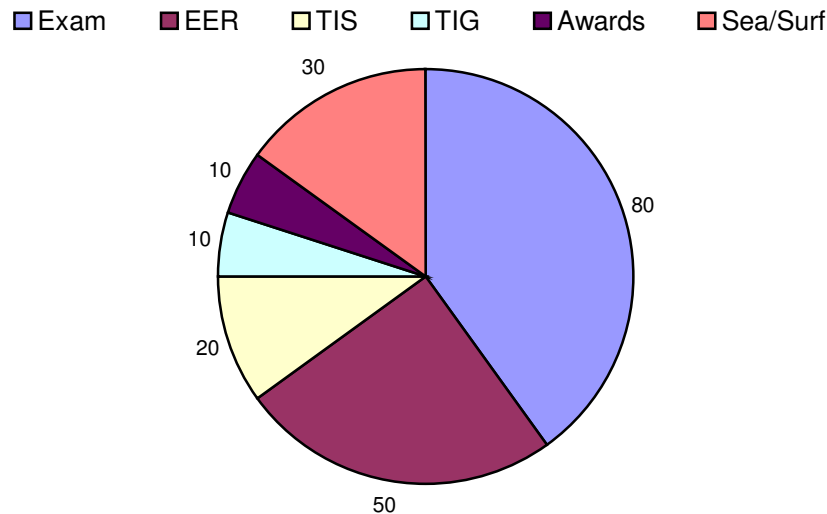
Time in Grade and Time in Service are things you can't control as you must do the time. Your TIS, TIG, and Surf/Sea points is computed on the Terminal Base Date, which is the up to the first day those taking the SWE are eligible to advance.

I am not going to deprive you from reading Article 5.C.3 of Change 41 to the Personnel Manual<sup>1</sup> for the specifics for advancement requirements in your rating or rate, as that is beyond the scope of this treatise. From this point on, I'll assume you know the requirements for advancement. If you don't know all the requirements for your rating and the rate you are attempting to advance towards, read the article. It's on the Internet.

The Coast Guard encourages you to take risks intelligently and given you a tool to assist you in evaluating that risk. I am doing the same thing, helping you do a risk analysis on an important thing in your life, your career advancement. I want you to maximize your chances of advancing every time you sit for a service wide competition. Maximize your chances by heeding the words of Louis Pasteur ... *Chance favors the prepared mind.*

## Part II – Interpreting the SWE stats from PSC(adv) and sizing up your competition

### Advancement Points Pie<sup>1</sup>

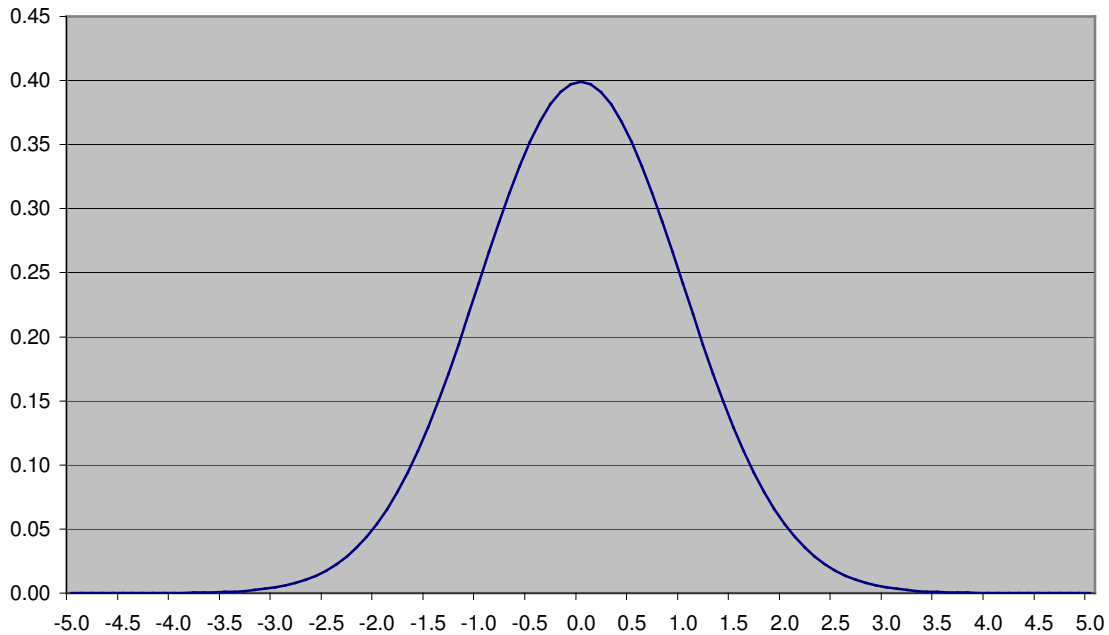


First we shall review the advancement pie. Of the 200 points, 80 is the maximum exam. You have earned some points in your career so all the other categories may or may not have points. You've certainly been evaluated, and earned those points, maybe not the 50 maximum points, but something respectable. Even someone with all fours earn 34.25 points. If you're competing against someone with all sevens [not likely], that's 15.75 points to overcome. If the "seven" person is the average test taker, you can expect them to get 50 points for the test and that leaves 30 points open for you to grab, but it will take work. Even if that person slipped into the one deviation bracket, that's only 60 points and you'll have beaten them by 5.75 points because of the exam.

You can compete.

There are many popular myths concerning the SWE. These include evaluations, awards, TIS dinosaurs, TIG dinosaurs. The population of your rating will fall within the standard distribution curve. You have seen this before, as the more common term for the graph is the bell curve.

### Normal Distribution



The majority of your rate (68.26%) will fall within plus or minus one standard deviation. Only 13.59 percent of the population falls between one and two standard deviations. 2.14% fall between two and three deviations. 0.13% falls between three and four deviations. If you're the average, you are right on the centerline of zero.

