

## How to practice answer-writing-2

There is a scientific principle behind everything, including practice. It is obvious that there is a science behind the art of practice. If we are not practising in an organised manner then we are not practising at all. Practice starts as a science in the beginning but turns into an art. Here I will talk to you about three steps of practising. These three phases take you from an amateur to an experienced person.

In the first phase we learn how to begin. In the second phase we have learnt something. In the third phase we have mastered this.

Let me make it clear to you that you don't have to use these three phases always for every question. After a lot of practice you will achieve that stage where you realise that you are in the phase where you do not require the first phase of practice. The second phase is now the first phase. There will, hopefully, come a stage where you will be left with only the third phase and that is the last one. Your aim is to reach this stage and reach it in one go. While practising you have the liberty to write your answer thrice. But you will not have this during the exam. The end goal is to merge all the three steps into one and you can do it. But you have to start with these three phases. You need to give this time. You also need a lot of patience. else you will not be able to benefit from it.

So let us discuss the first phase now.

### The First Phase

This is the first step, you can consider it a gateway to the art of practice. You do not have to rush this. Do not let conflicting thoughts enter your brain. You have to keep yourself free from the pressure of time. Do not worry about which facts are being left out and which are being retained. You are training your brain right now so do not expect much from it. If you expect all this, you will be disheartened. This disappointment can make you grumpy. This could lead you to stop practicing altogether.

Keep these things in mind and take the following steps:

- Take as much time as you need. This means taking time to think about facts, organising the facts and then forming a structure to place them. Then take time to write your answer. Forget that you only get 9 minutes to write a 200-word answer while here you are taking 90 minutes to do so. It doesn't matter. You can in fact take 90 minutes if you need. Your brain cannot prepare an answer in nine minutes as of now. It will do so eventually. It will mould. In this phase you have to train your brain to do so. Do not hurry. If you hurry, you may ruin things for yourself.
- You should start writing when you are ready. You can take an entire day for this preparation. Even if it takes you two days, so be it, as long as you keep thinking about the writing. If you think you are not prepared, do not sit to write. Whatever you write in this situation would be half-hearted. If you want to write half-heartedly in an exam then what is the point of practice. You can write like that anyway.
- Now you write. Do not keep a time limit. Think about each sentence. Look carefully at your language. Try to write a good answer. If you feel you are being repetitive, stop yourself. Think carefully about each word. If you think you can use another word in place of one do so. If you think that rephrasing a sentence will read better, do that. If you need to change a fact and shift it here and there in the text you can do it. This phase should be a very patient one. Do not worry about giving 110 minutes to an answer that you have to spend 10 minutes on in the exam. Follow the example of generous Karna. Do not forget at all that currently you are practising and the purpose of this is to turn you into a good player.

- You have to now evaluate your answer. It is better if you do this after a while and not immediately after. This gap can be as long as an hour. But do not give it too much time. This is related to the answer being fresh in your mind. Since all the facts are fresh in your mind, you remember the mental process you have been through while jotting them down. This will help you a lot.
- You don't have to evaluate the answer at your own level. You have to evaluate your answer according to the study material that you have. This way you will be able to figure out what are the important things you have left out. It is not important to just know the things that have been left out but also to understand why they have been left out. You will immediately figure out how this happened. It is possible that you have written something that doesn't match with the facts. Some facts could be wrong. An illusion can lead to this. Once you see that you have missed out on facts, try to figure out again why this has happened. This is a way to hone your skills.
- When you are evaluating your answers then no original work should be done. It is important that you jot down the first five points. This is because now you have to write again, and this time your answer will be better than the previous one. These points will help you write a good answer. This is how you will improve upon your answers.
- Now write the answer to the same question. It is obvious that doing this will be quite easy for you, compared to the last time you attempted this. Your brain does not have to struggle so much. Your answers will also read better than before. Your experience till now is proof enough that if you have to write an answer that you have practised in the exam hall, won't your experience be similar?
- Now read your answer and compare it with the one you wrote initially. Note down the points where the two answers differ from each other.

