

Acing the Competitive Examinations

Answering the Question: The Straight Way and the Best

Dr Sebastian Narively, Pala



*"Thou shall not covet; but tradition
Approves all forms of competition."*

—Arthur Hugh Clough

To all but a fortunate few among the educated youth in India today, landing a salaried job or building a career in the civil service or the professions is proving a most arduous task, given the spiralling numbers of candidates and diminishing levels of employment generation. Competition is keen and screening tests are getting tougher and tougher. To clear the hurdle a candidate has to prove not just a bare competence but a certain level of excellence even, since usually only the creamy layer is skimmed off for the job.

In the following, the aim is not to add to the already existing corpus of professional counselling in career guidance but to offer a 'cherry-picking' overview of available material so as to give the candidate an initial orientation to the task ahead.

With the advent of the exam season

One of the major challenges faced by Civil Services aspirants is writing clear-sighted answers in the Mains examination. Here are some tips for writing the perfect answers in competitive examinations.

there is tremendous stress and anxiety everywhere. Continual hours of study, search for past question papers, browsing the Internet for answers of winners, mock tests, acquiring problem-solving skills, revising the fundamentals – students (and parents alike) are at bringing out their true potentialities. Competitive exams grade one's basic skills – quantitative, analytical and linguistic. As such, one should not get mired by past failures, nor feel complacent on account of accomplishments of the by-gone days.

General Strategies for Writing Exams

Broadening the intellectual stance is of prime importance for candidates. They have to cultivate the habit of reading newspapers and relevant books so as to be updated with current affairs and the latest trends in diverse sectors like education, economy, health, industry and technology. An online search with keywords like 'competitive exams' will open up a profusion of useful articles regarding the



improvement of skill sets. Social networking also improves communication skills. An overall mastery in aptitude as well as attitude is central to your study.

One of the advantages of preparing for competitive exams is that it increases your concentration, willpower and ability to deal with tension. It is ideal for candidates to have the highway mindset. When you drive on a highway your headlights are focussed far ahead. But while driving on a bylane, the focus is limited to a short distance ahead of you. Aspirants have to keep their eyes far ahead since the exams open a window of opportunities to a glorious life of glamorous social status and greater personal happiness.

Preparation sometimes becomes too arduous and may have an adverse impact on your physical system. Sound health is a precondition for acing the exam. An overlong working day produces stress, fatigue and health problems, and reduces the level of concentration. Late night studies that most students prefer, affect one's health. A nutritious diet, exercises like a one-hour walk, yoga and sound sleep are of supreme importance. A wholesome mind and a wholesome body are cardinal factors for an optimal performance.

When the exam begins, you should read and reread the questions carefully giving each a preference grading which helps you avoid different questions. A high-risk question pays rich dividends like a risky investment in the stock market. If not confident, avoid confusing questions. Instructions are to be read carefully since even a little misunderstanding will affect your answer. One technique to keep clear of misreading is underlining or circling keywords in the questions. If the question is worded as a question, a clear answer has to be provided like 'On the whole, no' or 'Up to a certain extent, yes', but never a cut-and-dried answer like 'Certainly not' or 'Never'.

On scrutinising the questions and underlining the keywords, scribble down all relevant ideas, preferably in the answer book itself since it gives the examiner an extra impression of your knowledge. This strategy will help you in case you are unable to complete an answer. Answers are to be written legibly ordering thoughts in the most logical sequence and wording them in the clearest language. "You write with ease to show your breeding," as Sheridan rightly puts it. Make sure that your grammar and spelling are flawless. It is good to leave 5 to 10 minutes at the fag end of the exam to peruse the answers and correct the errors.



Draw a mental draft and get to the heart of your answer. Essay type answers are to be divided into paragraphs. As Winston Churchill states, "Just as the sentence contains one idea in all its fullness, so the paragraph should embrace a distinct episode." Each paragraph break is an indication that one topic or theme has been dealt with.

The character of the answer should not be jokey. Begin with a brief introduction clarifying the ambiguities, if any, in the wording of the question. State your views frankly and unaffectedly, without wasting time to qualify every statement with phrases like 'in my view' or 'it seems to me'. Without keeping the examiner in suspense, your answer must clearly state your attitude or response to the question. It is not desirable to hold back your key response for the sake of suspense or a punchline. Your arguments spiced with

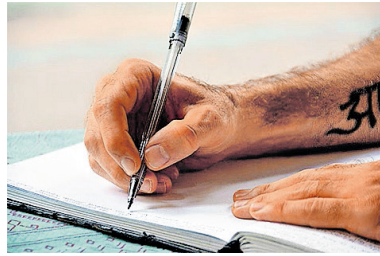
abstractions and concise generalisations have to be supported with specific facts and examples. Conclude with a concise assessment of the arguments and counter arguments, and finally, with a clear restatement of your opening response to the question. No fresh point should be included in the concluding paragraph.

