

Monthly Meeting: October 2019



Jack: Hi. What's your name?

Natalia: Natalia.

Jack: Hey Natalia. Great to have you. So just in case this is your first time just to let you know, this is just an opportunity to ask any questions you might have on the FSO application process, and just to be able to chat with other people who may join. It looks like we have one other person, Kiersten, and just to be able to chat about how everyone's going through the steps and everything. So do you have any questions?

Natalia: I was curious about what I've been noticing in terms of a new format and new procedures, and is there going to be a change in time or anything like that? Do we know?

Jack: Are you talking about the test itself?

Natalia: Yes.

Jack: Yeah. So it just happened for the October 2019 test, and the change that they made was that when it comes to the actual testing process, it's all the same. There's still three sections and then the essay question at the very end. But when you get

the feedback on how you did, you're only going to hear immediately about the questions. So the job knowledge, the situational judgment, and the English expression, and that's going to be what tells you if you passed or not. Your essay will be reviewed when your personal narratives are reviewed.

Natalia: Yeah. When I was looking at the people that were commenting, it would seem as though the majority of people passed this time based on the comments that I read.

Jack: You're saying that more people passed this time than previous because their essay wasn't reviewed?

Natalia: Well, that's one of the comments that are on your website, that a lot more people passed this time than in the past.

Jack: I mean I can believe it if they take out one extra portion of it, and I know the essay was challenging for many people. But yeah I can definitely believe that more people would be being able to submit their personal narratives.

Natalia: Okay.

Jack: Yeah. It's going to be interesting though to see what the process will be like now moving forward in the review from the board of examiners. I've actually requested some feedback from them if they're able to provide it on the reasoning behind the change. I doubt I'll get it, but I thought I might ask. Otherwise, we're just going to have to see what happens when the people that submit their PNs now, just what feedback they get if they pass or not. If they follow through with what has been done in the past, then they'll most likely say if you pass, "Congratulations, you passed," and set up your time, and if you don't then, "Hey, sorry. It was very competitive. You didn't pass." I doubt they'll actually do a breakdown of the scores. It would be great if they did, but I doubt it.

Natalia: Okay. Yeah, I was curious, but I have not taken the exam. I plan to take it next year, February, so in the process of studying right now.

Jack: Awesome. Great. Well, do you have any more questions on that, or are there other people on the line that might have questions they want to ask? Okay. Well

Natalia, what do you think the most challenging part of the test will be for you, since you're taking it next?

Natalia: History.

Jack: History?

Natalia: History. It's going to be American history. It's going to be anything related to American history, so I'm really focusing on that. I think I'm okay in certain other areas. I'm not sure, because I haven't taken the practice test for the English portion as yet or ... so I don't know about the other areas, but definitely American history. I did not grow up here.

Jack: Yeah, I'm right there with you. That was also my hardest part of it. I grew up overseas and trying to take the test, the US history test, it was a little bit ... or the US history portion, was always a lot more challenging just because I didn't study it.

Jack: Have you tried to check out any online course on USA history or just like a US..?

Natalia: No. I've been looking at the videos on YouTube, the [Crash Courses](#), and I started to read, [Rise to Globalism](#). It's a pretty good book. So that's what I've been doing.

Jack: Awesome. Yeah, I find the videos to be really helpful. They're really quick if you like ... they break it down very easily and they're very quick, like five minute videos too.

Natalia: Yeah. So I really don't mind those. Those are easy and it's not that expensive to do that right? So ...

Jack: No, it's free.

Natalia: Right. The local library does not have any of the books actually that are listed on their long list of books to look at. So what do you suggest? What do you suggest in terms of ... they have this long list of books. There's no way I'm going to get past those books. So what do you suggest?

Jack: I don't suggest reading any of those unless you have a very specific subject area within the subject area that you want to read. By that I mean I think there is a book in there that talks about terrorism in the modern age, or something like that. And if you really want to learn more about that subject field, then it's a great book, but when you're ... the thing you have to remember about this test is that it's what

they called a ... it's ... Oh, what's it called? It's, like a lot of breadth and not depth. You just need to know a lot of things.

Natalia: Just the surface issues.