How do I know where I placed on the standard distribution curve?

$$E = \left[ 10 \left( \frac{\text{score} - \mu}{\sigma} \right) \right] + 50$$

$\mu$  = average raw score

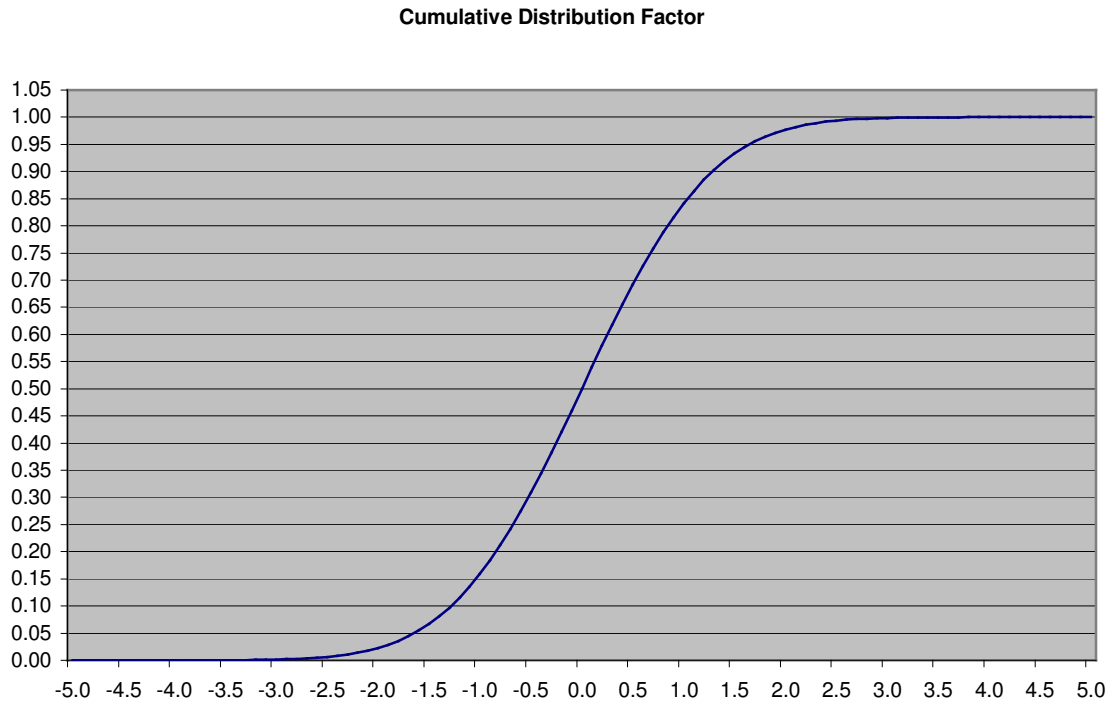
$\sigma$  = standard deviation

E = the Z-score

The Z-score measures the distance one's test score is from the average. The range of scores in the service wide exam is 20 to 80 with 50 being the average.

No matter what the standard deviation, if you're on the high side in the competition, you've improved your chances for advancement. The advancements are determined by the needs of the service ... specifically the number of open billets for the grade you desire. Being on the high side of the graph isn't enough, you must separate yourself from the competition by being one of those in the top 2.27% category, those at plus two deviations or above. Any less than two plus deviations you have a greater chance of

sliding down a lot further on the list. When your under 70 points, you can fall down the list very rapidly as the pre-test factors dominate. One would expect those with better than average points in the pre-test factors should be on somewhere between one and two deviations on the curve. This is especially true of the dinosaurs in your rating. To illustrate, below is the cumulative distribution function of a normal distribution curve with a standard deviation of 1. We could call it the competition slide.



We will discuss the things you can't control in the context of the overall competition. We could simplify things by saying your top competition has the maximum's in every category ... and all would be lost, for some would think that mountain is too hard to climb. Some may beat you in every category going into the exam, but the exam is the great equalizer against all other factors in the advancement game. You have absolute control over your study habits, and by extension, absolute control over your performance in the exam.

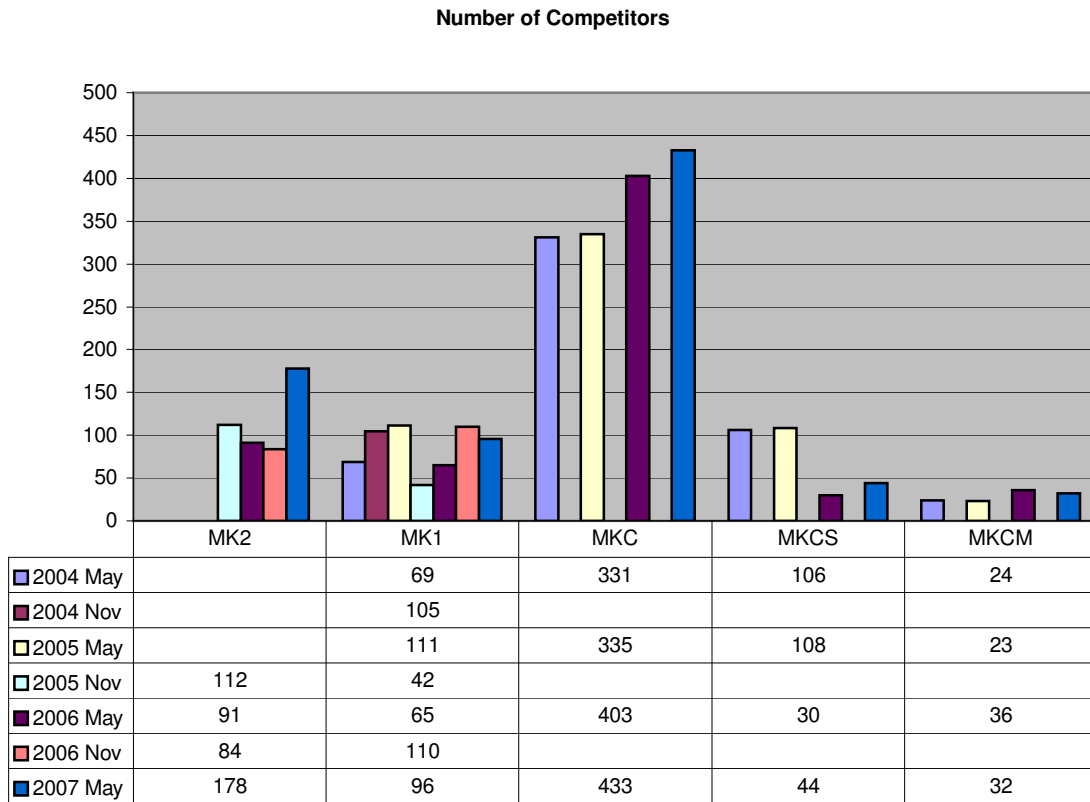
Rearranging the Exam Points formula, we can show where on the cumulative distribution curve you find yourself. If you're not above the plus 2-deviation mark, the chances are you will show a lot of movement from where you placed on the test and where you place on the list.

$$placement = \frac{(E - 50)}{10}$$

Let's look at some statistics.

I choose to look at the MK rating because there have been multiple exams for each rate over the past competitions. Some graphs are not germane to the final multiple, but are presented in the order they appear on the PSC(adv) statistics.