Multiple-choice Questions

A multiple-choice test, being objective, contains 4 or 5 possible answers to choose from. The options offered are not always of equal level. Since the answer you give is either right or wrong there is little latitude while marking. They are very quick to mark, and the marking is often done by computer. These questions which investigate into the entire syllabus gauging the extent and breadth of the candidates' knowledge, can be answered successfully only if your preparation covers multiple subjects. Solving past questions is a sure step to get familiar with the general procedure. In many instances the questions are not set at the same level of difficulty. The latter questions are sometimes more onerous than the earlier ones, without carrying additional marks. In most cases incorrect answers are penalised.

Open-book Exams

It is nearly five years since the AICTE approved open-book exams for selected subjects in engineering courses. In 2020 and 2021, due to the Covid lockdown various Central Universities and three IITs conducted exams in this stress-free pattern. Open-books are a panacea for the stress and strain of memorising long answers. This approach helps address the tension of last minute rote learning and memory tests which add fuel to fire during the exam season. Open-book exams pay special attention on the fundamentals of the concepts the student has learnt and the way of approach he has stud-



ied from a particular lesson. The idea of OBE is to utilise the text book to refer to and study problems, find complex equations and formulae to be used, relevant figures and maps, and to find the general guidelines for effective answer writing. An open-book exam tests the concept of objective knowledge from the subjective understanding acquired in the classroom. Questions are more conceptual than of the conventional descriptive pattern, beginning usually with 'What', 'Why', 'Define', 'Explain' and so on. Framing such questions is a challenge to the faculty who should be academically advanced in the latest trends in their area of specialisation.

Acing the Civil Services Exam

"It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves." – Edmund Hillary

The Civil Services Examination, conducted annually by the UPSC, covers three phases: (1) the Preliminary exam consisting of objective type papers – General Studies-I and General Studies-II – testing the knowledge and analytical skills of the candidates, (2) the Main exam evaluating in papers, the descriptive knowledge about the various topics in the syllabus and (3) the Personality Test. Effective answer writing skill is the major factor assessed in the first and second tests.

The comprehensive syllabus of the Civil Services exam stands as an insurmountable hindrance to lakhs of aspirants every year. But proper planning including effective time management and consist-



ently built-up self-motivation are stepping stones to overcome the stumbling block. You can launch the preparation with the confidence that you are only brushing up what has already been learnt, and that there is a plenitude of study material around. As the first step, you have to draw up a study plan, dividing the voluminous syllabus into subsections and accomplishing the important ones first.

Prepare a flexible plan for covering the core areas of the syllabus and start clearing new concepts. A systematic study of 5-7 hours is far more advisable than a swot of 10 – 12 hours for a few days, since the CS exam is a marathon and not a sprint. Monotony can be overcome by taking breaks and studying different subjects in the same session. Identify standard text books and read them repeatedly to learn fresh concepts. At present there are multiple study materials, in the public domain dwelling on complex topics like artificial intelligence and ChatGPT. Lastly, you have to adjust your preparation plan as per your strengths and weaknesses. If you are a science graduate, pay more attention to Humanities and vice versa.

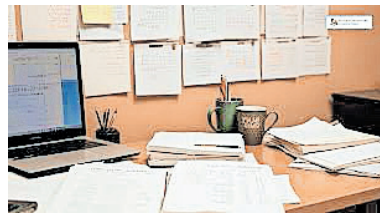
The qualities of good writing are accuracy, brevity and clarity (ABC). General Studies papers, except Paper IV, Ethics, have a limit of 200 words. In Ethics which has 150, 250 and 300 as word limit, you have to spare 30 or 40 seconds to prepare a scheme. Questions you are confident on are to be answered first. Write your ideas in appropriate words and phrases, preferably in short sentences, citing one or two examples when required. The Essay paper contains two essays in the 1000 – 1200 word limit. For writing a first-rate essay, the steps are “brainstorming, outlining, argument placement and structuring”. Choose topics you are most comfortable with, having interesting details, topics that can be developed into picturesque dimensions. Unfamiliar questions are not to be

attempted, and the time can be used for perfecting other answers.