Jack: No really where they go into like very specific detail about it. So I really, I mean if you just need like a general knowledge then pick up the dummy series books is really good because they usually just do like an overview of economics or history or management psychology and that will give you a good kickoff point. And if there's anything in there that you're just like, oh I really don't know what is being said right now. Or oh this ... I find this very interesting. I want to learn more. Then yeah, go ahead and do a deeper dive.

Natalia: Right, and that's what I did also. I got dummy books for the microeconomics and macroeconomics, but I also in college I double majored in corporate finance and economics. So it's like I'm not really going to even spend time because I've noticed like the questions I've been doing fine on the economics question. So will I delve into that more? Probably not. I'm doing okay on constitutional type questions, that's fine. But it's history type and the wars of America and all those kinds of things. That's where I'm like, that's the worst for me.

Jack: Yeah, and you actually bring up something that's great that for everyone else that's online should hear that you should really focus on the areas, especially if you're only a few months out like you are focused on the areas where you need the most practice on. Not on the areas that you already feel very comfortable on. If you need to do a refresher of that then definitely do it but if US history is where you know you're the weakest on, then focus on US history more heavily than some of the other areas. And one of the ways that you can determine where you need more work on is by just taking some online practice tests and then just focusing on the areas where you don't do as well in.

Natalia: Okay. There there's only that one online practice test on the website. Am I right or am I wrong?

Jack: Yeah. On FSO Compass there's only the one. There's another one that's currently being developed. There is also the official practice test that's put together by State Department and those are the only two that I know that are timed and online.

Natalia: Okay.

Jack: There are now a bunch of those. You can find a bunch of question banks online and you can find a bunch of questions, things and hard copy books. But if you want to practice what it would be like taking the test there's only two that I know of.

Natalia: Right. Right. Well I guess I could buy the books and have the practice test there. Is this the, the actual exam itself, is it pen and paper or ...

Jack: No. It's all computer.

Natalia: All computer. Okay.

Jack: Yeah. You're going to be in a testing service. It's administered by Pearson and they'll have cameras on you. You're not allowed to take anything in. It's just you and a pen and paper and you have to answer the questions. And they give you the pen and paper so that if there's a math question, you need to jot down something. Or when you're running your essay, if you want to put an outline together, you have the option for you.

Natalia: Okay. And in terms of mathematics is it basic math or do they delve it? Because you were talking about it just being surface history. Is it surface math or is it like delving in?

Jack: I think you should know some, I think, basic algebra and you should be fine.

Natalia: Okay. So good with that. Okay.

Julie: This is Julie. I just want to make a couple of quick suggestions to Natalie, if you download, there's an app, the [State Department app](#), that you can download on your phone and it has about maybe about 200 different questions that you can go through. There's a government section. There's a history section. There's a math section. There's an economic session. So definitely just go to the app store on your phone and type in State Department and you'll get that app. So I thought that was really helpful to give you a sense of the range of questions.

Julie: And the other thing too that I found was really helpful was reading the Rise to Globalism. It's about 250 or maybe 300 pages, probably 300 pages. And it just covers from before ... it covers World War I to 2001 and I thought it was a really good review of US history and foreign policy.

Natalia: Oh thank you. Question, I have downloaded the app. Those history questions are beyond. Those are the most difficult things I've ever seen.

Julie: Yeah, they're crazy. But I mean it just kind of, if you can get those and learn those then it gives you a sense for what you might need to know.

Natalia: Okay. Thank you.

Jack: Julie, I have a question for you. Have you taken the test before?

Julie: I took it last October and I just took it again last week.

Jack: Okay. And how did you find the app questions compared to the test?

Julie: Yeah, the app questions were definitely harder.

Jack: Yeah. Okay. That was my ... because I've done the app questions as well and I was like, this is insane. I don't know how to do this. And then I took the test and it was so much easier.

Julie: Yes, definitely. Because on the app questions, especially on the math there was a bunch of questions about, interest rates and future value and present value. And I didn't find anything quite that challenging on the test.

Natalia: Okay.

Jack: So Julie, did you, may I ask how did you do on the test?

