



Preparation Strategy for Civil Services (Preliminary) Exam in the Last 30 Days

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Dear Aspirants,

Civil Services Preliminary Exam is the first phase of the Civil Services Exam but not necessarily the simplest. There is a wide difference between the syllabi of the Preliminary and Main Exam, the nature of questions and consequently the preparation strategy needs to be well thought out. I would like to share my experience and learning over the last 2-3 years and hope that it might be helpful to other aspiring students.

However, at the very outset, I would also like to say that there is no fixed, deterministic path to success in this highly subjective, uncertain exam. What follows is my subjective experience which might work for some and might not work for someone else.

With CSAT (a major stabilizing factor, at least for someone with a basic understanding of 10th standard Maths) made a qualifying exam, GS assumes prime importance. This means that the total time spent dedicatedly on Prelims prep must be sufficient to allow multiple revisions and retention of GS topics since one cannot rely on CSAT to pull one through. For the last year's Prelims (2015), I spent a good 2.5 months (June, July and half of August) studying only for Prelims without giving any time to Optional or Mains GS. For the 2014 Prelims, I had only spent around 1.5 months and relied heavily on CSAT. The strategy paid off and I comfortably cleared the Prelims with 140 marks in GS compared to 102 in 2014. The cutoffs might be even higher this year and Prelims must not be taken lightly.

The last 30 days should be a time of intensive revision in a planned and organized manner. With so many subjects and topics, the Civil Services Exam syllabus has an extremely low retention span as you juggle between history, culture, environment, polity every day. It means that without last minute revision, all earlier preparation might not bear fruit as one starts forgetting after a week of lag.

In case you have covered the syllabus once as of now, you should strive for 2 cycles of revision before the exam with special focus on topics you don't feel comfortable with. In case you have not covered the syllabus once, you should prioritize and study in that order.

Prioritizing

Questions on conventional topics like History, Polity, Economy, Geography are for them fairly straightforward and NCERTs with a basic conceptual understanding should suffice. For Polity, do read Laxmikanth's book from cover to cover. The book is fairly comprehensive and from an exam point of view, very well written and organized.

Covering the above topics is a must as these are the ones with least uncertainty, straight-forward questions and well defined scope. These also do not require reference to multiple sources, a single book for each of these is usually sufficient.

It is also instructive to keep in mind the massive competition that you are up against. More than 4 lakh students actually sit in the exam. Many of them prepare as if their life depended on it, many would be veterans taking the exam for the fifth or sixth time. Unless you cover these safe topics well, it would be extremely difficult to have an edge over the lakhs of other applicants.

Only after these safe topics are covered, should you venture deep into topics like Science and Tech, Environment, Culture which are vast and have an undefined scope with endless study material. These are the topics where you can make the difference and outperform others. In this sense, they also become the deciding factor especially Culture and Environment which have become UPSC's pet topics over the past few years. So after you are done with the basic stuff of Polity, History, Economy and Geography, most of the time should go in covering as much as possible from these slightly ad-hoc topics. Go through previous years' papers and try to get a sense of the type of questions that are asked from Environment and Culture and read on those lines.

Take Mock Tests with a Pinch of Salt

I tried some mock tests for prelims with one or two coaching centres but found them to be highly unrepresentative of the actual UPSC exam. Questions in these mock tests are deliberately made confusing, ambiguous, tricky and convoluted. While it helps you practice time management in exam like conditions, the results should not be taken as any sort of indicator of performance.

Past year tests

The most reliable source of practice is past year test papers. Even here, some questions would be based on current affairs of that particular year. However, the questions from the static portions should give you a good sense of the type of questions asked in the exam and help you with reality checks and identifying your weak areas along the way. The more recent ones could be practiced as mock tests while the older ones can be done subject wise as you prepare a particular topic.

CSAT

While CSAT is now a qualifying exam, some amount of practice would definitely help setting the pace and in time management.

Final Week Before The Exam

In the last week, try to remain calm and not fret about any topics you have not covered. It is helpful to focus on topics which are fact heavy and where memorization is required e.g. UNESCO sites, Ramsar sites, National Parks, Rivers, etc. You might not be able to make much of a marginal difference in conceptual topics like Economy in the final days and hence can rely on prior knowledge for such topics.

Topic Wise Books

Detailed out below is a topic-wise list of books and sources I followed for the Prelims Exam. While there is a copious amount of study material available in Delhi markets and on the internet, I tried to limit myself to 1-2 sources for each topic. This helps in revision, retention and keeping the study manageable. I would not advise to further complicate the already complex syllabus by referring to multiple books and then not being able to revise them. Revision is the key and will define how much of what you study you can actually recollect and remember in the exam. For example, a number of books are available on Modern History. However, I stuck with Bipan Chandra's NCERT and some sections of Spectrum and read the portions I underlined over and over again.

Topics	Sources I Followed
History (Ancient)	RS Sharma Ancient History old NCERT
History (Medieval)	Romila Thapar 7th or 8th class NCERT and selected sections (only culture part) of Satish Chandra's 11th class NCERT.
History (Modern)	Bipan Chandra XII NCERT + Spectrum

Art & Culture	Apart from above history NCERTs, Fine Arts NCERT, CCRT website (topics like Dance, Drama not covered in books), NIOS notes on Science (e.g. Ancient and Medieval era science), UNESCO sites from Wikipedia.
Polity (Static and Current)	Laxmikanth, Indian Constitution at Work NCERT, Newspapers (Hindu/Indian Exp.)
Economy (Static and Current)	Day to Day Economics by Satish Deodhar, Indian Economic Development NCERT, XII Macroeconomics NCERT, Newspaper, a few chapters from Ramesh Singh (e.g. Banking is nice)
Science and Tech (Static and Current)	Class 9 and 10 NCERT, Biotech topics in +2 Bio NCERT, Newspaper, Rajya Sabha TV show "Science Monitor", random Google search on current topics not covered well in newspapers
Environment (Static and Current)	GK today booklet, Science NCERTs have chapters on Environment, Some Mrunal articles and videos about international treaties were good, Wikipedia for national parks, Ramsar sites and other such sites, Random google search on allied topics relevant to current issues e.g. if Air pollution is in news, read random stuff about it
Geography - World	XI NCERTs, 2nd half of GC Leong (Biomes)
Geography - India (Physical + India)	XI NCERTs
Important Current National and International Events	Newspapers (Hindu/Indian Express) - kept notes and revised them
Schemes & Policies	Not much. Made a list of schemes regularly appearing in news and read about them on government websites.
Other Internet or offline sources followed	Did not follow anything regularly. Rather, searched for an issue/topic I did not feel comfortable with and read as much as possible whether PIB (Features section), PRS, IDSA's 'ask an expert', Foreign Ministry's 'In Focus', Rajya Sabha TV's 'Big Picture', 'Science Monitor', 'State of the Economy', 'India's World' are good sources.

Wishing all the very best to all aspiring students.

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