### The competitors

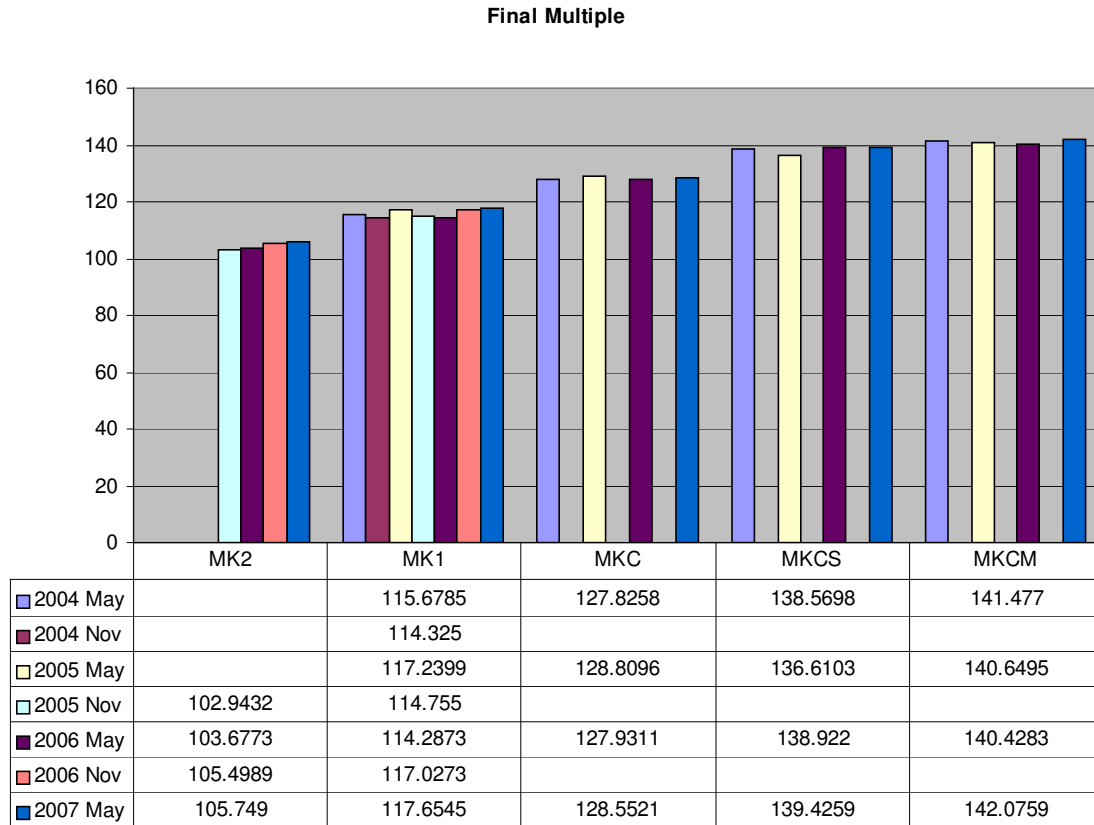


We can't glean much from the number of competitors except that we can expect a lot more competition at the MKC exam and pretty much about the same number of competitors at the MKCM level. The numbers of competitors vary widely at the lower grades, E-5 through E-7 because of the number of billets at those levels. The law limits the E-8 and E-9 billets, Coast Guard Wide, so the number of competitors decrease.

One thing you can do is compare the number of competitors with the standard distribution model to determine the number you'd expect at the various deviations. Looking at the last MKC competition, we know that approximately ten should receive seventy to eighty points. About fifty-nine should be between sixty and seventy points, and one hundred forty eight should be between fifty and sixty points on the exam. If you were teetering close to the 60 points and had the minimum points entering the competition, you could fall a very long ways on the list. We've all heard where someone

who wrote 25 on the test and fell to 100+ on the list. The competition slide is steep and the only way to get off that steep slope is to be on that upper tier of plus two deviations or better.

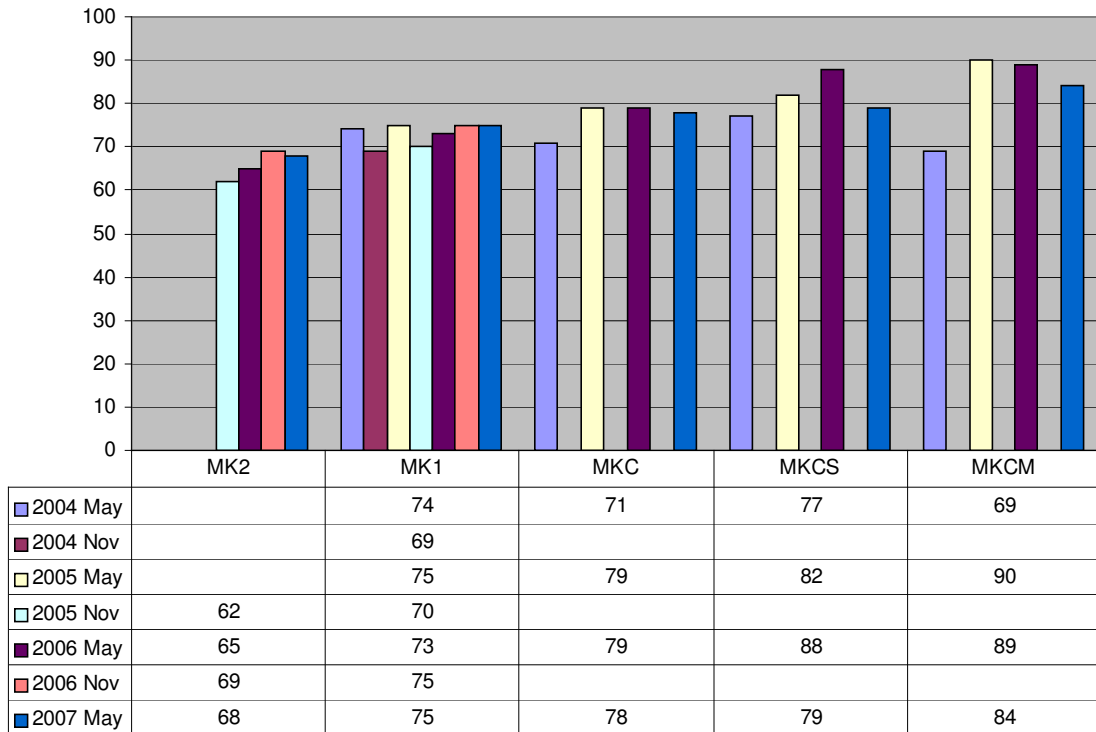
### The Final Multiple



The first thing we notice is the relative stability in the final multiple at every rate level, even with the instability of the number of test takers. There is approximately 13.7 points deviation between all the rates and I suspect the top tier people would have three times that deviation on the competition. One way to find out is ask the number one person on the list for their stats. It would not surprise me that the top competitor for MKC got 160 total points.