Julie: Yeah. So last year I passed the multiple choice and only got a five on my essay. This year since they didn't grade the essays I passed on the multiple choice part, which didn't surprise me. What surprised me was the change in not grading the essays. So I was really surprised to get my essay, or my multiple choice results a couple after hours after I took the test. And I have to say thank you because I did 20 points better this year on the situational judgment. And I think a good part of that was your post on how to address the situational judgment questions. So that was super helpful.

Jack: Well, that's great to hear. Thank you, Julie. And are you the Julie I've been emailing back and forth the last couple of days?

Julie: Yes.

Jack: Awesome. Okay. Great. Nice to talk to you.

Julie: Yeah, likewise.

Natalia: Congrats Julie.

Julie: I'm taking an hour off to join this call from from writing my personal narratives.

Jack: And how's that coming along?

Julie: It's coming along fine. You know what I figured out from just reading on the different the, the Reddit blog is, I'm kind of making an Excel spreadsheet of the 13 characteristics and then a list of the questions and just try to brainstorm different topics for each of the six essays. And then once I decided a topic for each essays kind of check off and make sure that I'm hitting on all the 13 characteristics in my, across my six different personal narratives. Seemed like that-

Natalia: How long did it take ... I'm sorry, not to cut you, how long does it take for you to actually hear what, I guess the personal narratives topics were going to be after you take the exam?

Julie: Everyone gets it the on the same day. So you get two weeks notice. Yeah. So like everyone here is like, I took the test on the third and at the end of that test window, I think that the last day was the seventh everyone got the questions on the seventh or the eighth.

Natalia: Okay, thank you.

Julie: Yeah. And any other thing too on the personal narratives that I found a really helpful post where it says to follow the star plus L approach. So situation, task, action, result and then learnings. So I'm trying to follow that format as well.

Jack: No and I agree that would be best ... that's the best approach. That's what I've done in the past and it's helped me move forward as well.

Julie: Yep. Yeah. So that's all that's going on with me.

Jack: Okay.

Natalia: Okay.

Jack: And the six questions, are they still the interpersonal and ... oh what are the others?

Julie: Like leadership, management. Yeah, it's publicly available. It's posted elsewhere, leadership management, intellectuals, interpersonal communication.

Jack: So it's the same kind. So that's all right.

Julie: Yeah.

Jack: Yeah. It'll be like if you're willing to share when you find out in what it's two weeks from now you have to submit and then it's usually like two or three months later that you find out? So like in three and a half months if you don't mind sharing, if they add more to how your essay might've been judged, that would be great.

Julie: Yeah. I mean just in the letter that when you got the multiple choice results just after the test, the letter said it was very, very vague. It just said they're going to consider your personal narratives, the essay that you wrote during the FSOT, your resume or the application that you filled out. And on the basis of those three things they'll group you by track and invite the top people in for the orals.

Jack: Well I wish you best of luck as to you **Natalia**.

Natalia: Thank you. Julie if you have any other tips of where I should go to find study materials I would be happy to listen.

Julie: Yeah. I mean there's ... I also had, I've spent a lot of time working on the English expression and there were some really nice online quizzes for English expression. See if I can't-

Nick: I'm actually going to take the chance to jump in right now. So yeah hi. Sorry for lurking in the background. I'm Nick and yeah so I'm actually in the same boat as you are right now Julie with actually had thanks to Jack and picking his brain last month I passed the exam and now working on the personal narratives.

Nick: Yeah. So it's tricky in that regard, but I was also in terms of other resources, and I think it was, was it US history you're looking for or what sort of subject because I've-

Natalia: Yeah. History.

Nick: Yeah, so like history so Rise To Globalism is yeah a really good resource. And if you want a little bit more like broader history and also a bit of geography, it's, I believe it's [Prisoners of Geography](#) by, I think it's Tim Marshall. That's a really good overall broad look and it helps give also a little bit of understanding and context for current geopolitics. But otherwise [Quizzlet](#) is also a fantastic resource because it's people for just working through history or if you just want a crash course, also just [AP course books](#) are awesome.

Natalia: Okay. Thank you.

Julie: Oh and hey and I used [Grammar Book](#) for English rules. And they would have quizzes for English uses, English usage quizzes. So that was where I went for my, to practice my English expression.

