

Notes on Civil Services or the IAS Exam



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I was fortunate enough to secure All India Rank 29 in Civil Services Exam(CSE, 2021). In this post I'll try to aggregate all my learnings/strategy/resources etc. at one place.

For Material directly go to Resources Section.

DISCLAIMER

Following is my understanding of the exam. Since UPSC is a complex exam there are many possible paths to success. You should pass any advice through your **COMMON SENSE FILTER** and **reject anything that is not feasible** for you to execute on the day of exam. Yet I hope you find something useful!

The Big Picture

Before getting into the weeds, first it's critical to understand the **nature of exam** i.e. **WHAT UPSC DEMANDS?** and **WHAT SHOULD BE YOUR BROAD STRATEGY?**

It's much easier to try to answer this question *via-negativa* i.e. what NOT TO DO. CSE is **NOT** about knowledge or hardwork or IQ or ability to memorise facts. In fact one of the toppers¹ quipped "Success in UPSC is *inversely* proportional to your knowledge".

Alternatively what UPSC actually demands is **good understanding** of a limited number of keywords/concepts/ideas/examples and then their **creative** and **analytical** deployment in answering questions. Another way of saying this is "UPSC is looking for someone who can hold up his/her end in an **intelligent & intellectual conversation**".

So first task should be creating this **list of keywords/concepts/ideas/examples**. A good start is the [FORUMIAS](#)

Keywords file consisting of keywords from **Syllabus and PYQs**. It could be added upon but anything unrelated to exam should be avoided.

Now around these keywords you have to learn **many stories i.e. characters involved and sequence of events resulting from interaction of these characters.**

For example, story about “Colonialism in India” would involve:

- Characters = the British; Later Mughals; Princely Rulers; Other Foreign Powers(like the French), Indigenous Elite(eg: INC), Common Masses(within them Peasants, Workers etc), Tribals and so on
- Sequence of events = would simply be how each group interacts every other (along the dimensions of: **POLITICS | ECONOMY | CULTURE | SOCIETY | ADMINISTRATION...**) in time

Notice, as popularised by Yuval Noah Harari², remembering stories is much easier than brute facts. Further moving from **facts to ideas/stories/concepts** will not only unburden your mind allowing it to

exercise its **creative/analytical muscle** but answers rich in ideas told in story-like format are more appealing to the examiner as well.

In the Resources section; I'll list the sources of these stories but you should really **focus on the principle that all you have to do is to extract keywords & stories** from whatever “study material”.

For a small portion of syllabus(like Physical Geography) creating stories is difficult but still the basic approach of creating a **list of important topics**, understanding **technical terms**(eg: Subduction Zone) and using general science(eg: hot air is lighter than cold air) remains highly effective.

The above only describes the knowledge-part now comes its application. You have to **practice and train hard** so that the process of efficient and effective application of knowledge becomes part of your muscle memory. Ideally writing answers should become like cycling.

And you don't have to go anywhere else but the PYQs of UPSC itself(of Pre, GS & Optional). **Nothing is more important than Syllabus and**

PYQs. You should always keep topic-wise PYQs handy. Answering and Reflecting upon PYQs(**multiple times & periodically**) itself would take care of most of your worries. This is especially true in case of Optionals(in fact I would go as far as to say, “**in Optionals all you have to do is PYQs**”).

Also don't fragment your knowledge paper-wise or exam-wise. While answering **apply Whole-of Knowledge without any artificial barriers.**

Next I'll describe stepwise strategy for PRE and MAINS(I'm excluding Interview for now).

Strategy

Firstly it is optimal to **prepare most of the time for MAINS** as it builds conceptual understanding and is the most **important**(PRE is just

qualifying; MAINS is the Kingmaker) and the most **predictable** part of CSE.

