

How to practice answer-writing-1

I often like meeting my students. Whenever I get such an opportunity I make sure I do not miss out. The incident I'm going to narrate to you is not a one-off thing. I have had such experiences in numerous places. I was attending the wedding ceremony of the daughter of a close friend. Like it usually happens, many of my students had gathered there so I could assess their preparation. We were able to not only understand each other better but also form a close-knit bond. Every week on my website afeias.com I present a question on the pattern of questions in the main exam of civil services. These are the questions that can be asked. I have been quite successful in this.

When I asked the students present there that how many of them solve the questions put up on the website every week on a regular basis, I could understand from their expressions that they did not have anything important to say. If I talk in numbers then only 2% of the students were solving the questions regularly. Others had their reasons for not writing their answers, but their reasons were of no use to me. They were of no use to them either. However, this reasoning served their purpose, not mine. This was not my first experience and it will definitely not be the last. No matter how many times I tell a student, no matter how many students I tell this to, and even if I say this to my best students who I trust, I know that only 2% of them will follow my advice of regularly solving questions. This is a coincidence that only 2% students can do this and only 0.2% students who take the IAS exam qualify. I believe that of the successful candidates 0.1% belong to this 2% population.

I find it a strange psychology that if you are aiming for something great, then why wouldn't you do everything possible to achieve it. What is stopping you from doing so? If this happened to only a few people, this would not be a cause of worry. But this is happening to most people. Only a few aspirants won't let this happen to them. These are the people who allow only those things to happen which they want to happen. It is obvious then that the results they get are also the ones they want.

There is no arguing that practising writing your answers is indeed a boring job. It also creates anxiety. First, you have to study the question, then understand it, then think about it and then write it. A struggle in your brain ensues while writing answers. There is no guarantee that what you have written is the right thing. When the mind comes up with an idea to write something, you don't feel hungry and your sleep goes for a toss. You feel a little restless as well. Now, who would want to invite all this upon themselves? It is easier to just think that I will write the answers in the exam. You have done this till now and have succeeded. So, you cannot understand why you would not succeed in the future.

The thing you have forgotten in this web of logic is that earlier you had to pass the exam and now you have to get selected. In university exams, someone's ability to do better cannot result in your failure. But this can happen now. In this situation if your technique to qualify civil services is similar to the technique you used to qualify your university exams then you are making a mistake.

I'm not saying that not practising your answers is such a terrible mistake that it won't let you get into the list of successful IAS candidates. There are some who can make it without this practice. I know such people. Among the successful candidates that I have met, I have found that over three-fourth of them were those who had written practice of the important answers. Some of them had little practice, some slightly more and some who did a lot of practise. It would be wrong to say that their ranking was commensurate with this practice. Since the percentage of people writing and practising is high it would be practical to say that such practice boosts one's chances of success. Let us discuss how and why this happens.

This is a natural process

Whatever we learn in our lives it is through practice. I'm talking about learning here and not about knowing something. Look at your own life. You learned how to sit then how to walk, how to run and how to talk. You learned how to feed yourself, how to study, how to ride a bike, how to sing, how to play cricket. How did you learn all of this? You do not have any other answer other than "through practice." There is nothing that we cannot learn through practice. There is nothing we can learn in one go. We can know about it, but not learn it. But we can only learn through practice.

I often ask my students this question. How many of you sing, even if you are just humming to yourself? Most students raise their hands. Then I ask, "How many of you are singers?" You will find it strange that not even 5% hands will rise. The challenge here is that a singer is one who sings. Everyone sings, so everyone should be a singer. But when I ask about them being singers most people keep themselves out of this range. Do you not find this strange? So why does this happen?

This is about discipline. All of us sing but we don't know how to sing because we have not learnt it professionally. We sing without ever learning it. So our singing is a natural phenomenon. But this does not allow us to become singers. A singer would be one who has studied music and understands all the 'sa re ga ma pa' notes.

