

The Idea and Preparations of Basics-1

“The Main Examination is intended to assess the overall intellectual traits and in-depth of understanding of candidates rather than merely the range of their information and memory. The nature and standard of questions in the General Studies papers (Paper IV to Paper VII) will be such that a well-educated person will be able to answer them without any specialized study. The questions will be such as to test a candidate’s **general awareness** of a variety of subjects, which will have relevance for a career in Civil Services. The questions are likely to test the candidate’s basic understanding of all relevant issues, and ability to analyze, and take a view on conflicting socio- economic goals, objectives and demands. The candidates must give relevant, meaningful and succinct answers.”

This is an important statement by UPSC that many candidates overlook. They go around asking ‘how should we prepare?’ and also ‘how should we start the preparation?’ This UPSC statement not only gives candidates the right direction on how to prepare correctly but also shines light on the path they should take. Why am I calling this UPSC statement so important? Let me explain. Pay attention to some of the sentences and words that have been said. There is a negative and a positive side to this. The positive points mentioned in the statement are –

- Evaluating the intellectual traits and depth of understanding
- Testing general awareness
- Basic understanding of subjects
- Critically analyse societal, economical goals, aims and demands
- Ability to form opinions

It is very clear what UPSC expects from you. This is not a web of words and there is no ambiguity. In fact we can say that UPSC is announcing they don’t want people who are specialists on subjects. They want generalists who have original thoughts and the ability to analyse.

Now let’s focus on the part that is negative. The lines that fall under this category are –

- No vast amount of information
- No analysis of memorising capabilities
- Without any special preparation

Our education focuses on two things: feeding loads of information to our minds and storing it there - at least till the exams. UPSC understands this fact. They have already cautioned that this is not what they are looking for. It is obvious that UPSC is asking you to steer clear of this so that you don’t waste precious years of your life. Now the question is how to fulfil all the expectations that UPSC has from you. This is a very accurate question and I believe that every student should have a deep and lucid understanding of this. Although every candidate who is successful in UPSC says the same thing, I would like to give you the example of 2014 UPSC topper Gaurav Agrawal and tell you something. When asked about the key to success in UPSC, he said, repeatedly, “Your preparation should focus on the basics of the subject”. This is a small sentence but it is as powerful as a uranium particle which has lakhs of tonnes of energy. In this article we will understand the various aspects and different levels of this ‘basics preparation’ from several angles. I believe that if you understand this, it will play a critical role in achieving your dream of being a civil servant. To be honest, I feel very shocked and disappointed when I get emails from students asking me ‘sir, what are basics?’ After I reply to them, their next question is ‘how to prepare for the basics?’ This question leaves me stunned. I get stunned because a student who is a graduate and has been preparing for IAS for two years or something does not know what basics are or how to prepare for it. Then what preparation has he been doing or

what has he been preparing for? When the number of such emails increased I decided to address the problem. I developed a half-hour audio and posted it on www.afeias.com and this article is the next step.

The meaning of basics

Just like the spinal cord supports your body or the foundation supports a house, a subject has its basics. The basics of language begin with knowledge of letters. Then we learn how to form sentences. Now you know that your preparation of the basics of language is complete. This doesn't mean you have become a specialist in the language. You have to work hard to expand your knowledge of the language. There are two important things to be noted here. Firstly, when you further develop your knowledge of language you won't have to work on the basics. They have already been etched onto your consciousness. Secondly, if you do not know the basics no matter how hard you try you will never be able to master the language. Without the knowledge of basics, you have only one option to become a scholar of the language. You can memorise various sentences and then use them when needed. But the other person will immediately understand that you are only speaking a few memorised lines.

From grade 1 to grade 10th whatever we study is actually the basics of all subjects. It is, therefore, called primary education and middle-school education later. It is after 10th that you have to choose a branch. It is clear then that knowledge of basics is nothing but a good understanding of the subjects taught till 10th grade.

Where do students get deluded then? They think that since they have studied for five more years after 10th their basics are clear. They think they have a really good knowledge of the basics. But at a psychological level, such thinking can weaken your hold over the basics. If you remember everything you have read till grade 10th or you can recall it when necessary then you do know your basics. Unfortunately, our education system focuses on knowing the basics. This system focuses on gaining knowledge about the basics, not testing a student's understanding of the basics. If this was the case, you would not face the difficulties you are facing now.

Maybe I'm being a little vague here. What I'm trying to tell you is that basics are not something to know or memorise. It is a thing that is to be understood. The only way that basics are related to studying is that if you don't study you will not understand. Problem is that we consider studying as working hard and memorising as understanding. UPSC is already warning you against this. But have you taken the warning seriously?