To prepare for UPSC exams, the basic steps to be followed are listed below:

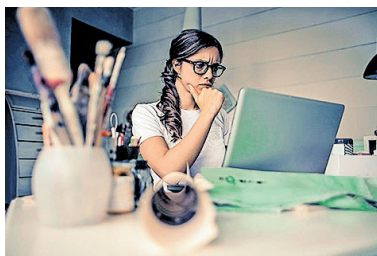
1. Scrutinise the syllabus and the exam pattern.
2. Build a strong foundation with NCERT books.
3. Join a successful coaching institute, or obtain the guidance of an effective mentor.
4. Read reputable English newspapers for current affairs.
5. Practise mock tests with past papers focusing on answer writing skills.

One of the prerequisites for acing the exam is the preparation of a pre-exam schedule that meets your needs, revising it, if necessary, and strictly keeping to it. A well thought-out timetable includes every little thing you spend time on, be it the hours spent at the college, newspaper reading or TV viewing, interaction



with friends and relatives, time for travel, sleeping hours, and above all, the precious hours for study. Your schedule should assign adequate time for at least 2/3 revisions of the syllabus. A session for hard study of 1 ½ or 2 hours has to be divided into 3 / 4 sub-sessions concluding with a full review of the material.

Mock tests guided by a mentor provide adequate practice at writing exams. Your answers should contain data such as statistics and case studies, diagrams and flow charts substantiating your statements. Solving the question papers of previous years will benefit you in rearranging the



major points with coherence, to manage time effectively, and finally skim over the entire answers identifying slips, if any, in spelling, grammar and usage. Regular mock tests where you put your writing skills to work in 3 hours, boost your motivation as your self-evaluation before the UPSC evaluates you decisively.

Reading newspapers is another vital requirement. Since several questions of the UPSC exam come from newspaper topics, a better understanding of how and what to read in a newspaper is a sure guide to success. A prudent selection from standard newspapers includes international and national news, the editorial and leader-page articles, articles on education, medicine, science & technology, sports and the like. Another sensible style of preparation is framing your own questions from the notes prepared and reworked by you.

Discussion goes a long way in clarifying your doubts. Keeping abreast of all developments occurring at home and abroad and their impact on the Indian scenario is a theme to be discussed at length by IAS aspirants. Discussion enhances your language skills and self confidence and guarantees remarkable performance in both prelims and mains exams as well as in the interview.

One of the major challenges faced by Civil Service aspirants is writing clear-sighted answers in the Mains examination. The first step is understanding the question fully before making a mental structure or framework of the answer. Jot

down the relevant points without wasting time to recall all suitable particulars. Never slip into unnecessary details.

The introduction which presents the nub of the matter the question is enquiring about should not be longer than 10 or 15% of the word limit. The size of the concluding paragraph too should be more or less the same, i.e. 20 – 30 words in an answer of 200 words. The body of the answer is to be divided into paragraphs or bullets. Each paragraph is the expansion of one point, and the most important points are to be dealt with first. Opinion-based answers, being essay type, are to be written paragraph-wise e.g. 'Discuss the role of the National Service Scheme in minimising the problem of waste disposal.' Fact-based answers can be written in both paragraphs and in bullets or in a combination of both. e.g.: 'List the factors that exacerbate climate change.'

After completing a suitable answer in keeping with the directives, you sum up with a logical conclusion repeating the stance presented in the introduction. Never ever end on a negative tone, or by posing a question. It is quite impressive to conclude on a positive note putting forward a solution or a way-forward. This indicates that you are endowed with a constructive bent of mind and a yearning for solutions—ideal attributes that Civil Service hopefuls should be equipped with.

Developing a lucid writing style

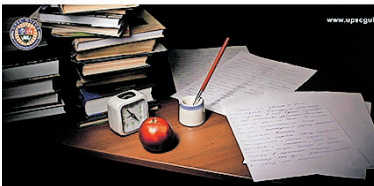
To write in a powerful and clear style, you have to use simple sentences, preferably in active voice, discarding complex and high-falutin expressions. Cliches and tautologies are also to be shunned. The variety of synonyms and antonyms gives great scope for effective expression. But never repeat the same synonym more than once in an answer. For example, the word 'happy' instead of being reiterated, can be substituted with 'cheerful', 'blithe',



or 'buoyant', or emphatic adjectives like 'exuberant', 'ecstatic', 'rapturous' and the like.

Time and Stress Management

Effective time management is another precondition for success. You have to allot the right amount of time to each question so as to finish in 3 hours, including the last ten minutes for a final scrutiny. Inability to divide time according to the priority of the syllabus often results in time mismanagement. Setting realistic, time-bound goals – goals for the day, for the month, for the entire CSE year – and conduct of mock tests are prudent strategies to be adopted. Both time and stress management can be enhanced to some extent by cultivating an lively interest in current affairs.