A singer would know the grammar of music. He not only knows the grammar of music but also practises. If he has not practised but knows the grammar, he can only teach music but can never be a singer himself. This means that to be a singer he has to learn all of this and this cannot happen without practice.

You will rarely find an artist who does not practice. The moment he dissociates himself from practice, his talent loses its sheen. Not just an artist but any man who is striving to achieve perfection is continuously practising. He practises even when he does not need to. Do you think a cricketer only practises when he has to play a match? If you ask one he will tell you that he cannot even afford to take a break on Sundays. In fact, they practise the most when they do not have a cricket match.

Friends, I'm discussing this at length because I have been unable to stress upon the importance of practice to students. Maybe if I quote a few scholars it would have more of an effect and students would follow this. Tulsidas has written on the importance of practice. He says,

"Karat karat abayas ke, jadmati hot sujan,

Rabri vat jaat hai sil par padat nisan."

This means that even a fool can become intelligent with practice in the same way that when you take out water from a well with the help of a bucket and rope, the rope rubs against the stone and in the process the stone is also marked. This applies to studying for civil services as well. Those who have been good students since the beginning do have some qualities which enable them to score well. This means that they have stability. They have standards. While this does not ensure them entry into the successful civil services candidates club, it does provide them some benefits. But I'm not talking of such students here. They do not fall under Tulsidas' definition of "jadmati" (fool).

So what is the reason that 50% of students who pass the exam are not toppers but second division, and sometimes, third division holders? This is answered by the truth that these are those students who have practiced to hone their qualities.

Based on the results of past 30 years of exams I can definitely say that most candidates who are successful in the civil services exam are those who are taking the exam for the third or fourth time. It is rare for people to clear the exam in one go. The answer to this lies in the word 'experience'. The students are now mature and wiser. This benefits them. Do you believe that experience entails practice in it?

I believe that if we can gain experience from another medium then we should do it. Practising your answers is one such medium.

To explain another thing I would like to give the example of riding a cycle or bike or driving a car. Look back at the days when you were trying to learn how to drive. You must have been very scared. You had to remember everything chronologically like holding the clutch before you change the gear, then leaving the clutch slowly. Or to use the left foot for the brake etc. But after you were driving for a few days did you feel the same fear or did you have to remember all the technical details? You would have noticed that things were happening on their own now. You were doing whatever was necessary and it came naturally to you. You wouldn't even have to think before performing the action. If you are driving and have to apply the brakes you will notice that your left foot automatically does that. It is noteworthy that your fear has turned into fearlessness. How come an action that you were performing very cautiously, you can now perform comfortably? You are actually much better at it now. How did this happen? This is something worth pondering over.

Through this example I want to explain to you that when we do any kind of practice, the process of practising helps your subconscious absorb the learning. What we learn passes through our conscious to our subconscious and lodges itself there and when we need it, it appears immediately. If you ask me, the purpose of practice is not just to achieve perfection but to let the subconscious absorb the whole process. Let me put it this way. If something is lodged in your subconscious it does not mean that you have achieved perfection but it means that you have embarked on the journey to attain perfection. It is now up to us how long we continue this voyage. The longer the journey, the higher the degree of perfection.

It depends on you now how perfect you want your answers in the civil services exam to be. It is possible that you can write good answers without practice that let you gain entry into the list of successful candidates. You could even get the top ranking administrative services. But if you practise your answers can be even better and you can score higher. This could change your ranking. You are aware that in civil services, promotion depends on your ranking in your batch.

If you can improve your ranking by spending some time practising, and coping with the stress that comes with it, shouldn't you do it? This won't harm you in any way.

Importance of practice:

This should be clear in your head that when we are talking about practising answers, it means to practise answers for those questions that are more likely to be asked during the exam. This doesn't mean that you should start writing answers for any question that comes to mind. I have discussed how you should choose questions in another chapter of the book. You can take help from that chapter. But, before you try writing answers, I think it is very important to tell you what exactly is the meaning of practising your answers.