### Exam Factor

### Raw Scores

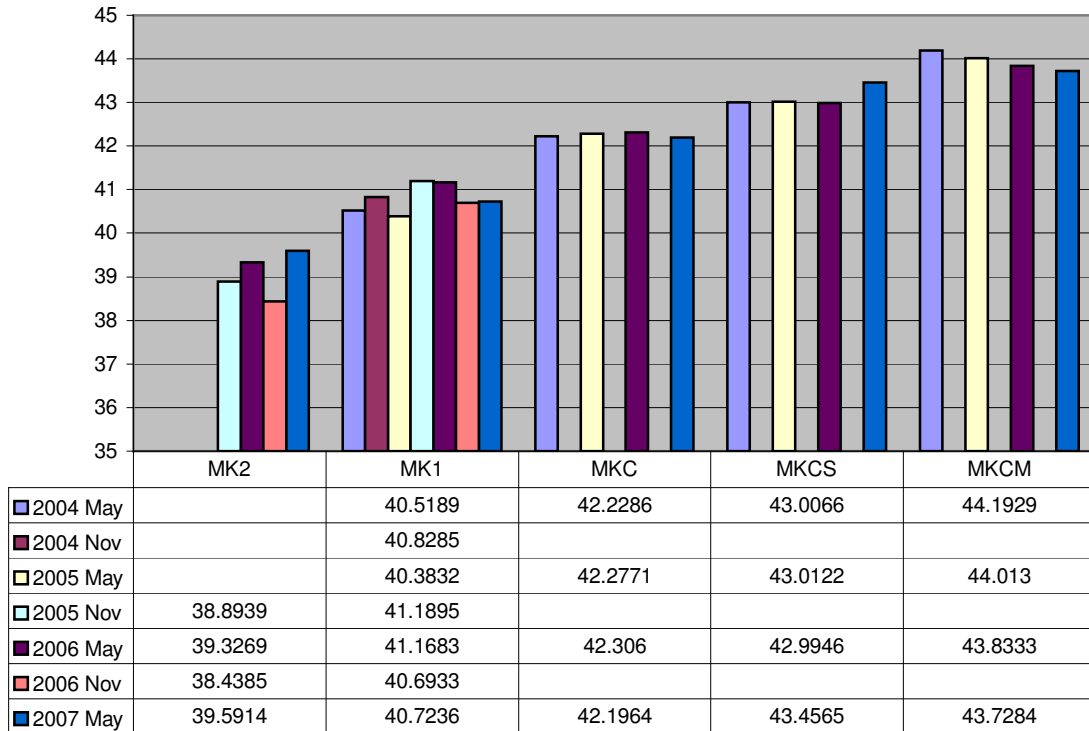


The most important thing to point out in this graph is not one average was greater than 90, leaving 60 questions, assuming none are thrown out, are available to those with the service minimums. We know from the previous discussion, that if the deviation were 20, that would be .5 points per question and you would need all 60 questions to get those 30 points. A standard deviation of 20 is probably an unlikely scenario.

The deviation for all the rates was about 7.52. The top tier people could have only 23 more questions above the average. Again, you can compete.

### EER Factor

### EER Points



Looking at this graph, we can see the average EER points were pretty consistent. Look at the highest number for the MKC competitions, 42.306. We know from the formula in part I, how that figure is computed and now we shall reverse the process to see what the average mark was for that competition.

There was a change to the evaluations dated 8/2005 and some older sheets were used for those who had to have the last 26 months of evaluations to be in the service wide competition. Those calculating the final points averaged the pre-2005 evaluations with the post-2005 evaluation points. A simple add the two sets and divide by 2. We know someone who get's straight fours has 31.25 points and those who get straight sevens get 50 points. Let's re-arrange the formula so we can figure out the average evaluation points for the competition.

The original formula to calculate the EER factor points:

$$M = \left[ \frac{21D}{4K} \right] + 13.25$$

D = Raw Marks Average from the sum of all subcategories on the evaluation form.

K = Number of sub-factors on mark sheet

The number of sub-factors since 8/2005 are:

- 19 for E1-E3
- 25 for E4-E6
- 25 for E7-E9

Rearranging the formula to compute the average mark:

$$D = \left[ \frac{(M - 13.25) \times (4K)}{21} \right]$$

Let's plug in the highest number and calculate the average mark for that service wide.

$$D = \left[ \frac{(M - 13.25) \times (4K)}{21} \right]$$

$$D = \left[ \frac{(42.306 - 13.25) \times (4 \times 25)}{21} \right]$$

$$D = \left[ \frac{(29.056) \times (100)}{21} \right]$$

$$D = \left[ \frac{2905.6}{21} \right]$$

$$D = 138.362$$

What? The maximum number on the evaluation form is seven, how can D be more than seven?

D is the summation of every mark on the evaluation form. Each form is added separately, and then the results are averaged. We must do one more calculation to get the average sub-category mark, and that's dividing D by the number of sub-categories on the evaluation form.

$$\text{Average} = \frac{D}{K}$$

$$\text{Average} = \frac{138.362}{25}$$

$$\text{Average} = 5.534$$

The average EER factor was 5.017 for each of the sub-categories on the EER form. Some have called the five a glorified four, as all you need to do is meet one thing in the six column *consistently* to earn a five and *consistently* do everything in the four column, and do nothing *consistently* in the 2 column.

