

Security Clearance Frequently Asked Questions

Questions and answers related to US government-sponsored security clearances in accordance with the National Industrial Security Program (NISP) and compiled by ClearanceJobs.com

What is a security clearance?

A security clearance is a determination by the United States government that a person or company is eligible for access to classified information. There are two types of clearances: Personnel Security Clearances (PCL) and Facility Security Clearance (FCL). Government agencies that issue clearances often refer to clearances as "eligibility for access."

What are the security clearance levels?

Security clearances can be issued by many United States government agencies, including the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Energy (DoE), the Department of Justice, and the Central Intelligence Agency. DoE clearances include the "L," and "Q" levels. DoD issues more than 80% of all clearances. There are three levels of DoD security clearances:

- Confidential
- Secret
- Top Secret.

What type of information is requested on a security clearance application?

The application form requires personal identifying data, as well as information regarding residence, education and employment history; family and associates; and foreign connections/travel. Additionally, it asks for information about arrests, illegal drug involvement, financial delinquencies, mental health counseling, alcohol counseling, military service, prior clearances, civil court actions, and subversive activities. The number of years of information required on the form depends on the level of clearance involved. For instance, residence, education, and employment history for a Top Secret clearance requires ten years of information, whereas a Secret clearance requires seven years.

Can a Naturalized Citizen get a Personnel Clearance?

Yes. A naturalized citizen is treated the same as a native born US citizen.

Can non-US citizens obtain security clearances?

No. Non-US citizens can not obtain a security clearance; however, they may be granted a Limited Access Authorization (LAA). LAAs are granted in those rare circumstances where the non-US citizen possesses unique or unusual skill or expertise that is urgently needed to support a specific US Government contract involving access to specified classified information (no higher than Secret), and a cleared or clearable US citizen is not readily available.

How are security clearance investigations carried out?

The National Agency Check and credit check portions of all investigations are conducted by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), Federal Investigations Processing Center (FIPC) near Boyers, PA. The Local Agency Check (police records) portion can be done in part by FIPC or completely by field investigators. For cases requiring other record checks, reference interviews, or a Subject Interview, tasking is sent from FIPC simultaneously to supervisors of field investigators (either federal agents or contract investigators) in all locations involved. If the investigation develops information that requires further action in another location, tasking is sent from the investigative office that developed the information to another field office. Investigative reports are electronically submitted as the work is completed. When all reports have been received at FIPC, the case is reviewed for completeness, then forwarded to the appropriate Central Adjudication Facility (the Defense Industrial Security Clearance Office for DoD industrial clearances).

Will I be interviewed by an investigator?

If you are being investigated for a Top Secret clearance or for a Secret clearance that requires access to a designated Special Access Program (SAP), a Personal Subject Interview (PRSI) is a regular part of the investigation. A Special Interview (SPIN) can be required in any investigation, if a previously undisclosed suitability/security issue surfaces. SPINs can also be required in an investigation for a Confidential or Secret clearance, if a suitability/security issue is listed on your clearance application.

What will I be asked during a security clearance interview?

During a PRSI, the investigator will cover every item on your clearance application and have you confirm the accuracy and completeness of the information. You will be asked about a few matters that are not on your application, such as the handling of protected information, use of information technology systems, and sexual misconduct. You will be asked to provide details regarding any potential security/suitability issues. During a SPIN, the investigator will only cover the security/suitability issue(s) that triggered the SPIN. The purpose of the SPIN is to afford the applicant the opportunity to refute or to confirm and provide details regarding the issue(s).

Should I reveal unfavorable information about myself on the clearance application?

Yes. The majority of clearance denials for drugs, alcohol, and criminal conduct also involve providing false information during the clearance process. In many cases the misconduct people try to hide probably would not result in a clearance denial. Passage of time is a major mitigating factor for all issues involving misconduct. Willfully providing false information on a clearance application or during a Subject Interview is judged under two separate Adjudicative Guidelines—Personal Conduct and Criminal Conduct—and is of such recency that mitigation is almost impossible. Without mitigation any serious criminal conduct or false official statement can result having your clearance denied.