This is how you will complete the first phase. If after writing this final answer you feel a sense of satisfaction then whatever you have done till now is in the right direction and the right way. You are on the right path and this is the path to success.

## The Second Phase

I told you that the first phase is an independent one. You should start with this one. It doesn't matter how long this takes or how bored you are. You can take this as the foundation of your practice. How good of a writer you will become depends on this phase. So do not have any reservations here. Give it time. If this takes you four to five months, give it that much time. When you feel that you have grasped the first phase then you move on to the next.

How will you understand that you have become the master of the first phase? There are some criteria

- Facts flock to your brain. You can catch the various hues of a question.
- You get to know at once what you should write in your answer.
- You will have no trouble in writing your answers.
- You will get creative ideas in your brain.
- You will feel less anxiety and confusion.
- Your language has improved and has acquired a rhythm.

In the first phase, you will acquire all of these skills. Next, you will go through two more phases. In the second phase, you have to adopt a similar method with a small change. What is this method? I will now discuss this.

- The biggest difference is the time. In any case, you have to reach the level where you can finish writing your answer (two hundred words) under seven to eight minutes. In this case, you can compare yourself to a sprinter. A sprinter practices every day, and during practice, his only goal is to reduce the time it

takes him to cover a set distance. During each practice session, you will find that he always checks the time. If he realizes that he has been able to cover the distance in 10th of a second less than before, he pats himself in joy. After a certain period of time, his lap time ceases to improve. This is the stage where he has reached the utmost level of his ability. This is how you can identify the sprinter.

You are in a similar situation. You have to develop the ability to answer a question under a pre-determined amount of time without compromising the quality of the answer. Most students are able to achieve the ability to handle the aspect of time, but at the expense of quality. It would be better then to think of another way; however, the difficulty is that there is no other way. The one and the only way is the method we are currently discussing.

Perfection in quality is actually linked to the excellent co-ordination of the brain and the hand. Some students think that if their writing speed increases, it will automatically take less time to write the answer. This is true to a certain extent; however, not completely. This is one-sided thinking. Due to this, it will definitely take less time to finish writing the answer, but do not forget that your answer may not be as good as it used to be when you had ten instead of eight minutes. In this case, I have talked about only two additional minutes, but if you convert this into a percentage, it is twenty-five percent. If you apply this need for extra twenty-five percent to answer twenty questions which take three hours to write, you will get two different types of results. Either the time to complete the paper will increase from three hours to three hours forty-five minutes, or the number of questions will have to be reduced to fifteen. However, the number of words will remain the same. You already know that none of this is possible. Things will remain the way they are.

At this point, practising to write helps. In the second phase of practice, you must only focus on one thing: “how do I reduce the writing-time to a minimum.” This time will be considerably less than the time in the first phase, but not as much as in the third phase. Let’s say that in the first phase you took half an hour to answer a question; in this phase you would be able to decrease this time to fifteen minutes. That means half the original amount of time and twice the amount of perfect timing. When I experimented in the second phase, I felt that this calculation of time is correct. This happens and at this level it would be sufficient to put this much effort.

How will you achieve this? You have to set your brain’s stop watch to fifteen minutes. That is, before you write the answer, you have to consider that you have to complete it within fifteen minutes. As soon as fifteen minutes are over, the examiner will snatch the paper from you and you will have to stop writing. This will be your final answer.

- Now, you will examine your answer. Surely, the parameters to check the answers will remain the same as the ones you used in the first phase. In doing so you will get a different feeling. Here you will have to pay attention to the topics that your brain missed due to pressure of time and also to why it missed these topics. You have to check these things in particular. Note whatever results you obtain on a piece of paper.
- Next, you have to think about the solutions to the questions that have popped up from these notes. You can take the following steps to solve these questions:
  1. Did I write slowly? If yes, can I increase my writing speed? If you feel that this is possible then you should focus on this aspect of the exercise.
  2. Was my preparation insufficient, which limited the brain’s ability to recall facts quickly? If the answer is yes, you will have to pay attention to your methods of preparation. As far as these methods are concerned, I have discussed these in various sections previously. However, I will list a few of them again –

1- Is it possible that the brain is preoccupied with trivial things?

