

Foreign Service Officer

An American diplomat, posted where the government sends you, for a career of two-year and three-year moves.

TYPICAL PAY

\$142,080

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$83k to \$195k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

4 to 6 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

**Embassies and consulates abroad,
Washington offices, hardship posts**

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
 You must be a United States citizen and available to serve anywhere in the world. Start a second language now, because it never stops helping.
- 2 Bachelor's degree in anything** 4 years
 Most officers hold one, in subjects from history to engineering to accounting, but no degree is legally required. Pick a cone, meaning a career track, while you study: consular, economic, management, political or public diplomacy.
- 3 Sit the entrance test** 1 day
 The written Foreign Service Officer Test covers job knowledge, English expression and a written essay, together with a biographic questionnaire about what you have actually done.
- 4 Personal narratives and the oral assessment** Months
 A panel reviews written narratives about your experience. Those who pass are invited to a full day of group exercises, a structured interview and a written case study.
- 5 Clearances and the register** 1 to 2 years
 A top secret security clearance, a medical clearance for worldwide service, then a ranked hiring list. You wait there until an offer comes, and the place on it can expire.

Pros and cons

- + Housing paid, language training paid, and a strong pension
- + You live inside other countries rather than visiting them
- + No specific degree required, so the door is genuinely open
- The hiring process can take two years and most applicants do not make it
- You do not choose where you live, for your whole career
- Moving every two or three years is hard on partners and children

Optional boosts

A hard language. Military or federal service. Real work experience before applying. Taking a hardship post early.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Political Scientists (19-3094.00)
 American Foreign Service Association
 Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service
 Office of Personnel Management: federal pay and leave

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/foreign-service-officer>

Good to know

You pick a cone before you are hired

The five career tracks, called cones, are consular, economic, management, political and public diplomacy. You choose one when you apply and it shapes your whole career, so the choice is made before...

Almost everyone does visas first

Nearly all new officers, whatever cone they chose, spend one of their first two tours doing consular work: interviewing visa applicants and helping Americans in trouble abroad. It is the fastest introduction to...



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