

Fundamentals of Main examination: Analytical ability-1

Candidates preparing for civil services should know that this exam is very different from university exams and also the state civil services exams, even though the pattern may be quite similar. Students who do not understand this difference, work hard and prepare well but they are unable to secure a place on the final list. It is surprising and a little sad that students who qualify preliminary exams for IAS are sometimes seen securing a mere 15 percent in the mains. It is therefore essential to understand the fundamental difference that causes students who have qualified preliminary exams to fall behind.

It would be better if we try to understand this in detail, and not in brief as the secret to cracking civil services lies here. I also believe that if we try to understand such an important fact in brief it would be a half-hearted and likely-to-fail attempt. I would like to take your permission to discuss this in detail so you can absorb the information and use it for practical purposes. I want to discuss the structure of our education and the important facts associated with it.

Our education contains four levels. The first level is middle school. This level teaches us about important subjects. This stage provides information. From this level to higher secondary level, studies are aimed at developing a student's understanding of various subjects.

The third level is directly associated with main paper in civil services. During the three years of graduation a student develops an analytical approach towards his subject. Whether a student develops these skills or not is a different matter, but in the ideal situation this is what should happen, otherwise there is no point in graduating. Unfortunately, this most important level of education is also turned into the level of attaining information and developing understanding. In fact, it consists more of information and less of understanding. It is precisely this issue that becomes a slow poison for civil services candidates.

The last and fourth level is that of post graduation and it is about specialisation. This is an effort to specialise in one subject so that a person is able to analyse and establish fundamental facts. Thus as far as knowledge is concerned, the four levels of education should provide us the following –

- Information (up to middle school)
- Understanding (up to higher secondary)
- Analysis (up to graduation)
- Originality (post graduation)

This is a scientific technique for learning prepared after great thought, long observation and numerous experiences. This technique is similar to a student's psychology. It is in sync with the capabilities of a student's developing psychological consciousness. Initially our psychological conscious is not such that it can understand a piece of knowledge or an incident directly. When we have gathered a large store of knowledge we are able to review the information. By the time a student reaches higher secondary his consciousness is able to do so.

But is the information and understanding of a subject enough in itself? The correct assessment of your psychological abilities lies not in your memory but in your analytical capabilities. This is the ability that causes the knowledge about a subject to continuously evolve. It is through analysis that hidden gems are uncovered from the deep sea of information. This process allows the subject to evolve, else it would be stagnant.

Do not forget that this analytical ability developed at the graduation stage is only possible if you have lots of information about the subject and a deep understanding of it. Higher secondary education provides our

consciousness with all the information to help us develop the ability to analyse. If you have achieved this ability then it means you are tightly holding the reins of the horse of the civil service exam. You just have to sit, the horse will run. However, if you are not well-prepared do not be in a hurry to mount the horse. It will not be able to move a step. There are only a few thousands students who are tightly holding the horse's reins out of lakhs of students who take the exam. The ones who have fast-running horses win the race.

Demands of the exam

Maybe you are wondering how the above-mentioned facts are associated with IAS. I think the two things are heavily interlinked so much so that if you do not prepare keeping these facts in mind your success would remain doubtful. Let us see what expectations UPSC has of you. These can be divided into three categories –

- UPSC expects you to be well-versed in General English and General Hindi at least equivalent to that taught till grade 10th. Since these exams are related to language, they are merely to be qualified. So I don't feel the need to elaborate on this.
- The next expectation is regarding General studies. UPSC only expects from you what is expected from an average educated person. Now who is an educated person? If we link this expectation to general English and general language, the level expected is that of grade 12th. The level of optional subjects is that of Honors degree. By this logic, General studies could then be considered to be that of graduate level, but this reasoning wouldn't be right because this level would then not belong to an average educated person. Therefore, the knowledge required for General studies should be considered to be that of Higher Secondary level. This would hold true if you go through the general studies papers, especially in the main exam.

There is a very important expectation that people often overlook. You have to focus on two facts here. There is no doubt that the level of the subject is that of 12th grade. However, the minimum requirement for a candidate is graduation. So this means that UPSC wants you to have the knowledge of 12th grade that can be expected from a graduate. Students make this mistake that they judge the study level to be of 12th grade but forget that the candidate taking the exam is a graduate. They may have to regret this later. So you should remember this fact.

- Third expectation is related to optional subjects. Many Universities do not provide Honors degree. You can deem this to be at the level of post graduation. This is the level of specialisation in a subject. This is the expectation from you when it comes to optional subjects.

Nature

Friends I don't want to bore you or confuse you. Let me come straight to the point and explain to you how the above mentioned things are related to your preparation strategy. Let us focus on the two papers in the preliminary exam. For example, in General studies questions are asked from various subjects. Have you tried to understand the nature and character of these questions? Many students do not feel the need to do so even though this would give your studies a scientific edge. All the questions asked in General studies are of two types

- Information-based
- Understanding-based

Around 30 to 35 percent questions are related to information while 65 to 70 percent are understanding-based questions. For instance, this is a 2014 question – “When did the 1905 partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon end?” To answer this question, you don’t need much of an understanding. You need information. You need to know when the ending of partition was announced. The next question asked was – “The 1929 Lahore session of the Indian National Congress is important because...” You have to choose from one of four options. At first glance, this will seem like an information-based question but after you read the options you will not think so. You will only be able to answer the question correctly when you understand the Independence movement and can comprehend all the given options. Otherwise you will get trapped in this maze of choices. I gave you examples from history so that you don’t think that only information-based questions can be asked from history.