2- Is it possible that there is lack of clarity in the brain?

3 - Inadequate grasp of a topic is also a reason for reduced speed. This lack of understanding is caused by failure to study a topic for this purpose, etc.

You must include the facts that you found here in subsequent practice sessions. Lessons ahead will only be beneficial if you make changes to your style of preparation. Otherwise, you will keep repeating yourself while you practice your writing skills.

- I also want to mention that you should try to choose questions that you are well prepared to answer when practising to write. At least in this phase, do not pick a random question and start writing. You must choose only those questions that you have prepared well for.
- After checking the questions, re-write them. Write consciously, but also keep track of time. The time it takes you to write this time should not be more than the time it took you previously. In any case, you will naturally find that you can write in less time than previously. This is the proof of your success and you can be proud.

Therefore, you can say that the second phase is the refined form of the first phase. Anyway, the three phases are conceptualized in a way that all three of these phases are bound to refine gradually. We have to gradually improve ourselves. Therefore, I would like to mention again, and there should be no surprises if I repeat it in future, that don't be hasty. Do not get bored. If it takes time let it take time. If it feels boring, so be it. Do not leave it. Assume that this is the biggest challenge in this exam, which makes most students quit due to anxiety. If you are persistent then victory is inevitable.

Yes, you can definitely practice this way once or twice a week. Even one day is sufficient. However, what has to be done has to be done. Therefore, if you do not feel like doing it right now then don't do it. Do it whenever you feel like it, but do not give so much leeway to your mind that it makes you do whatever it wants to do. Then it is possible that it will never feel like doing it. This is what happens in most cases because this is problematic. Even if it is not problematic, you cannot call it entertainment. Therefore, if your mind is repeatedly going against your will then you must control it. Keeping such students in mind, I have written a book called "Student and the power of mind". If this habit of your mind is troubling you then I will advise that you read this book.

### **The Third Phase**

After completing two phases, you have reached the third phase. This phase is not only the third phase, but also the last. Therefore, here you have to achieve the maximum ability to write answers. You have to acquire perfection. You basically started this in the second phase. Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to assume that this phase is an extension of the second phase. However, I haven't done so because there is always a stage where things reach their utmost level. Therefore, it is better to look at it in terms of separate stages.

This is an elaboration of the second phase because here you have to work mainly on two parts. First, time has to be reduced to a level that is similar to the pre-set time for any question in the exam.

Secondly, the number of missed facts while writing an answer should be negligible. I am deliberately not suggesting that it should be zero. Do not get into that trap. Otherwise, you will be under constant stress because it is almost impossible to do that. Although this might be possible when you are regurgitating an answer, there is no possibility of that happening in this exam.

Do not think of reaching this ideal state suddenly. Set an expectation to write within eleven to twelve minutes in the starting. In the second phase you took 15 minutes. Here that stopwatch will be set at maximum twelve minutes. Although you must feel that reducing the time by three minutes is not a big deal, it is a big deal. The higher you climb a hill, the more difficult it gets to breathe. The same principle applies here. Decreasing the time even a little bit will require a considerable amount of effort from you. Start with the goal of completing the answer within eleven to twelve minutes and stop writing as soon as the time is over.

Now you will implement the same method that you did in the second phase for checking answers. Look at the time. Look at the facts. Now look at the time and facts in the context of your writing speed and ability of brain to come up with facts. Then focus on these and practise further.

Gradually, you have to reduce the time it takes you to write during practice and reach the same limit that is set for you in the exam. However, you must keep in mind that facts should also be co-ordinated in addition to writing speed.

