

# How to prepare history for UPSC

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## Importance

Our perspective on state, society and life can be made better through analyzing past events in history. This is one of the main reasons why history has become an important and compulsory subject in primary and higher secondary education as well as for general studies not just in India but around the world.

It is believed that after acquiring historical knowledge, one can make better decisions in life as history makes one familiar with the past and contemporary events. This also explains why history is one of the main subjects in civil services exam, the other three being political science, geography and economics.

A person appearing for the UPSC exam is perhaps striving to become one of the topmost administrators of the country, who has to take decisions for the common good of all. However, there is no direct link between my statement above and the preparation for history as a subject for civil services. My motive is only to make you aware about the truth, draw you towards the subject on a psychological level and help you develop interest in it.

If I succeed in attracting you towards history, you will enjoy preparing for the subject, which I consider as the first essential step towards preparation for civil services.

Now, we come to the number of questions asked on the subject in the exam. The questions based on history (including art and culture) in paper I (general studies) of the prelims is nearly 15% on an average every year, which may vary from a minimum of 12% to a maximum of 19%.

The subject is divided further in the main exam. For example, Indian independence movement, events post-independence, world history, as well as art and culture. The maximum number of questions are asked from the independence movement. In other words, only a few questions are asked about history post-independence and seldom one gets questions on world history. Hence, out of 250 marks in the paper, 125 marks on an average (nearly 50%) are for the four topics mentioned above.

The division of marks will give you a glimpse of the importance of history in civil services. You should also be able to determine how well you need to prepare the subject in order to clear the exam.

## Level of preparation

The Union Public Service Commission has stated in its notification that 'the nature and standard of questions in the general studies paper will be such that a well-educated person will be able to answer them without any specialized study'. If we were to interpret these words in the context of NCERT books, then it would sum up to the syllabus of class 12. But is it really true?

Despite it being true literally and logically, it's not a matter of fact. This can easily be established by going through the previous years' unsolved question papers. The standard of questions is clearly above the class 12 level. Then why did UPSC mention it? According to my understanding, a thorough preparation of general studies paper can help aspirants prepare and understand other subjects better.

In fact, a person should have a comprehensive outlook. The aspirants should not go just by the literal meaning of the statement. The words can further be interpreted in the following manner:

1. You need to at least be a graduate to qualify the civil services exam. This means that the books may be of class 12 level, but the aspirant's brain should be developed to the level of a graduate. This mental development helps a person understand, comprehend and express things and topics better.
2. In its notification, the commission further mentions about 'general ability and intelligence' as well as 'ability of analyze and put forth one's point of view'. Here, 'the ability to have a perspective on things' is somewhere related to 'having original ideas' and analyzing situations through one's own reasoning. The concept of applying your own mind into questions makes the UPSC paper completely different from regular college exams. Hence, 'analysis' and 'logical reasoning' become two of the most challenging words in the civil services exam.
3. The questions on current affairs give a new dimension to the preparation of the exam. However, this aspect does not play a great role while preparing for history. But for other subjects (even for preparation of geography), the current affairs become an important feature since certain questions have a link with the current happenings in the world.

The above points will mainly determine the level of preparation (not only for the mains but also for prelims) an aspirant requires for the UPSC exams.

### Source

It is obvious that the source of your preparation should be such that it fulfils your basic necessities and leads to a positive outcome. Therefore, I am mentioning some sources as a 'suggestion'. It is just an 'indicative' source of preparation and should not be considered as carved in stone. According to one's need, aspirants can add, remove or replace the study materials.

- NCERT history books till class 12<sup>th</sup>, both old and new editions.
- Modern India: Especially a good graduation-level book, which focuses on Indian Independence movement. Renowned historian Bipin Chandra's book 'History of Modern India' is considered one of the best sources for the preparation of civil services.
- One must also be thorough with ancient and medieval Indian history on art, literature and culture. Also, one must have an in-depth knowledge on the philosophy of these periods.
- A few important events post-Independence should be prepared. Bipin Chandra's book will also be helpful for this.
- The world history in itself is quite extensive. However, you should save yourself from getting lost into the abysmal depth of the subject. For example, a question on 'decolonization process

in Malay Peninsula' was asked in the 2017 question paper. The purpose of such questions is to encourage aspirants to read as much as possible and be aware of the happenings around the world. Hence, one must remember that there's always scope for exceptions.

Besides these, one must also know about the Renaissance period, revolution of America, France, Russia and China, World War I & II, dictatorship and fascism in Germany and Italy, industrial revolution, capitalism, Marxism and socialism, colonialism in African countries, end of colonialism, and Japanese imperialism among others.

NCERT book will be a good source for preparation of world history. One must go through it in detail. You will get a glimpse of world history through this book.

It will be better if you also go through a graduation-level book for world history in the later stages of preparation. This will strengthen your understanding on the topics.

### **Method of preparation**

I will now state some general important points which will give a concrete shape to your preparation for history and help you proceed systematically.

- I would advise you to not let your preparation and topics muddle up. Save yourself from reading too many authors. Just go through one book thoroughly on a topic or if need be, then two (that too only for the most important topic).
- Do not be in a hurry or sit down to mug up topics. Move systematically and focus on strengthening your basics. Start with reading the entire history. This will help you understand the past events, even if vaguely. Following this, concentrate on the most important topics; topics that are often discussed.
- As far as memorizing is concerned, your focus should not be on the incidents, period and place. Your emphasis should be on the reason behind the incident and the beginning of the historical event. Period and place mostly work as references in the events.
- From the point of view of the main exam, it is extremely important to give yourself time to think about the topic after reading it. It implies that one must try to use their thinking and reasoning to interpret and understand an event. This will not only help you analyze a topic, but also in understanding and forming an opinion on the subject. This attempt to think logically will help you in both prelims and mains.
- If a historical event finds its way into national or international discussions, then go through it more carefully and try to connect the dots with the contemporary happenings. It is advisable that aspirants note down the points of the topics which have resurfaced through discussions.
- Do not be under the misconception that history for UPSC exams is mainly about preparing the Indian independence movement. You should have a stronghold on the topic but do not solely depend on it for success in civils.
- After 2013, the difficulty level of the main paper has gradually decreased. The questions asked in the history paper of UPSC in 2017 were relatively easy and mostly pertained to the important

topics. It seems that this trend will be prevalent next year as well. Hence, do not let yourself get tangled up with too many theories and concentrate more on the important topics. Instead of learning too many chapters vaguely, try to have a thorough knowledge of the most important ones. This way you will be more confident about your answers and it will help you excel.

If you follow these points, you will be able to prepare the subject well and will pass the UPSC exams with flying colours.

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



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