Nick: Yeah. On the English expression, I mean obviously without going into any details, but I mean it was it's ... because I knew in the back of my mind it was just going to be one of those little questions, you're going to see those questions that you don't really think about how easy it is to mix up until you're asked to differentiate which one is correct and you have no chance to look it up in the moment. So just reviewing those as flash cards and keeping those rules in mind I think saved my butt on maybe four or five of the questions on the last English expression section. So I mean in my mind those were kind of like free and easy points because it's something you can kind of fall back and study and review every day too and and it helps boost the score at the end.

Jack: And Nick where did you practice? Was it also at grammarbook.com?

Nick: Well actually, so it was just a variety of, the college writing centers have a lot of very detailed explanations. Not just because I recently graduated from William and Mary, so I didn't just stick to that website as great as it was, but I ... like University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has a very in depth writing center where they actually explained not only, and this also helped for the essay section, where not only did they explain common grammar mistakes and how to differentiate between and choose which one's correct, but also how to write more succinctly.

Nick: Because some of the questions on the English expression were just if you knew how to identify which sentence is properly written and how the information can come across as most succinct that already provides, provided, I feel a lot of help. Especially since you're under a little bit of a time crunch.

Jack: Yeah. No, that's great resources. Thank you.

Nick: But I mean, I'm trying to think of ... but it's tough because I can understand with the ... I came in with a little bit of an advantage with being a government major. So I kind of had like the US history and all that sort of stuff kind of built back in. But it's tough because a lot of the questions are very, very specific. So it's other than just ... I don't know just ... because Rise To Globalism, I think, is a fantastic book in giving it goes enough in depth into events, I guess, in modern American, I guess, America's role in modern politics from World War I onwards. But that depth is really important.

Nick: So it's ... and yeah, and a lot of ... I guess what I'm trying to say is, it's tough because breadth, they certainly expect more breadth over depth. But there are just some things that the breadth just doesn't cover. So, I mean if you just know the list of presidents in order, I don't know if that's good enough. It's like what each one is known for, just like the main stuff sure. But yeah, it's tough finding that balance.

Jack: I will say something that I've noticed, especially in the last couple of tests is without giving away the questions, you have to insinuate. If you don't know the direct answer, it's more like they're talking about something that happened in this part of the world, but how were things happening in a different part of the world making you, affecting like the different scopes? So that's, I think to what you were just saying Nick, would make it a little bit more difficult if you just go with breath. You need to know a lot like how the interplays of politics and geography are working with each other to answer some of the questions. And I know that's very broad and not very well spoken, but I'm trying not to give away what the questions were.

Nick: No. I mean it's tough because even with my family, they're all asking. And this was the first time taking the test and it was me not wanting to give away too much, but it's ... I mean, but it was, it is extremely interesting because I mean without being specific of course, it was extremely broad because my weak sections going in, which I think we discussed last month, was like management and I think the psychology side and communications. I was, so just reading through some surface level like textbooks that I found online that was enough to help me.

Nick: So it's ... I didn't ... I'm sure things like Coursera or resources like that are fantastic when there's like zero background. But just kind of helping, kind of having an overview to help connect the dots, like you said, does help in the moment.

Jack: Definitely. Definitely.

Nick: But yeah, but I guess the big reason why I joined today was also, yeah, with the personal narratives. I also took a break from working on those just to see if you had

any tips about how specific we should be, or what kind of your mindset is in tackling those? Because I mean it's 1300 characters. That's not a lot.

Jack: No, definitely it's not a lot. And Julie already hit on one which is the star plus L method situation, task, action, results and learnings. So I highly recommend using that structure and other recommended, two more recommendations I would give is make sure you actually answer the question. And the reason I say that is because over the last two years in June I will do a PN review group. And I see a lot of different personal narratives and I can tell you a lot of people are not answering the question. So it was to make sure that you are actually indeed answering the question. And the best way to figure out if you are, if you're not, which is my third recommendation, have multiple people read your essays.

Nick: Yeah. Absolutely.

Jack: Yeah. So not only the ones that you trust to ... but also the ones that can give you a really strong critique. So a professor that you might have a good relationship with, maybe a boss if they know that you're going through the process, or you know someone that can actually critique what you have written.