On PRELIMS

- Your MAINS knowledge would be the foundation but to clear PRELIMS you'll need to get into PRELIMS mindset(ideally full-time 2-3 months before PRE).
- You have to prepare some additional topics outside MAINS(eg: National Parks...); again create a **checklist with high-priority topics on top**
- Build Elimination and risk-taking skills [Varun Jain Sir's course is best]
- Analyse each PYQ in detail(Wikipedia is great for this), focussing on the theme(eg: Buddhism, Gupta Empire) and related terms/concepts mentioned in each question
- **Force yourself** during practice to answer even if you possess incomplete knowledge.
- Finally solve Test Papers within 2hr time. Note most Coaching Test Series for PRE are **irrelevant(& counterproductive)**. Best Test Series that I have found, in that order are EdSarrthi >> ForumIAS FLTs >> ShankarIAS

- Remember Test Series is only the means to develop the **skill** of solving papers in time, discover the approach and figure out your risk-appetite
 - But the most basic lesson is understanding PRE-math. For every correct answer you get +2 & for any incorrect -2/3; thus even if you choose answers randomly(monkey on Keyboard style) on average **you will end even** i.e NO gain NO loss $\frac{3}{4}$. Thus even if you eliminate 1 option you gain 2/9(on average per question); if you eliminate 2 options you gain 2/3 and so on.
 - Thus PRE awards risk-taking and attempting more as these **averages work out only when you attempt more** [law of large numbers].
 - Note I'm **NOT** saying that you must blindly answer every question and guesswork substitutes for knowledge and calculated risk-taking. Rather these techniques will only help you to get from 70-80 to above 100 but you must reach 70 first.
 - Overall prepare predictable/foundational areas like POLITY & ECONOMY well, focus on high-scoring parts in other subjects (eg: timelines in history, vegetation types in geography, general science for S&T...) and build the skills of elimination and keep bias towards attempting more(especially those preparing for a longer time because they have stronger intuition). Use Test series to come up with approximate number that you will attempt(for me it was ~95) and remain slightly flexible on exam day.
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On MAINS

Again you'll have to switch your mind-set. For MAINS focus on the BIRD'S EYE VIEW or the Big Picture. After building knowledge base you should start answer writing and it's best to start with PYQs.

On ANSWER WRITING

- Foremost **Structuring** is critical and the standard Intro→Body→Conclusion works.
- A good heuristic is:
 - for every question detect its theme;
 - create Intro from = context | definition | background | Constitution etc
 - break the demand of question into multiple sub-parts(2 parts for 10M & 3 for 15M)
 - address them each under separate headings
 - Conclude with either = summary | final opinion | forward-looking suggestion
 - enrich your answers with keywords, data(keep it limited) and box diagrams(small on side) of maps/figure/graphs etc
- Realise the **Points vs Paragraph debate** is futile; but a good thumb-rule is that for direct GS-like question points are better

and more analytical ones paragraphs are better. And you can always mix-and-match

- Once you are comfortable with structuring you should move towards time-bound answer writing(though you can be more relaxed initially like 10 mins for 10 marker). **But avoid answering practice without timer** as it won't help and at worst could be counterproductive giving you a false sense of confidence.
- Further answering 20Qs back-to-back in 3 hrs is a whole different beast! You can start with answering 6-7 Qs in 1 hr [Live Answer writing by Varun Sir is again a great innovation]. Eventually you should attempt full 3hr papers and approximately one month before exam simulate the full GS-experience(GS1 & GS2 then next day GS3 & GS4).

Other things that you need to keep in mind:

- Answering is NOT rocket-science. Do not get intimidated by rigid advice(like if you don't do this you're doomed). The crux is your answer should first satisfy the DEMAND then be embellished by diagrams/data/examples depending on time available.
- Internalize the zero-sum nature of GS papers. For example if you spend 1-2 minutes extra on first 15 Qs you might end up without answering 1-2 Qs at end. And that is a sin! Train your internal clock to answer 10M in 7mins & 15M in 11mins.