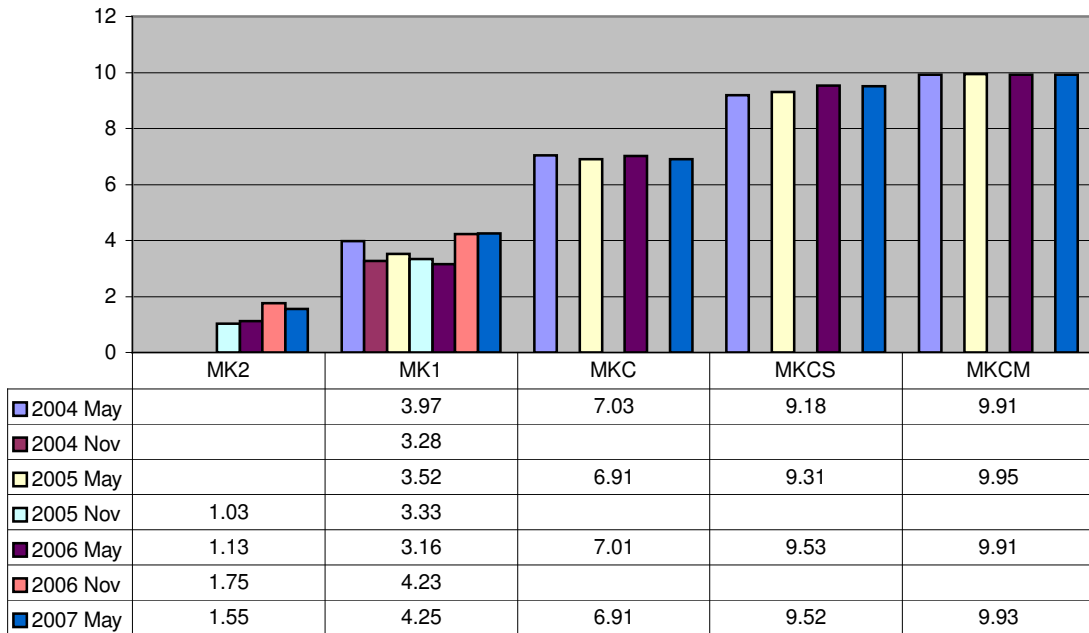
Here is a cheat sheet. I'll let you create on based on the tenths or hundredths of a point.

Average Mark	Points
7	50
6	44.75
5	39.5
4	34.25

One thing you might want to notice ... no rate have averaged a 6 in the MK rating. The EER point's standard deviation for all rates was 1.71 making the top tier people having approximately 5.13 points above the average. For the MKC competition, the top tier people probably received 48.436 points.

### **Awards Factor**

### Award Points

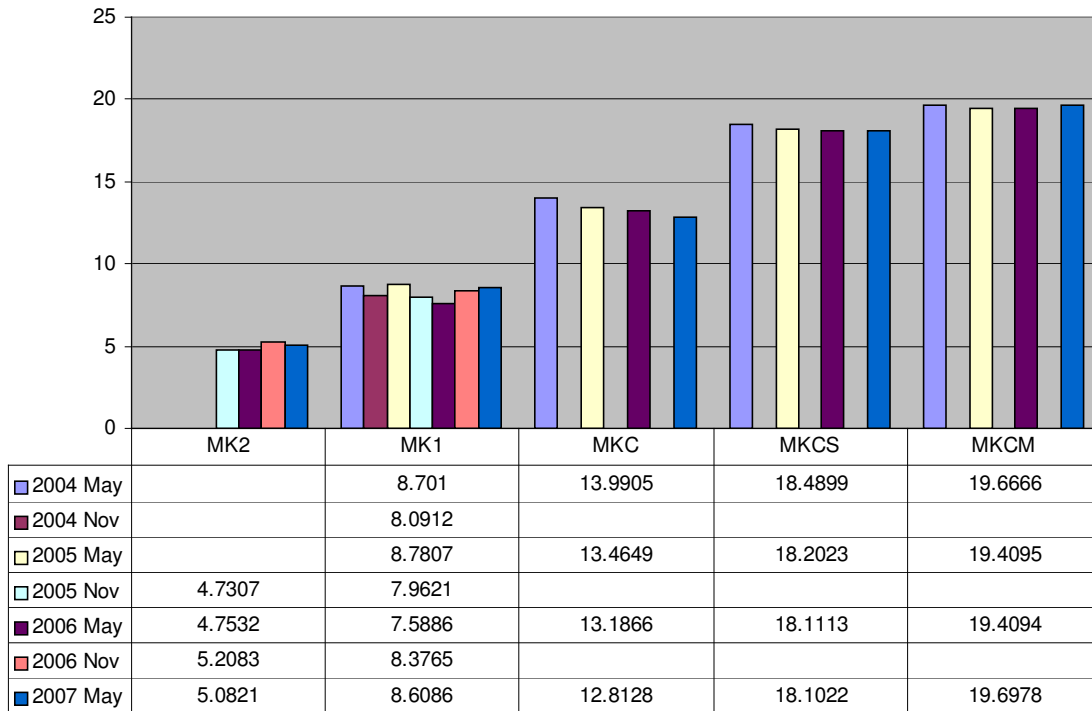


The award deviation across the rates was 3.28

The highest points over the last four MK2 competitions were 1.75 points. One Good Conduct [3 years TIS] and one Commandant's Letter of Commendation and you have that beat. For those with less than three years in, one Commandant's Letter of Commendation has you less than one point behind the competition.

### Time in Service Factor

### Time in Service Factor

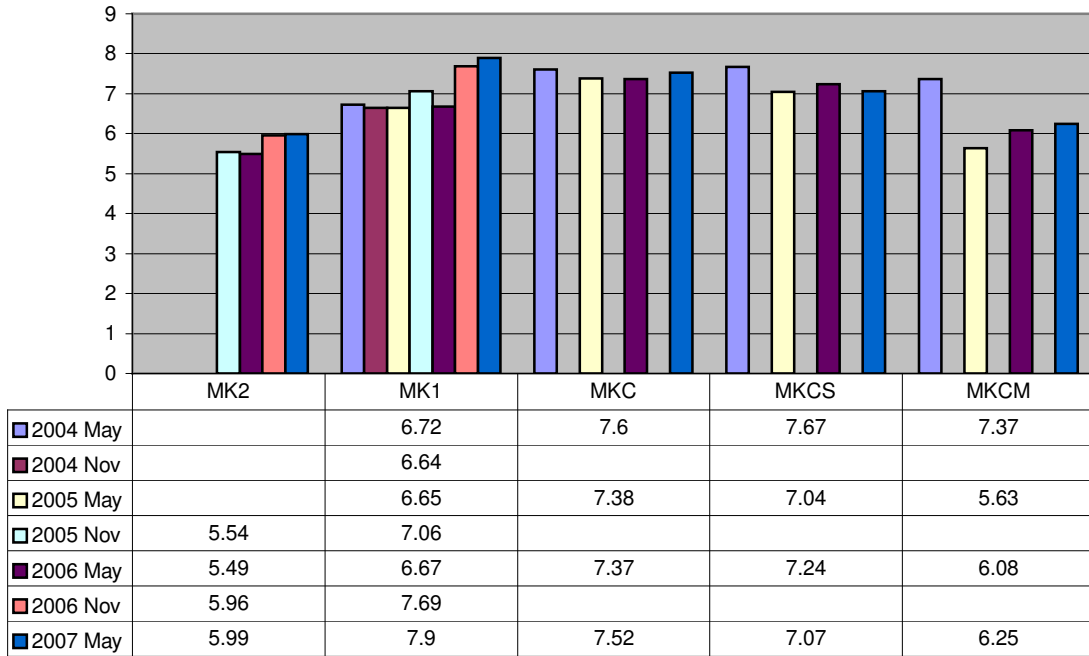


The Time in Service factor points are earned as one-twelfth of a point per month for each month of service to the terminal eligibility date.