Nick: Yeah. And most importantly not afraid to tear it apart.

Jack: Exactly.

Nick: Because even as brutal as, because right now I've got my family around, and I know they're not afraid to be critical, but it just, what it comes down to is we're just both all looking at it so closely. And then with that we miss something so simple like not answering the question. So yeah, that's good advice just to get as many, like just a broad spectrum of people to get that feedback.

Nick: But do you think, because I noticed the questions this time, they're talking about specific instances for the different, like for the I guess five like actual skill sections. So how, like it ... and then we also have to have a verifier. How specific, does have to be a very specific instance or an overview of one instance? What do you think would be the best approach to that?

Jack: I think in some of the questions they do say like pick us one situation, or a time period if I recall, but so it really comes down to your choice. My recommendation, and again this is just mine, is to pick a specific situation that you can talk about because then you can speak to how the different tasks you did, the actions and what happened as a result of what you did as opposed to something that's more broad than, there's a lot of different ... it's hard to navigate what exactly you did as opposed

to maybe something else or some other situation that affected the outcome. And if it's over a long time period, then it just loses some of its succinctness I think.

Nick: Right. Yeah. And that's the big challenge too because it was already so restrictive, in a good way. That's why I was ranting and raving and how great your essay practice like at essay simulator was because you don't realize how succinct you have to be when it comes to 2,800 characters. But 1,300 oh my goodness. It's ... so that's probably where having that specific example is incredibly helpful. Because yeah, if you go any more broad or general than that, you're going to be stuck. Yeah, you're going to lose a little bit of the oomph.

Jack: Exactly. And what happens is that you, in your writing, you'll start being more general about it, which you don't want to do. Because every word in this is going to count. So you have to-

Julie: Have you started writing yet? Because I'm starting to just brainstorm, but I realize it's going to be incredibly hard to be super succinct and tell everything you need to say in those number of words.

Nick: So right now, I'm a little bit behind my personal schedule, but I haven't exactly started writing anything yet, but I'm actually working on one tip that I read from another blog because I mean yeah there are so many foreign service blogs out there, but just type in personal narrative after find some good ones. And one tip that I found extremely helpful is in how to pick the most effective questions. So it's not necess ... the way they said to do it was to take all these, like all the examples that pop into your head like throughout the day, or if you're sitting down and thinking hard about it and just write them down on a piece of paper. And then take a colored pencils and match them up to the 13 dimensions. So literally have them next to it. So like written communication, will be one color and so on to the end. And then you go down the list and mark a color next to each situation. And the ones that have that fit with the most ... the number that were ... the most of the dimensions are the more effective situations.

Julie: Yeah. I read the same thing. And that's why I was saying earlier I was going I put together this matrix and make sure that I hit ... like I don't know if I have the time to write down, evaluate a bunch of different topics for, or several different topics for each essay, but I have a pretty good idea of what I want, examples I want to use for each one. And have that matrix of the 13 dimensions down the right hand side and just make sure that I'm checking them all off at least once across my six different essays. That's so funny you read the same blog article.

Nick: But it's I mean if ... eventually I think everyone just kind of, you come across all the resources out there because I think it sounds like you did the same thing I did and just delved deep into Google and found everything we could.

Julie: Yup.

Nick: But I guess it's a little tricky because when it comes to my approach to these things, I'm fresh out of school. Don't really have a lot of work experience. I've got some, but it's just the challenge of thinking of direct examples because it's always so intimidating to, like for instance, there's some examples that I pulled off of the Yahoo group. And it's like, and this woman was saying, oh these I've ... I've gone to the oral assessment twice and here's an example of my essays and she's talking about, oh there was a bomb threat and I have to keep these children safe. Like I've never done that. So I guess what I'd be curious to pick your guys' brains about is can it really be about any topic? Is it like a college essay where you can write about anything but as long as you portray it in a way that is effective and fits the 13 dimensions, do you think, or should I just go out and try and find a burning building and save some kids in there?