I have found that many students take thesis as a mere formality. They think that they should write answers and they do it for their satisfaction. While this exercise provides you satisfaction, it fails to fulfil the purpose it was meant to. It is better that you don't write at all. I'm saying this because you are only wasting your time and capabilities. It would make more sense for you to utilise your time in a more efficient manner. This is why I feel the need to outline what this really means.

- First of all, writing an answer does not mean repeating what you have studied. You can revise in your head as well and recite it. You can even jot down important points. So don't think that practice is revision. If your aim is to revise what you have learnt then you will not be able to answer according to the question that has been asked. You will keep thinking "What should I do so that I can write down everything that I know about this topic?" This is revision and not writing answers. Most students start revising instead of writing answers.
- There are many reasons to write an answer. The most important one is to continue correcting oneself. You will be able to understand this when you write an answer. After you are done writing it, you should also evaluate it. This doesn't mean that you should rate your answer. It means you should evaluate it against the learning material that you have. You will find that you have missed out on many things. You should think why this has happened to you. The information that you missed out on will now be lodged in your brain. This will make your answer more accurate.
- You can reach close to perfecting the art of answer writing with this practice. When I mention perfection, I do not mean just a multitude of facts but also the style of writing, word count, use of language and the structure of your answer. Writing an answer is less of a science and more of an art. This is a way to express yourself using facts and language. There are many students who have facts but when it comes to presenting them they are not able to do justice. This is true to both spoken and written language. So what is the solution? The only solution is to write as much as possible. This will hone your skills and eventually the style of writing will seep into your consciousness.
- I have learnt from my own experience that through this we can bring our subconscious into our conscious. I'm saying something that is peculiar. This is not related to writing answers but to writing facts. The first option is to memorise the facts by rote. The next option is to read the facts, memorise them and write them. When we put pen to paper, we make sure that the facts are ingrained in our brains. They stay there for a long time. It is not that we will never forget these facts but we will be able to remember them at least until we take the exam.
- The practice of writing answers comes with a benefit that the subject is absorbed by our brain with a special rhythm. We can feel the rhythm of that answer and when we have to write it in an exam it works like magic. Our mind does not have to struggle to find an answer. All the facts come to you in a chronological order and you just put them down on paper. This is highly enjoyable.
- You can understand how much time is saved when the facts come to you and you can just place them in a mould without any pressure or struggle. There are two reasons it takes time to write an answer. Firstly, we are unable to figure out what we should write in our answer. Secondly, once we start writing the facts do not come to us as fast as they should. This slows us down. This causes us to take more time to answer even though we know the answer and we have practised it before. When you save time writing these answers, you can use that time to answer questions which require some brainstorming.
- It will never happen that you practice writing answers for 40 questions and you will be asked 20. There is also no need for this to happen. The only thing that should happen is that if you prepare 40 questions, at least 6 or 7 must be asked. You can do wonders with this. You will at least be able to do wonders when compared to others. This will be a great achievement for you. When it comes to General Studies, I think it is enough to practise 20 questions for a paper. But these should be the 20 most important questions. This will give you the confidence to answer questions from any subject.
- When you start writing answers you save yourself from forgetfulness. When you evaluate your answer you notice the things you missed out on. But this is not the only reason you hone your memory skills. The reason writing an answer helps you is that when you have to write an answer you don't think about just what you're writing. Your train of thought goes over many kinds of thoughts and facts. Some of them you will use, some you will let go. In this way you end up thinking about various facts related to the topic. Instead if your practice routine is to merely revise out loud what you have studied, you may not think of many other facts. The thoughts that will come to you will reduce even further. This is because when you are revising something out loud your brain does not struggle. It is easy for the brain to do this task. The gravitational pull of the brain is not as high as it is while writing an answer. Therefore, writing an answer is more beneficial to us than revising it.

Most of the things that I have told you I have experienced myself. Sometimes, I have included experiences of other people as well. The only thing I can tell you is that you should not think of the process of writing answers as a mechanical process. Think of it practically. Only then would you be able to enjoy it. You should try to do this.

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