I forgot to mention that the last hurdle in front of you is different from the last two phases. Stop the practice when you reach the stage which is similar to writing answers in the examination hall. Therefore, you will have to include the following two methods in the latter half of the third phase:

- First method is linked to the choice of questions. Now you can pick up any question and start writing about it. The preparation for this question is yours, but it is not exactly the same as the answer you have written here. The exam will not have the questions that you have prepared for. Yes, the topics might be the same. Here you have to assume that you are giving an exam in the examination hall. This must be your psychology and you must practice accordingly. Therefore, from now onwards, you will not write answers to predetermined questions.
- Until now, you were practicing writing one question at a time. At this point, you will write answers to multiple questions. By now, you must have guessed my purpose behind saying this. I am saying this because in the exam you will have to write answers to twenty questions (questions under general studies- hundred to two hundred words each) at once. You must have experienced that in the beginning of an exam, your brain is alert and fresh, as expected. Fingers are full of energy, as well. Anyway, we start with answering those questions first that we know better. Also, the brain has less difficulty in answering questions which we are familiar with.

If we divide the three hours in two parts, then the first part is the first and foremost and most favorable to us. However, in the latter half, our abilities lose momentum and the brain gets tired. Even the wrist is worn out. Furthermore, the difficulty is that the questions at this stage need a more determined brain.

How will you face this situation? This is only possible through practice. Therefore, the last lesson in the third phase will be exactly what is required for the exam. If you want, you can call it “Pilot Project” or its replica. This lesson will make you stronger. Although it is true that you don’t have to practise a lot, by practising more, you will become stronger, confident and adaptable to that environment.

For this, you should create a mock test yourself or have someone else create one for you. If both options are available, select the mock test that has been created by someone else. Keep in mind that these questions must be of the same level as the ones in the civil services exam. If the questions in this test are of a lower level, you will develop a misconception.

Now take three hours out of your time and bring your psyche to a state where you feel as if you are sitting in the examination hall. Whether it is time, content or result, you must enter an examination like state of mind. Do not think of this as nonsense.

The amount of students who do this three-hour practice is negligible. Students mostly practise for one to one and a half hour. However, I feel that there should be tests for practice sessions like this one.

I have deduced this principle by talking to some players. I was excited after reading the great cricket player Sachin Tendulkar's statement, 'Before playing a match on any pitch, I play the game in my mind'. He had said that he used to go to the ground, examine it and then hypothesize situations such as spectators are sitting, balls are being bowled, players are getting out, and spectators are cheering, etc, everything. I found this concept riveting. I wish that I would have known this while I was a student. I do not have any hesitation in admitting that I did not practice like this. I used to practice writing but in form of short questions. Now, I always do this when I have to give an important talk somewhere. With all honesty, I accept that this is very beneficial.

Like I said, after the three hours of writing practice, all the phases are complete. In spite of this, there is one more challenge left to practice. Are you able to guess what this challenge is? You might have guessed it. This challenge is to write for three hours, and then write for another three hours, after a two hour break. I won't say anything else about this. I leave this to you. However, if you want an answer from me, my advice is, "It is not essential considering that you complete the three-hour long practice."

I also want to say that if you are unable to do the three-hour long practice, don't think that you are making a serious mistake. It is not that you are missing out on something that is essential for succeeding in the civil services exam. That is not the case at all.

However, where it is a matter of practising writing one to two questions, I would like that you don't take any particular liberty with it. You have to do this, even if you have to push yourself and find time from somewhere, you must do this.

I don't mean that you have to do this everyday, but it must be done once in a week or ten days. If the gap between two practice sessions is more than this, you will find that the gain you expected in your ability has not materialized. This is similar to the options that you have while building muscle by going to the gym: everyday, every alternate day, two days in a week, one day in a week, or as per one's wish. Think about the effect and outcome of these and then apply that to your ability to write answers.

Now, decide your next steps.

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