The question here is 'what is understanding?' The meaning of knowledge is not to increase the amount of information in your brain but actually to lessen it to an extent that there is space for knowledge. This knowledge comes from an understanding of basics. So do you have vast amount of information or wealth of knowledge? If this question comes to your mind then I would like to compliment you that your mind is a fertile ground where anything can be sown. There is a criterion that will help you determine whether you have basic understanding of the basics of a subject.

Which one of these is a special characteristic of forests in the equator?

- a) Existence of tall, dense trees whose tops form a straight line.
- b) Many tribes cohabitating
- c) Existence of great diversity in plants

Choose the right answer –

a) Only a b) only b and c c) only a and c d) a, b, c

The challenge here is that you will not find a direct answer to this question in any geography textbook. Then how will you answer? It is obvious that you will have to look for the answer. At first glance the question seems difficult and complicated because a mind with vast amount of information will not find the answer in its database. Consequently, you would either leave it or answer incorrectly. But if you know the basics of geography you will know the answer after reading the question just once. What is the basic here? The basic here is to understand the nature of equator and to know the temperature, soil, weather, air conditions. If you know all this it won't matter what the question is. If you know the longitude and latitude and you have read geography as a science you will be able to answer this question. So if you are asked 'write an article of 200 words on the economic situation of a country which is 22.5 degrees North latitude and 78.75 degrees West longitude, you will know the answer. To write the answer you will have to think and your understanding of the basics of geography is what will help you think. There is no other option.

I will tell you a measure here to check your understanding of basics. If you are able to apply the subject you studied to things that are happening around you then that means you have a pretty good understanding of the subject. For instance, in the 2014 paper on sociology the following question was asked, "Illustrate with examples the challenges and difficulties faced by societies due to social changes." This is a very simple question and this is why it is quite difficult. What is the answer to this? The answer is very simple. It is very easy if you know how change influences society, you will be able to answer this really well. Otherwise it will become very difficult for you, and even if you manage to write an answer, it will be superficial for which UPSC will not give you any marks.

I will now state a very important fact here which is connected to your attitude towards any subject. Your viewpoint would be either one of these. First viewpoint is to accept the subject as static or dead but the other viewpoint is to take it as continuous and living. 95 percent students take a subject as dead which is just trapped in the books. They find it difficult to understand that a subject in the book is actually the account of a living society. No matter what the subject is it is related to the society or nature. Neither one is dead. They are dynamic and they keep interacting with each other. Now think about how a subject developed and grew. The answer is very clear. After analysing whatever is happening in the society and nature humans figured out cause and effect relationship between various things and recorded them in books.

If students are taught these things in primary school I think it would have a miraculous effect. A student will look at his surroundings and observe natural phenomenon that he read about in books. Then there will be a stage when they will see things in their surroundings but will not find the answers for them in books. Then the student will be curious and this curiosity will lead him to seek out answers. It is not that before Newton discovered gravity apples would go up the sky instead of falling down on the Earth. The question of why apples fall down on Earth led Newton to become a scientist and discover gravity.

Friends, you don't need to be scientists to become civil servants but you do need to become social scientists. Questions will be asked and you will not find direct answers for them in text books. You will then seek out answers and this curiosity will make you come up with a good answer. This is the nature of social science and this is what UPSC refers to as 'the ability of adopting a viewpoint'. In conclusion, when you can apply the subject you studied to events around you, you can assume that you have a good understanding of the basics of the subject.

Stages of basic

Our brain is related to every subject in four ways –

- a) In the first situation our mind does not question anything we read, see or hear. So we accept things as they are.
- b) In the second situation when you see events around you and hear things your mind raises questions but does not have answers. This shows a better quality mind than the previous one. At least your mind is raising questions. This is a good beginning.
- c) The third stage is more advanced. Questions arise in your mind after listening, hearing and seeing things. You also get answers but you have to struggle for it. You have to think and thinking takes time. But at least you get all the answers.
- d) The fourth and the best situation is when you see, hear and study things and immediately you find answers. This happens so fast as if there is an automatic machine in the brain.

If you have ever sat for a civil service exam and if you had a chance to sit for the main exam, you will not have any difficulty in answering my question – which of these stages do you need to achieve to be successful in civil services. It is obviously the fourth stage, and the mind is the strongest in this one.

So another criterion that you can use to judge whether you have an understanding of the basics is to see which of these stages your mind is in after listening to a question. This is just for evaluation. As far as success in civil services is concerned, you will achieve that only after reaching the fourth stage. But you can only reach this stage after crossing the first three stages.

Friends, I'm ending this article here. This is not complete. You must be wondering already how to prepare for the basics. We will talk about this in the next issue.

NOTE: This article by Dr. Vijay Agrawal was first published in 'Civil Services Chronicle'.