- Each of the seven papers are important. Qualifying MAINS is like jumping through seven hoops; you should prefer **at least above-average** in each hoop; because if you try performing really well in 6 you might still get disqualified due to 1⁴.
 - But that being said there are papers that are more rewarding like Optionals, Essays and GS4. So definitely focus on them more.
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On PSIR(my Optional)

- In Optionals, you have to **appear** more knowledgeable in subject-matter, use the lingo and methodology of subject, but still do not hesitate in using GS knowledge in Optional or vice-versa.
- For PSIR my approach:
 - Develop deep understanding of all the concepts (from Shubhra Ranjan Ma'am or this more accessible digital version)
 - apply them in writing PYQs [see Resources section for my solutions]
 - I took SR Ma'ams Crash Course that was useful in developing subject-specific thinking style.
 - Don't memorise rather combine ideas/theories/criticisms in a story-like format to write answers

- a good trick is thinking about 4Cs for every question =
Context → Content → Critic → Conclusion
 - liberally use ideas across papers/sections [eg: Plato's idea of Functional Specialisation in 1A could be used to answer question on Lateral Entry in 1B]
 - Make use of examples from Contemporary world [eg: Social Movements(Hong Kong protest, BLM), Conflicts(Ukraine, Syria, Congo); Terror Groups(Al-Qaeda, ISIS); Regime-types(theocratic Iran, autarkic North Korea, anarchic Somalia, State-Capitalistic China, Soft Authoritarian Singapore etc.)]
 - Don't stress too much about naming scholars. Theorists are more important than columnists/analysts; hence try to use them more; that again makes life easier for you & is more rewarding as well.
 - Maintain FLOW and avoid unnecessary details that disturb the flow.
 - Remember **practicing PYQs in time-bound manner** is the ultimate key to scoring high in Optional.
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On Essay

- Essay can be highly rewarding, and can allow you to take lead over others. Further the **skill of articulation, elaboration and deconstruction** is useful everywhere.
 - It provides an opportunity to show uniqueness of your personality and show your creativity.
 - First priority should be addressing the given topic and then readability and interestingness of your essay. Your essay should keep the examiner hooked!
 - And since last year most essays are philosophical you need a knack for deconstructing abstract ideas. Again the approach of: Context → shedding light from different standpoints → different interpretations → criticism → Summarising conclusion is useful.
 - I spent a lot of time writing essays on PYQs[see my essays in Resources section]
 - Also if you feel inertia for writing 1000-1200 word essay; you can always write a smaller one(600w) or just brainstorm the structure and ideas.
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On Current Affairs

- In recent times Current affairs has become a headache for many especially beginners who waste enormous time on chasing

current affairs. But actually most questions in real exam come from static or major current affairs.

- My strategy was to keep TheHindu and IndianExpress open in browser to read any relevant articles. Apart from that ForumIAS releases daily list of articles segregated syllabus-wise and now there's also UPSC Key by Indianexpress. Choose either one.
 - But don't bother making notes & chasing minor facts. Rather relate most current affairs to Static topics (for eg: if tribunals are in news prepare holistically the Tribunal topic) and add major current affairs to list of topics that you have to prepare(eg: Constitutional amendments)
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On Short-Notes

- I think very short-notes full of keywords, data, diagrams etc can be handy in revision. Also the **act of creating short-notes itself will crystallise knowledge** in your head; hence they are worth creating.
 - This is especially true for Optionals because using the lingo of subject is necessary for scoring high.
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On Motivation

Being **motivated and high-energy** is essential to bear the enormous physical and mental toll imposed by CSE. Ideally you should be internally motivated and strongly desire the service of your choice but there are other tricks too:

- **Forcing Function:** I created forcing functions that kept me consistent and disciplined. For eg: I bought Convertias subscription so that I'm forced to write answers and attempted regular tests forcing me to prepare particular topics.
- **Habits:** I believe in Aristotle's notion that "we are what we do". Good Habits(aligned sleeping schedule, daily MCQ/answer writing etc), most of the time, structurally prevent demotivation.
- **Process over Result**(or Nishkama Karma Doctrine): a cliché in UPSC sphere. But beware working hard-work without reflecting on outcomes/endgoals can also be fruitless.
- **Avoid Navel-gazing:** Do not think of forces/factors outside your control; or the search for ideal source-material or ideal strategy. Be pragmatic & focus more on execution.
- **Limit Social Sphere to selected and trusted few:** I was completely off any Social Media