The highest points in the last four MK2 competitions was 5.2083. This makes your average competitor having 5 years, 2 and one half months TIS. The absolute minimum TIS person, assuming they went to boot camp as an E-1 and advanced at the minimum times for each grade, earns 1.666 points. That's 20 months Time in Service and sitting for the E-5 service wide. They have to make up 3.54 points. It could be as little as four questions.

### Time in Grade Factor

**Time in Rate Factor**



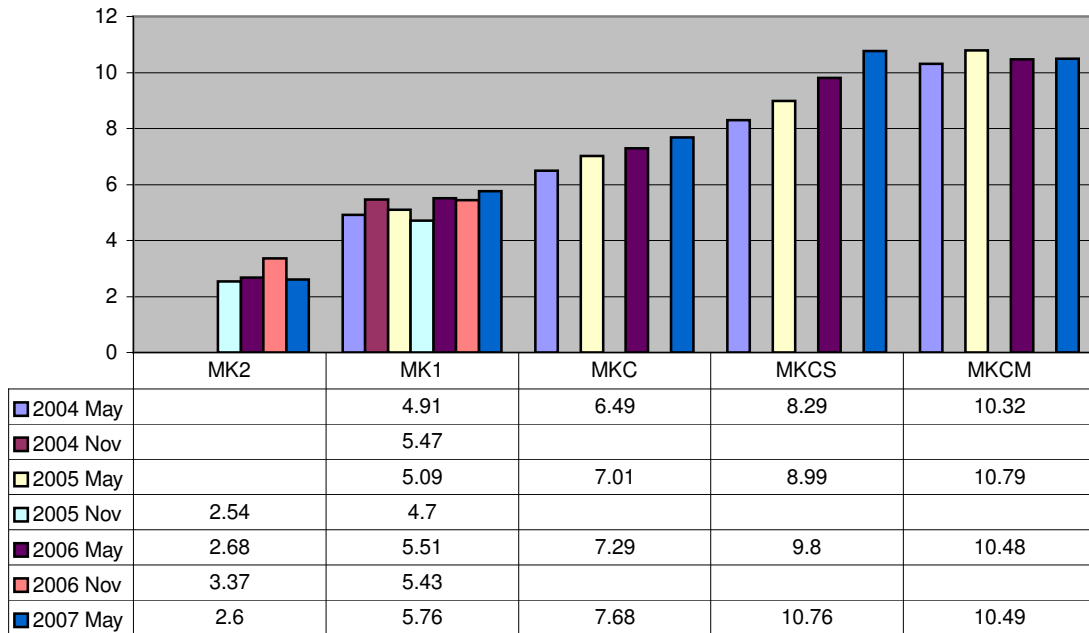
The Time in Grade is computed as one point per six months time in grade to the terminal eligibility date.

The minimum TIG person earns 1 point, as six months is the fastest advancement time.

The highest points in the last four MK2 competitions were 5.99. Our minimum TIG person earned 1 point and needs make up another 5 points.

**Sea / Surf Factor**

**Sea / Surf Points**



The highest points in the last four MK2 competitions were 3.37. Our minimum person might have zero points in this factor.

**Practical Exercise:**

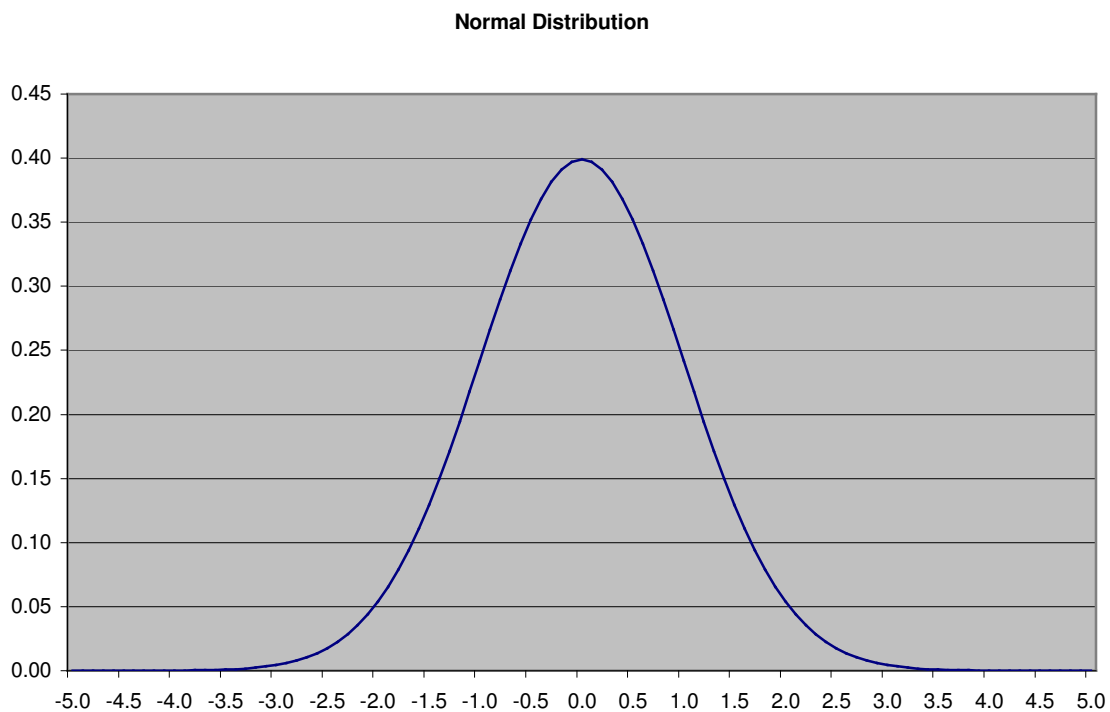
There is hope. Let's compare the highest points in the last four MK2 competitions with the minimum TIS/TIG person. I took the highest number from each of the categories.