Time and stress are interrelated. Mismanagement of time leads to immense strain which often spoils chances of success. The vastness of the syllabus of the Civil Services exam and the pressure of competition against outstanding candidates are factors that often enfeeble the competitors. Choice of reading material is another source of stress. Knowing what to prepare or where to prepare from is of cardinal importance. There are innumerable books, numerous magazines and umpteen informative websites and this information overload also leads to pressure. The long cycle of the Civil Services exam which takes almost a year for the completion of the entire process, also makes it stressful.

You have to make most effective use of 5 – 7 hours per day. Prioritize the vari-

ous sections of the syllabus so as to meet your requirements. If interruptions come up, settle them at the earliest, get back on track and make up for the lost hours. Through interaction with peers, learn how to manage time and stress during preparation. One way for managing time is to avoid entertainment sources like the TV, mobile phones or even the computer. Candidates who depend on the Internet for preparation should use it diligently only for study. A disciplined and systematic study habit is the mantra to scale the dizzy heights.

Steps to improve Answer Writing in UPSC Mains

Writing quality answers in the IAS Mains exam is as important as preparing the subject material. You have to build adequate basic knowledge prior to starting answer writing practice. Before 3 – 4 months of the Mains exam, start the practice in a precise, clear and illustrative pattern. As the adage goes, 'Practice makes perfect.' Different sorts of answers are expected in the General Studies papers as opposed to the Optional papers. In the Optionals, answers should reflect a deep understanding of the theme. But in the GS papers, you should have a good (not necessarily deep) knowledge of the concepts which should be presented multi-dimensionally. Substantiate your answers with real-life examples of situations, tables and illustrations. Major points are to be highlighted with keywords which should be underlined. Answers should be written legibly in a simple and error-free language with headings and subheadings wherever necessary. Consistent practice also enables you to stick to the word limit specified by the UPSC.

The secret of success for securing the highest marks in the UPSC Mains is the ability to concisely and coherently express the arguments and contents of what you

have learnt from standard books, newspapers and the social media. Your answer writing skills can be improved if you take the following steps:

(1) Practise with the questions of the last five years and learn the requirements. (2) Examine the toppers' answers learning the extent to which the core demand of the question was fulfilled. (3) Ensure balanced arguments presenting an analytical approach with unbiased stances. For instance, in a question on the Future of Democracy in India, never express a pessimistic view whatever be your political inclination. (4) Provide a methodical structure for answers consisting of a clear introduction, followed by a logical discussion on the demand of the question, embroidered with examples, and finally with a telling conclusion summarising the main points or presenting a futuristic perspective related to the topic. (5) Enhance the visibility of the main points through underlining or drawing a circle around keywords and thereby subtly drawing the examiner's attention to significant points. (6)

Secure the guidance of a mentor or a peer to review your answers and give a balanced feedback. "A simple conversation across the table with a wise man is worth a month's study of books." – Chinese proverb. (7) Cram for the test with proper time management, trained memory and speedy writing so that all questions are answered within the designated timeline.

In sum, there are, broadly speaking, two parts to successful oral and written communication:

1) acquiring sufficient knowledge in the area of choice.

2) laying out the material required to the best advantage.

As regards the first, the golden rule is to avoid rhetoric, padding, and vague, sweeping generalisations. Wherever possible, support the points made with data from current or latest research and statistics.

As regards the second, the best advice is to structure your material in logical sequence and highlight key ideas with sub-headings or bullet points. ●

Education

India has 26.52 crore students in school, 4.33 crore in higher education and more than 11 crore learners in skilling institutions. The vast expanse of the educational landscape comprises 14.89 lakh schools, 1.50 lakh secondary schools, 1.42 lakh higher secondary schools, 1,168 Universities, 45,473 colleges, 12,002 standalone institutions, 94.8 lakh teachers in school education and 15.98 lakh teachers in higher education.

However, this quantitative advantage has not translated into qualitative success. For instance, while India boasts a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 108*

per cent for primary education (100 per cent), it plummets to around 79 per cent for secondary education. In contrast, China maintains a 100 per cent GER for primary education and 89 per cent for secondary education, reflecting better student retention. India's GER for higher education is even more dismal, languishing at a dismal 27.1 per cent, a figure that is half of China's and pales in comparison to the US's impressive 88 per cent. Exemplary education systems like those in Finland and South Korea achieve nearly 100 per cent GER across all school levels.

If these statistics highlight a substan-