Jack: I know exactly the story you're talking about. And I had the same reaction. I was like, I haven't done this at all, so I guess I'm just screwed. But I mean I think it ranges. So the topics that I talked about, a few of them were, and I did pass with these topics, where being a captain of a ultimate team and making tough decisions. Installing, or going through a new web development for a company, doing like getting negative feedback from a conference. And then what was the outcome of that? So it's ... I mean the different topics you can talk about is really broad. It's just are you able to hit the different characteristics that are asked for?

Nick: Yeah, it's true. And I guess also, well one other thing that just popped in mind now is what was the tone? Because I've heard people say not to be so formal academic. Just come across as a person. So did you take that approach or ...

Jack: Yeah. I think I definitely tried to do that for parts of it. I mean I kept it ... let's see, I kept a formal, but I showed personality in it if that makes sense.

Nick: All right. Yeah, it's like a balance. So yeah don't have like abbreviation text speak, don't talk to them like they're my friends or anything. But yeah, I mean that makes sense. Because right now my sister, little sister's, going through college applications now and I'm seeing so many similarities between ... Yeah. It's like you have to sum up experiences in so many words or characters. You have to make it, make your essay stand out in front of people who are probably reading hundreds if

not thousands of these things. So it's, yeah, similar challenges. So yeah, but maybe that informal tone will help.

Jack: Yeah. I wish you all the best of luck. I went through it a couple months ago so I know what you're doing and I've done it before.

Julie: All right. About how many hours, if you had to estimate the number of hours you put in, what would you say? Is it like a 20 hour job?

Jack: Let's see, the first time I ... let's see, two years ago when I wrote the PNs a lot of time I put into it. So basically the hours right after work, I was just working on it. It didn't help that I had like a trip right in the middle of that time period. So that's why I had to crunch in a lot. But as a result of doing that, I was able to get more people to read my essays because I had them done so then I could get more feedback. So that's why I highly recommend if you ... because what you found out on Friday or Saturday, so you're already what, four or five days in?

Julie: Yeah.

Jack: I would definitely try to get at least a couple done by this Friday and if not more so that you can have people review them.

Julie: Yeah. No we got them on, I think we got them on Monday was when they opened.

Jack: Okay.

Julie: Right Nick? Was it Monday?

Nick: Yeah. It was on Monday because yeah, we have on ... because it said online the sixth until the 18th but they were released officially on the seventh on Monday. So, yeah, we don't have a ton of time. I'm reading all these old forum posts saying, oh we've got two or three weeks. Like no we don't. We don't have that much.

Julie: Yeah.

Jack: I think it used to be three weeks and then they dropped it down to two.

Julie: Yup that's what I read too.

Jack: So yeah. No, I highly recommend trying to knock out one every two days, just like a draft. Don't go for perfection at least for this first one. Just put a draft together, send it out and then get people to just critique it heavily.

Julie: Yup. Got it.

Nick: For sure.

Jack: Use the active voice as much as possible and yeah.

Julie: But I think that's good advice to make sure that we're really actually addressing the, answering the question. I wrote that down in all caps on my note sheet so I can make sure that I do that.

Nick: Yeah. I mean it's ... it felt similar to, I'm sure it's probably similar process to when I was practicing for the essay section where that's why it was great just to have one other person in my house just to read over the papers or whatever. Because yeah it sounds silly like, oh why in the world wouldn't answer the question? But when you just look so closely at it for so long, then yeah, something like that. It might be very well written, but if you don't answer the question, that almost automatically, I think, takes it down quite a few notches.

Jack: Oh yeah. They just, I mean they'll mark you as a zero, which is not helpful when everyone's very competitive.

Nick: Yup. Brutal but everyone else I'm sure is working hard so you have to put in your best.

Julie: All right. Well, I think I'm good.

Nick: Yeah same. I think I'm reassured, motivated.

Jack: Great to hear it, Julie. Nick, best of luck to you guys on your personal narratives. I'll throw this out for both of you. You guys are more than welcome to share your PNs with each other if you want. And then you have some, right there you have someone that you can review. And Natalia best of luck with the test.

Nick: Yeah awesome. Thanks so much.

Julie: All right. Thanks everyone.

Natalia: Thank you.

Jack: All right. Have a good one guys.

Natalia: Thank you. Okay bye.