To succeed in the preliminary exam, your higher secondary education will be useful. The method of studying you used for these 12 years will aid you now. Learning by rote is useful in helping you acquire information, but it cannot help you develop an understanding of the topic. It is not that you don’t need information at all when it comes to understanding. To think that understanding can be developed without information would be foolish. It is also foolish to think that only information will help you develop an understanding. I have already talked about this topic in my previous articles on understanding the basics.

The second stage of IAS exam is that of the main paper. The most challenging papers are the four General studies papers. You can imagine how difficult these papers are when I tell you that the person who topped IAS exam in 2014 only scored 38 percent in these papers. These scary statistics prove that the papers are indeed difficult. But is this true? I do not think so. The figures are scary but it is not necessary that they always tell you the truth. The truth the statistics tell you is not related to the difficulty level of the exam, but it is related to your understanding of the nature of the questions asked. This is directly linked to your ability to analyse. As far as knowledge is concerned, you only require it to be of 12th grade level but the ability to analyse needs to be that of graduation level. This is where students lack. This is why I believe the main paper is associated with the third stage of education which helps hone your analytical abilities.

As far as essay writing in the main paper is concerned it is that of graduation level. Essay writing is not directly related to analytical ability. It has mostly to do with information on the topic and the student’s understanding of the topic. The challenge here is for the student to balance his understanding and information and present it in an eloquent manner. Here, knowledge is secondary and art of expression is most important. We will discuss this in detail some other time.

Now let us discuss the optional paper which you have the freedom to choose. This is entirely your choice. So if UPSC has high expectations from you on a subject that is of your choice, is it wrong? Think about it. If a student is allowed to choose a subject, he would definitely choose the one he is best at. It is also understood that when a student chooses his best subject he will also present his best effort. Now the question is what are the elements that establish excellence in any subject? The answer is originality. Many students study the same subject from the same books. As a result, most students will give similar answers. All the answers will be good but UPSC expects the best from you. Your originality is what will differentiate you from the crowd.

I want to assure you that the evaluation civil services conducts at different stages in different ways, and the expectations UPSC has from you, you already have the seeds for it sown inside of you. You don’t have to buy the seeds from anywhere. All you have to do is identify the dormant seeds inside of you and try to germinate them. Believe me all the expectations that UPSC has from you are very practical. There is nothing new. You already have everything that you need. It is just that you have forgotten it. I’m helping you remember what you have forgotten.

Nature of questions

I'm only discussing the questions in the main paper and those in the four General studies paper. You can also apply this identification of questions to some optional papers in the subjects belonging to the field of humanities. Only the 2013 main exam has been conducted according to the new pattern so the papers from that year are the basis for my analysis. I don't think the structure of papers in 2014 will be much different so you don't have to worry about that.

In the general studies paper, you will come across three types of questions –

1. Questions that do not need analytical answers. Questions are direct and straightforward. They are much like the questions you are used to answering in your university exams. For example, 'What are the causes for the formation of heat islands in the urban habitat of the world?' or 'Discuss the Tandava dance as recorded in the early Indian inscriptions?' These questions are mostly based on information and understanding. When the questions are followed by words such as characterise, introduce, differentiate between, discuss, you should know that they do not seek an analysis in your answer. These questions are asked in civil services but they make for only 15 percent of the total number of questions.
2. The second type of questions require an analysis but not an in-depth one. You need to deepen your level of understanding and information to answer these questions. These questions are accompanied by instructional words such as clarify, comment, review, evaluate, discuss, justify etc. For example, 'A national Lokpal, however strong it may be, cannot resolve the problems of immorality in public affairs. Discuss.'
3. The third type of questions require an in-depth analysis. This is the final stage that assesses your analytical ability. These questions can be identified by two instructional words clubbed together such as critically evaluate, critically examine, discuss critically etc. For example, 'What are the reasons for introduction of Fiscal responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) act 2003? Discuss critically its salient features and their effectiveness.'

So you don't need great analytical skills for the first type of questions. Students are able to solve these questions with ease because they are used to it. It is, however, challenging for them to answer the second and third type of questions. The mistake they make is to handle these questions the way they were handling the first type of questions. This becomes the reason for their failure. This is the biggest challenge posed by the main paper which is directly linked to a student's analytical abilities. We will discuss these skills in detail in the next issue. Until then you read and re-read this article, understand it and evaluate where you stand with regard to these challenges. This will help you absorb all the knowledge better. This is the foundation that will enable you to understand the next article easily. Until then, I bid you farewell.

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