- **Tangentially related stuff:** If you get bored you can listen to podcasts or watch movies or lectures/interviews that remain somewhat useful content-wise but are highly motivating [see section on Tangentially related stuff].
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MISCELLANEA (General Advice)

- Being **Confident** is really important since CSE is highly uncertain; self-doubt and lack of confidence can affect your performance on the final day. So being confident at all stages is actually pragmatically useful.
- Use your COMMON SENSE; do not burden yourself with Rigid Top-down orthodoxies; Syllabus, PYQs and what could be done in 7mins are good reality checks.
- Beware that both the Online and Offline Environment is **highly polluted**. Most advice is at best irrelevant and at-worst damaging.
- The Coaching Industry suffers from BAD INCENTIVES and Conflict of Interests [see principal agent problem]. For instance, they are monetarily incentivised to extend your preparation period(leading to bizarre scenarios like teaching World History for months) and fear-mongering(to create FOMO).

- I did not join any coaching explicitly. But I did join EdSarrthi Mentorship, Online Crash Course of SRIAS and Online FORUMIAS Test series.
- Be highly selective in choosing your material; the goal is **Minimalism** not creating a unwieldy collection that is difficult to revise/manage.
- Always **Prioritise** through **Checklist**. Pareto Principle applies to CSE as well i.e. 80% of gains come from 20% of content.
- **Deconstruction** (borrowed from Post-Modernist like Derrida) can be a key for writing Essays and PSIR. To deconstruct any topic:
 - **list its synonyms/interpretations** eg: Happiness can be de-constructed as = utilitarian pleasure | Plato's Functional Specialisation & Duty | Aristotle's Eudaimonia | Marxist socio-economic anarchic utopia | ...
 - **context** = historical or cultural eg: problems of Indian society to Colonialism
 - **criticism of each view from alternate standpoints** = eg: Marx: Natural Rights protects the rich & Hayek: Socialism is Road to Serfdom
 - Think along subjects = HISTORY | POLITY | SOCIETY | ECONOMY
 - Or Temporally(past, present, future) or thesis + anti-thesis → synthesis

On Some Unique things that I did

- Programmable Search Engine = you can use Google to search website like TheHindu, IE etc; this will allow you to find relevant articles on any topic
 - Notability app = great for scanning, and storing answers/pdfs; ALSO it can search your handwriting.
 - Smart use of Internet especially Wikipedia, Youtube, Google Ecosystem(Keep, Docs, Drive, Gmail...), Google Search(**Images Tab**) etc
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Resources

- PYQs of PRE, ESSAY, GS, & Optionals sorted subject-wise (Edsarrthi)
- Coaching
 - EdSarrthi courses for mentorship, strategy, answer writing, material and everything else for PRE & MAINS

- Shubhra Ma'am PSIR Crash course
 - Shubhra Ma'am Notes available digitally for PSIR
- FORUMIAS Test series
- 11th & 12th New NCERTs for History, Geography, Polity and IR
- Laxmikant is of declining use for Polity as real-exam questions are more conceptual so don't stress about spurious details;
- Vivek Singh Sir book and telegram channel for everything Economics
- Current Affairs = EdSarrthi gives **star-categorised list of current topics** and also covers **Contemporary affairs**(topics from last 10yrs). Also Dipin Sir's notes from FORUMIAS are also highly crisp & relevant.
 - For PSIR can read articles by C Rajamohan, Harsh Pant, Suhasini Haider, Suhash Palshikar, Dhruva Jaishankar, Nitin Pai, Pranay Kotasthane et al
- Dr Ashok Gulati's articles on Agriculture in indianexpress
- Use Internet smartly for random topics (eg: Youtube for S&T; Wikipedia for History; Programmable Search Engine for anything else)
- My Segregated Material(mostly answers to PYQs and other questions and my Test Series papers): This covers most of the syllabus of MAINS topic wise; if **YOU DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME START DIRECTLY FROM HERE** especially those writing coming MAINS.
 - Keywords/Syllabus

