

CIVIL SERVICES (MAIN) EXAM 2015: GUIDELINES FOR LAST LEG OF PREPARATIONS

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Success in any competitive examination depends on thorough preparation of the entire given syllabus. But as the examination draws to a close, other aspects of the examination need to be taken into account as well. The forthcoming IAS Mains examination, being held next month, will also require a shift in focus at this stage. Ideally, by this time, the entire syllabus should have been covered by the aspirants. But in many cases, for reasons beyond control, this may not happen. For many students, the syllabus might seem to be only partially covered. Be that as it may, whether the syllabus has been fully covered or partially, it goes for both types of aspirants to look at the exam from a different perspective at this point of time. Traditional ways of learning will not work at this stage. One has got to do the things that needs to be done at this last leg of preparation. There has to be a strategy to maximize ones' performance with whatever preparations one has done so far. There are many elements of this strategy which are summarized below:-

1. Balancing the preparation on the entire syllabus: The main examination consists of an optional paper, four GS papers and the essay paper. It is extremely important to assess at this stage whether a candidate has been able to balance the needs of the entire syllabus. A careful, self analysis would help him arrive at a conclusion as to where he lost the balance. For example, while covering GS papers, it is quite possible for a candidate to have completely missed out on the internal security part of the GS paper III syllabus. If this is so, it must be identified and rectified. No area of the syllabus can be completely left out. But at the same time, there is no adequate time left to cover the entire

internal security chapter, so, the practical way of doing it will be to focus on the probable questions on this topic. This has to be done by a careful observation of the most important security challenges our country confronts today.

2. Selective preparation: Although the entire syllabus is important to be covered in both the GS as well as the optional paper, at this stage, one has to be selective. There is no time left to do the entire range of topics of a paper. Instead, one should only focus on some selected topics. These topics should be from the dynamic areas of the syllabus. For example, if someone is preparing for Indian Polity, then selective preparation at this stage would mean picking up issues like: competitive and cooperative federalism in India, role of NITI AAYOG as an instrument of cooperative federalism, the GST issue and cooperative federalism, the consequences of the Supreme Court judgment on NJAC etc. This will enable a candidate to get ready with likely topics.

3. Focus on the optional paper and a few GS papers to score maximum marks: It is impossible that a candidate will command all the subjects of the main examination equally well. An attempt to go

for this type of command will only dilute his efforts. It is better, therefore, to have this sound strategy to obtain maximum marks in the optional paper and some of the GS papers. It makes good sense to concentrate on your optional paper because its syllabus is well defined and the more you command it, more the chances to increase your score in this. In other words, there is a certain link between the input and output in the optional paper. This strategy does not, however mean that one should neglect other papers. It is only about focusing on some mains papers so that one can leverage his/her preparations in these areas.



4. Special attention on the Ethics and the Essay papers: In the main examination the two main determinants of success are going to be the Ethics and the Essay papers. These two papers have the potential of giving you the minimum or maximum marks. Many candidates are not able to align their preparations to the needs of these two papers and they end up scoring very poor marks in these papers. On the other hand, if a candidate grasps the nature of the questions of these two papers, he is bound to get extraordinary marks. Many of the last years' toppers were selected with high ranks because of this strategy. They had been able to score highly in their optional papers, and the essay and the ethics papers. So, the elements of this strategy are: (a) excel in your optional paper, ethics and essay papers, and (b) at the same time ensure at least an average performance in other papers. This will procure the required marks to qualify for the interview.

5. Answer- writing practice: In the present format of UPSC Mains examination writing answers is a big challenge. The questions are very different now and no text book type of answers will suffice. Each question is framed in such a manner that you will have to improvise the answer in the exam hall itself. You can not go and write the answers according to a script. Therefore, answer writing practice should be the priority at this stage. A good answer is one which is close to the question, answers only what is asked and not extraneous things which has no relevance to the question. For example, if there is a question on describing Shivaji as a great political and military strategist, there is no need to write about any other aspect of Shivaji's life as it is a superfluous information.

The second point to remember about answer writing is that in the word limit of 150 words for each question, there is no scope to describe in details any aspect of the question. A question will have many aspects. A few lines should be written on all the aspects. Or else, the word limit will be crossed just writing the question partly only.

6. Do not underline your answer: There is a popular misperception among the candidates that in order to catch the attention of the examiner, the important points in the answer should be highlighted by underlining them. It is in fact a very risky proposition. How can a candidate determine for the examiner as to what is more important? There is every likelihood that the examiner will not find your underlined sentences important and get a negative impression instead.

However, one can follow a bullet form answer where there is a scope to do that, but not always. For example, if the question asks for your suggestions to improve governance in India, you may put your suggestions in bullet form. But remember, no question should be answered only in bullet form. A brief introduction is always necessary before adopting the bullet form format.

7. Do not chase facts and figures in your answer, chase analysis: The very purpose of the mains exam is to assess your analytical, intellectual capabilities and not your memorization of facts and figures. So if you do not know all the facts of an issue, it's not a cause to worry. But you should have a perception, a perspective about the issue. This is what will be looked for in your answers.

8. Adopt a general, commonsensical approach to answering: Do not make your answer look like an academic answer. It should look like a non-expert view on the issue because UPSC does not expect you to be area experts on environment, internal security or any such thing.

9. Time management: The biggest challenge in the main exam is going to be how to manage time to be able to write all the questions. The answers are all lengthy now (150 words each). Then, there are 20-25 questions to be written in each paper of GS. This implies that in each paper, one has to produce 4000 words in 3 hours time. It is a stupendous task and only repeated practice can give you control over speed and time.

10. Get your answers evaluated by an expert: Only an evaluation of your answers can tell you about its quality. If you have not got them evaluated by a competent expert, you may not be writing the right answers yet. Therefore, make it a priority to get it checked by any expert who is appropriately able to guide you. Incorporate his suggestions in your next answer practice. Remember, in the final analysis, the main exam is all about writing answers. It is a 3 hour exercise which finally matters and not years of your preparations. So in order to make these three hours high marks yielding hours, go for answer writing practice and their evaluation.

11. How to attempt a question about which you are blank? Many students have asked me this question. It is very natural that some of the questions will leave you completely clueless. How you will attempt those? Leaving them un answered is not the right thing to do. Instead, you should think hard about the question and come to some general observations relating to the questions. Put those observations in your answers. The only caution you should take is that never be specific in your answer as you do not know the real facts about the issue. For example, if a specific question has been asked on India- Nepal relations and you are not aware of this development, then you should make a general answer in terms of importance to resolve the issue in mutual interest, importance India should accord to its relations with Nepal, and the need to protect India's national interest while dealing with Nepal. It will not be a cogent answer, still it will give you some marks.

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