Factor	Highest Points	Minimum Person	Difference
EER	39.5914	34.25	5.3414
Award	1.75	0	1.75
TIS	5.2083	1.666	3.5423
TIG	5.99	1	4.99
Surf/Sea	3.37	0	3.37
Total:	57.6597	36.91	20.7497

The minimum person has to make up 20 points going into the competition. Can it be done? Certainly. Write the best exam you can to position yourself into making up those 20 points. If the highest points person over the last four competitions wrote the average test, 50 points, you would beat them by 10 points if you distanced yourself from them by getting all 80 points in the Exam portion. Remember the words of May V. Smith I quoted on page 1 ... *The only place success comes before work is in the dictionary.*

There is one unknown on every service wide, the standard deviation. After every exam, the semi-annual event of attempting to collect all the raw scores goes for naught as it is tough to get everyone to participate. The PA rating might have a good chance of producing a decent list mainly because of their small population and everyone knows everyone they competed against. In 2006, only two PA1's sat for the PAC test. In 2007 and 2006, only one PACS sat for the PACM test. Guess what his Exam Factor was? If you guessed 50, you've been paying attention.

PSC(adv) releases the raw scores as quickly as they can, but, they still can be different from the final raw score. The time to correct to the raw scores depends on the number of challenges the Course Writer receives.



### Part III – Preparation

To make your preparation meaningful we need to discuss the ways of learning<sup>6</sup>. These include

- the ways of learning,
- the Laws of Learning,
- the Learning senses, and
- how to improve your retention of the material.

The five ways of learning are

- Imitation
- Trial and Error
- Association
- Insight
- Transfer

Charles Caleb Colton, an English cleric, stated *Imitation is the sincerest of flattery*. We've learned a significant amount through imitation since birth. Imitation has remained a mainstay in our learning process. This learning is without reinforcement of words or directives as we learn from observation. As a leader, it's imperative you set the example.

Trial and Error learning is sometimes called discovery. This is learning by doing. The costs of this type of learning is incurred by the number of errors introduced by the learner. The high costs of trial and error learning is offset by someone setting a proper example. Reducing the errors builds self confidence. As a leader, you should be aware of this type of learning and be watchful for those who become frustrated because of repeated trials not leading to success.

Association is comparing past learnings to the new situations. This is a mental process that serves as a reference point. I used this as a student and as an instructor. I attended a course on the new timers and it wasn't till I got an answer to what a signal was called three years ago in the timer I originally was taught, did everything fall into place. When you use an association, make sure it's relative to all your trainees.

Insight is realizing that the whole is more than the sum of it's parts. This is the great "ah ha" discovery when one's mental reorganization of idea's and concepts occurs. To meet this discovery process, one must stimulate the thought process.

Transfer learning is applying past learning to new, but somewhat different situations. This can describe the "A" school graduate troubleshooting a problem at their first unit. There is no way any "A" school can replicate what happens in the field. There are always intense moments that can't be duplicated.

Everyone uses these five learning processes. Some have recommended the trial and error process for End of Course Tests. Why? How many errors are acceptable before one loses their confidence?

This whole treatise got it's genesis in the trial and error recommendation for an EOCT.

The laws of learning.

Edward L. Thorndike postulated the laws of learning in the early 1900s. Although subsequent psychologists further clarified these laws, these are the basis. Thorndike's Laws of Learning include

- Readiness
- Effect
- Primacy
- Exercise
- Intensity

The law of readiness states you learn the best when you are physically, mentally, and emotionally ready to learn. To be mentally ready, you must master your previous material. If you haven't mastered the PO3 material, your not mentally ready for PO2. If you are instructing, either professionally or in an OJT environment, you must be ready to teach. The trainee's will see right through an unprepared instructor. Very few can teach off the cuff and maintain the appropriate level of readiness.

The law of effect states you learn best those things that result in satisfying consequences. There is a direct relationship to motivation in this law. Like most adults, you want immediate benefits from your training. The benefit you'll see here is your new found confidence, your self-satisfaction, and skill improvement.

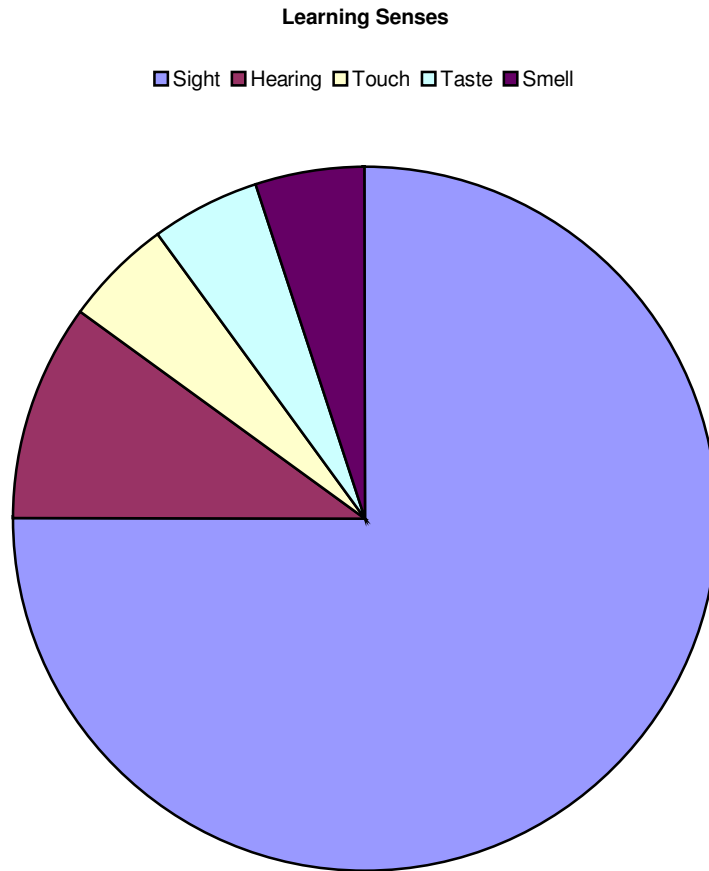
The law of primacy states you retain information you learn for the first time longer than the information you must relearn. This law drives the importance of learning things right, the first time. We all know it's more difficult to unlearn than it is to learn. Bad habits come to mind with this law.

The law of exercise is the maxim that practice makes perfect. You learn best and retain longer information you practice and repeat. This provides improvement only when there is positive feedback.

The law of intensity states a vivid experience is learned better and is retained longer. I usually call this "creating a significant emotional event." This is I remember the negatives more than the positives when it came to evaluations. One training that always follows the law of intensity is fighting through the pepper spray. All the talk in the world can't compare to the intensity of being sprayed.

I'm sure you can find other examples of these laws in practice at your unit.

