

Analysing your Answers-1

This is a common problem but an actual one. Whenever I tell students that they should practice writing their answers, they ask me "Sir, we will write the answers but how will we know if what we have written is correct. How will we get to know what else is required in the answer?" I can understand this problem very well and I can even feel it. But before I tell you the solution to this problem let me tell you the bitter truth.

Many students use this problem as an excuse to avoid practising writing their answers. They tell themselves that since they do not have a way to assess their answers so what is the point of writing them. Thus, they avoid the stress that comes with writing the answers. Is this not true? You can say that this is not true in your case but not for others. There is no dearth of students who I have asked to send their answers to me. I never got to see or assess their answers. In fact after that the students stopped talking to me on the phone. Perhaps, they were scared that I will ask them why they haven't sent me their answers yet.

This is why I said that the problem lies not just with writing down your answers and assessing them but never actually writing them. Anyway, we have discussed this problem in detail. I would like to tell you of an incident related to this problem. This will help you understand this problem as well as find solutions. I had a student who was a family friend which is why she was forced to meet me and ask me exam related questions. Every time we met I told her to practice writing her answers. She went to Delhi and took coaching classes. It is a great thing that she managed to crack preliminary exams in her first attempt. However, she only managed to score 25% in the main exam. This was a very bad score.

The scores indicated that either no attention was paid towards preparation of the main exams right from the start or if attention was paid, it was not paid properly. Definitely, this score must have shook her deep down and must have caused her concern. As a result, she might have realized, "I have to practise writing answers". Once she decided upon this, she took admission into a few institutions in the city to practise writing her answers. I am not sure of the practice needed in case of other papers, but I would like to share my experience with her in regard to essay-writing.

The institution had asked her to write an essay. The essay was written and was marked. She scored 125 out of 250 in the paper, which means 40%. I would call this a good score. This can be considered a good score because in the previous main exam she scored 25-30 marks. Most students get stuck at this point because the essay exam although seemingly easy is actually difficult.

She showed me her essay. After reading the essay, I was surprised not because it was well written, but I was surprised because if such an essay can receive a score of 125, how bad an essay one has to write to receive a score of 40 to 50. I was perturbed and agitated internally. My disturbed state and agitation was not because I was concerned about the future of this particular student; I was concerned about the future of all the students who could be in a similar situation. Students are like a blank sheet of paper; they do not know what they are doing.

I did not say anything to this girl. I did not want her to feel discouraged, sad, and hopeless because she had a few days left until the main exam. This would have shaken her self-confidence and that would have had a negative impact.

The only thing I said was "Let's do an experiment. You have to perform two tasks."

- The first task is to read the essay and identify points that you have mentioned. Create a list of these points.
- After creating the list of the points, read the entire essay once again in reference to those points. After that write down five different titles for this essay.

“You do this and then meet me tomorrow.” I deliberately told her to meet me again because I was afraid that she might drift away forever. Because I was her well-wisher, I was concerned about her drifting away.

I was pleasantly surprised that she completed the tasks and returned the next day. This time she looked very disappointed. I asked “What happened?” and instead of speaking she placed in front of me the paper which had the points and the five titles based on it. The truth is, at this point, there was little room left for any assessment. She had understood everything. The topic on which she had written the essay was not in the list of the five titles. The five titles that we had in the list now were the appropriate titles for this essay. Therefore, if the direction was to write an essay on these titles, this essay would have been correct, but this essay was not appropriate for the title that was provided.

Now, tell me what percentage score will you award a student in such situation if you were marking the essay as an examiner? I feel that even a score of 10 to 15 is not justified in this case. This, in some way or the other, not only reveals the student’s inability but it also reveals his/her grave ignorance, stupidity, and craftiness. Ignorance as in he/she does not know what he/she is writing. Stupidity as in he/she has no idea of what is being asked, and craftiness as in the student’s belief that the examiner is also ignorant like him/her and can be deceived.

Friends, I will present what i want to tell you through this way in a structured manner. I have discussed this incident because I believe that in some way or the other you also see yourself in a situation like this, provided that this is your problem as well. If you are interested, you will be able to surely find the solution. Some thinker has accurately stated that a problem without a solution does not exist. If the solution doesn’t exist, the problem doesn’t exist as well. The issue doesn’t lie with solving the problem, but with understanding the problem, which in medical term is called a diagnosis. Drugs are plenty, but to cure the disease it is essential to know what the disease is. What is the disease here?

Introspect. The first symptom of the disease is that you do not want to write the answer. You do not want to practise. The second symptom is that even if you are writing the answer you are writing it out of compulsion. You are dragging yourself. If you are writing out of compulsion, your brain will naturally not take interest in it. It won’t be able to understand the question and won’t be able to provide concepts and ideas for the answer. The third condition is the lack of direction. Direction is scarce when it comes to responses and the ones you trust may not be as trustworthy as you thought. Therefore, another problem emerges - where will you find direction that is trustworthy?

However, as I have stated, if there is a problem, there is a solution. Therefore, let’s talk about solutions.

Maybe, this is something you do not believe in, but believe it for the time being. It is not that I haven’t obsessed about or have not been dismayed by this issue. This is true for most students. Especially with students who are trying to write better answers. Therefore, it isn’t wrong to think that the situation will not improve unless there is someone to assess your answers. What do coaches do? They don’t do much other than watching the players play and discussing with the players minor errors that they identify in the player’s game. The question is how do the players rectify these errors and practice? Even the world famous and active players have to go through this. Doesn’t matter how well one plays, one can still make mistakes. It could also be the case that

even if an old error has been rectified, a new error has emerged or a good quality has transformed into a flaw. Therefore, every player wants to be under the direction of a coach for as long as he/she plays.

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



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