



5 Tips to Prepare for a US Government Security Clearance in Advance

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Many highly rewarding careers require a security clearance. While the process can be daunting, advance preparation will ensure that you are ready when the time comes.

The Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA) brings together the leading graduate schools around the world, which specialize in international affairs. Our graduates regularly serve in public and private sector positions that require clearance by the US government.

The timeline for obtaining clearances keeps getting longer and longer. If you expect to need one in the future, advance planning will enable you to go through the process in a timely manner.

1) Track Where You Go, As You Go

Travel outside of the United States provides important training for today's workforce. It is highly valued by employers. At the same time, extensive time abroad can lengthen the clearance process.

All time spent outside of the US in the last ten years must be reported (unless you were on US government business). Record the day, month, and year when you begin and end a trip. Keeping up with where you live is just as important as travel, especially if you stayed in a place for 90 or more days. Document your residences (addresses) and the contact information of your landlord.

Keeping track as you go will enable you to accurately recount these details without having to chase them down later. Even if you spend time in a place without formal street addresses (such as Peace Corps service in a remote village), write down any indicators that will enable an investigator to confirm your information.

2) Remember Who You Know

Relationships with people from different parts of the world broaden your horizons and improve your international understanding. However, hiring agencies need to know about all of your interactions with non-US citizens ("foreign nationals").

As you build relationships with people from outside the US, again note the day, month, and year when you began contact, as well as your last contact with them. As much as possible, learn about their affiliations with foreign governments or employers. Similarly, if you or a member of your immediate family serve as a consultant, intern, or employee for a foreign agency, you will need to disclose those contacts and contracts.

If you have an extensive network of foreign national acquaintances, focus on those with whom you have had the closest ties and/or most interaction over the last seven years.



3) Maintain Relationships

According to the Office of Personnel Management, “background investigations...gather information to determine whether you are reliable, trustworthy, of good conduct and character, and loyal to the US.”

Identify three or more friends, colleagues, roommates, or other associates whose combined association with you covers at least the last seven years. They must be able to speak knowledgeably about you, your character, and your activities. They cannot be family members. Ideally, they will currently live in the US.

Select people from different parts of your life and career. Individuals who can speak to your conduct outside of the US could be particularly helpful. As needed, prepare your contacts by reminding them of when you first met, what type of activities you did together, and in what you have been involved since you met.

4) Understand Your Financial Situation

Employers realize that students and young professionals may have debt related to their education, living expenses, or other needs. However, agencies may see considerable debt as a leverage point that could be used against you by foreign entities.

Keep close watch on your finances and credit score. Know exactly how much debt you have. Request copies of your consumer or credit report files, as your clearance investigator will. Understand what these documents say about your financial picture. Ensure you are up to date with federal, state, property, and other taxes. If you have ever applied for bankruptcy, investigators will need the details, including the docket/case number.

5) Safeguard Your Social Media

Your online relationships matter as much as interpersonal ones. Your presence online can reveal a great deal to a potential employer and to outsiders.

Google yourself to see what others will find out about you. Establish strict online settings. Do not include your address, birth year, or other personal information in a profile. Do not download files illegally. Truly erasing information once it exists is incredibly difficult. While private settings are not fool-proof, they can help to reduce your exposure.

Think before you post. Be careful when sharing photos of yourself and loved ones. Never disclose that you are seeking a clearance/cleared position. Consider what news and stories you share online and how they reflect on you and your potential employer. Know who follows you. These contacts may also have to be reported during the clearance process.

If you want to work in a cleared position someday, prepare now with a few simple steps. It will save time and frustration as you go through the process.

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