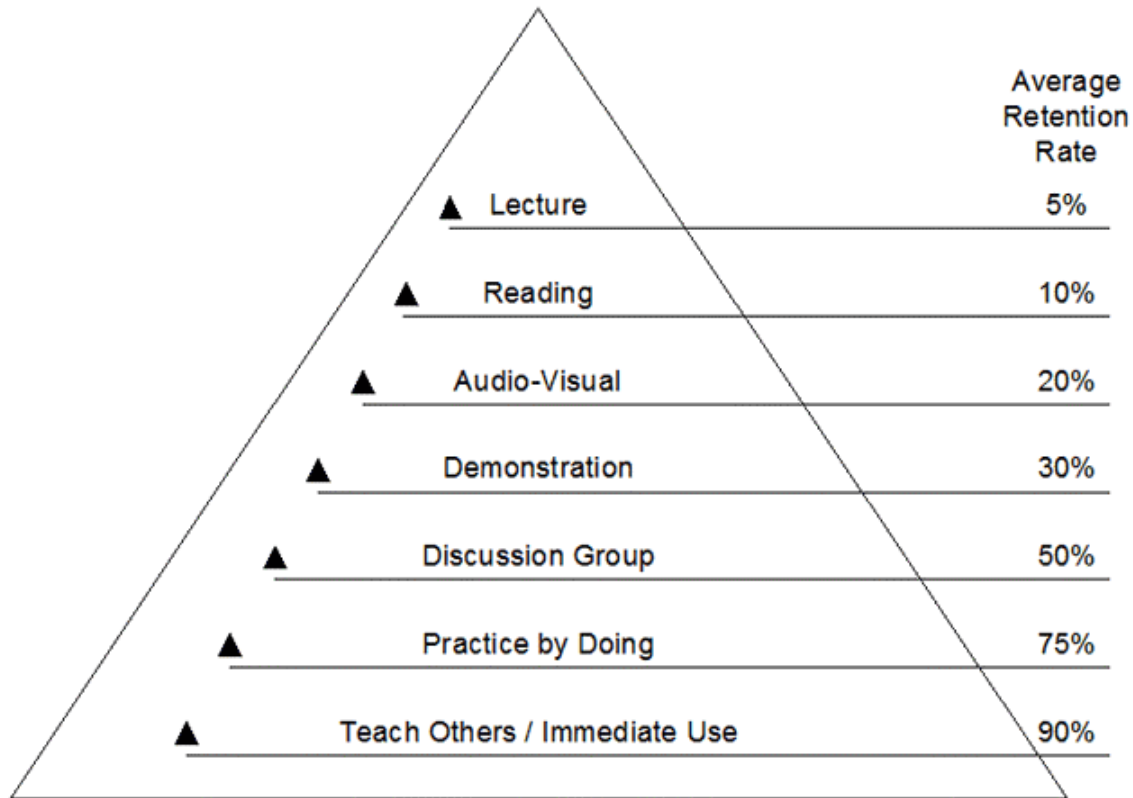
The learning senses<sup>6</sup> include all five senses.



Sight is considered the most important learning sense. Some estimates are as high as 75 percent and Hearing taking the majority of the remaining 25%. Experts differ on the exact numbers but all agree combining sight and sound increases the learning. You can use this to your advantage.

## Retention

From a 1960s study by the National Training Laboratories  
Institute for Applied Behavioral Science.



As the graphic illustrates teach others/immediate use has the highest retention. Again, you can use this information to help in your study habits.

## Recommendations:

*The four laws of learning are explanation, demonstration, imitation, and repetition. The goal is to create a correct habit that can be produced instinctively under great pressure. To make sure this goal was achieved, I created eight laws of learning: namely, explanation, demonstration, imitation, repetition, repetition, repetition, repetition and repetition.*

-- John Wooden

For those who don't recognize the name, John Wooden was the UCLA basketball coach for 27 seasons with 10 National Championships including seven consecutive championships from 1967 to 1973.

My typical recommendations will be expressed here once again,

- Gather the PQS for your rating and for the PME
- Gather the PQS for E2 and E3
- Compile a listing of all the references you'll need.
- Copy the PQS information into a word document.
- Go through the individual PQS and review the pertinent reference and write a summary for each PQS in your word file.

Why do I recommend creating your own study guide when there are hundreds out there on the internet? You must answer the following question, do you want your advancement to be placed in someone else's hand? This does not preclude you from getting those study guides to glean the information from them, but you should follow President Reagan's guideline of "Trust, but verify."

Looking at the retention graph, you'll retain only about 10 percent of what you read. Reading the manuals and all the other study guides will not improve your retention, unless you follow the law of exercise.

To create the audio video experience to increase your retention, you can use power point or any number of flash technology. Be sure to record your voice as you "discuss" each point. This recording can be used to any audio player ... and you can shuffle the PQS and answer with all the other PQS you should know. The Law of exercise, your repeated listening to your notes, will increase your retention. This system works. I used it last year to score a measly 98 on my final during a tax preparation course I took.

It will take you time to create all the files necessary. Combining the various retention methods, from teaching to creating your audios, you will be well prepared. Then your daily commute could be "study time". Your grass cutting chore is now multi-tasked with "studying" ... The law of exercise will prevail and your retention will be increased. This doesn't mean you and others in your shop couldn't join forces ... but remember, teach/immediate use has the highest retention. It's been said many times, that the person who teaches the subject gets the most out of it. You could create a training plan where every task ... from E-1 to E-6 is discussed every six months with a new person doing the lesson plan to spread out the workload. Then individually, you can confirm what was taught and update your own "study guide".

You can be more devious than any course writer. Create multiple choice exams based on what you read. One of the toughest exams I've taken was a fifty question exam that an instructor wrote by going through the technical manual. That use to be the payment required for a quiz generator I wrote back in 1990. There is free exam software that will do a multitude of tests, from T/F, matching, multiple choice, etc. These exams do two things, one you learn when you make the questions and your not fazed by the SWE with all the practice exams you've taken. You'll make all your mistakes, like not reading the whole question, when it doesn't count ... in practice. There are plenty of professional question pools for most ratings that have some non-military certifications.

Use this information to improve your own standing, professionally on the exam. We have seen where there are a lot of points to be had, for someone who puts forth the effort.

I'll end this with a Louis Pasteur quote ... *Chance favors the prepared mind.* Don't take my advise, take Louis Pasteur's.

References:

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5. <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/tcpet/tpf/SWE/SWE-2-info-SWEProcess.htm> [no longer available on the web, but PDF printout of that page is available upon request].
6. NAVEDTRA 14300, Navy Instructional Theory