- Essays
 - GS1
 - GS2
 - GS3
 - GS4
 - PSIR
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Acknowledgements

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 - Pratyush Pandey Sir for his efficient way to crack CSE and especially this amazing post
 - Vaibhav Rawat Sir for guidance related to PSIR
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My Marksheet

CIVIL SERVICES (MAIN) EXAMINATION, 2021	
ROLL NO. : 7102140	
NAME : BHAVISHYA	
MARKS OBTAINED	
SUBJECTS	MARKS
ESSAY (PAPER-I)	141
GENERAL STUDIES -I (PAPER-II)	110
GENERAL STUDIES -II (PAPER-III)	110
GENERAL STUDIES -III (PAPER-IV)	094
GENERAL STUDIES -IV (PAPER-V)	117
OPTIONAL-I (POLITICAL SCIENCE & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS) (PAPER-VI)	130
OPTIONAL-II (POLITICAL SCIENCE & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS) (PAPER-VII)	121
WRITTEN TOTAL	823
PERSONALITY TEST	188
FINAL TOTAL	1011
Remarks :-RECOMMENDED	

Tangentially related stuff

I have tried to collect additional resources that can compliment your preparation. But note they are **only for your free-time and your first priority** should be **ONLY** material that is directly relevant to exam. Also whatever follows use it **very selectively**.

PODCASTS

available on Apple, Spotify, Google Podcasts etc...

- Puliyabaazi : highly relevant to CSE issues
- Grand Tamasha by MilanVaishnav
- The Seen and the Unseen by Amit Varma especially episodes on history, economics, etc
- Ideas of India by Shruti Rajagopalan: also see the 1991 project
- Worldview with Suhasini Haider : for IR
- In Focus by The Hindu
- GoodFellows = general geopolitical & geoeconomics issues
- The Good Fight with Yascha Mounk: for PSIR especially topics like Democratic Recession(rise of populism), decline of West(or Institutional decline in general), Post-liberalism, crisis of expertise, etc
- Whiskey & International Relations Theory for IR theory
- ARGUMENTATIVE INDIANS PODCAST

LECTURES(Youtube)

- Power and Politics in Today's World for PSIR 2A
- Caspian Report for geopolitics
- Hon'ble EAM S Jaishankar, Amb Shivshankar Menon, John Mearsheimer, Kishore Mahbubani, and others on Youtube
- Justice with Michael Sandel for GS4
- Michael Sugrue's YouTube channel for Philosophy
- CrashCourse channel eg: for world history
- Down To Earth channel for Env't, Climate change, pollution...
- DW/Financial times/Bloomberg channels
- Michael Rossi's channel

MOVIES/Documentaries

- The fog of war (Robert S. McNamara)
- Dr Strangelove (Deterrence, MAD, Cold War...)
- Adam Curtis docs: HyperNormalisation & Can't Get You Out of My Head
- Astra Taylor docs: Examined Life, What Is Democracy, Propaganda: The Art of Selling Lies
- Zizek documentaries
- The Putin Interviews(Oliver Stone): Russia-Ukraine conflict, Nato enlargement etc

- Insha'Allah Democracy = Democracy in Pakistan; post 9/11 geopolitics; example of political instability in South Asia; ethnic/religious divide
- The Social Dilemma = Digital Rights, Privacy, Weaponisation of Information, Orwellian Big Brother State/Corporation
- Gandhi by Richard Attenborough
- John Adams(HBO) = American & French Revolution, Natural Rights to Life, Liberty & Property(Thomas Paine vs John Locke), Fragile origins of Democracy and Republicanism(Tocqueville)
- PBS docs on Iraq war, ISIS, Populism etc