EFFECTIVE EXAM PREPARATION

INTRODUCTION

Gaining worthwhile qualifications is a very good way to enhance your future prospects - but it isn't easy. You must accept that you will have to put plenty of effort into your studies between now and the exam.

Try the P-R-E-P system of exam PREParation.

PLANNING YOUR TIME

The calendar
Before drawing up your revision programme, confirm the date(s) of your exam(s). Get a calendar and see how many days/weeks are left. Make sure you have the latest syllabus (found in the exam handbook) and the past two years' exam papers and reports. You can't expect to use revision time to best advantage without these. Familiarise yourself with the format of the exam paper, because to some extent this will determine your most effective revision methods.

Now draw up a list of the main topics to revise. Aim to cover all the major areas of the syllabus: don't concentrate on a narrow range of topics which you hope may come up. Then, allocate the main topics to the days available for revision. If you are taking more than one subject, you can allot a bit more time to the subjects you find hard, but do not neglect other subjects.

The clock
Having produced your outline revision programme, you will know that on a certain day you have to revise one or more topics or parts of topics. So before starting revising on that day, break down what you have set yourself to do into periods of about 45 minutes each, with a short break in between. It may help to give yourself variety by revising a different subject in each period or, if you are taking only one subject, revising different topics.

The difficult part on any day is to get started. Most people revise best when they are fresh in the morning. A few don't function so well at this time, but unless you are convinced that you really are a night owl', make the effort to get up and make an early start By doing this, you are putting your priorities into practice and guaranteeing that today's revision will be done. Make up your mind to do sufficient revision periods to cover the topics you allocated to today, and then stick to that: don't just try to 'do what you can'. Self-discipline is vital for successful revision: a bit of will-power in the crucial weeks before the exams will pay dividends.
**REVISION METHODS**

**Passive revision**
This is when you revise and learn the subject, but are not actively practicing writing exam answers. The ideal place to do this is a room with no distractions. Don’t kid yourself you can work better with the radio on - or worse, the TV. You need full concentration on the job in hand, and in any case you cannot have music playing in the exam, so you need to learn to work without it. Sit at a desk or table, *not in an armchair*: you will need to write even when revising passively. Before starting, sort out your notes. Time spent getting them into order, filling any gaps by copying up missed notes and making a table of contents, is not likely to be wasted. Put any essays or test papers done with the relevant topics. You should not need to learn any completely new material at this stage, but you can update any out-of-date facts using student supplements.

The object of passive revision is to **review** existing material by re-reading it, organise it for purposes of **recall** and then **reorganise** it for purposes of answering exam questions. Many marks are lost because answers are too rigid; exam questions require you to reorganise your knowledge. You can partly do this for the main topics at the passive revision stage and then gain more skill at the active revision stage by planning and producing answers to specific questions.

To review your knowledge for recall and reorganisation, make sure the key headings and passages in your notes and the course book are underlined or highlighted; bright colours help here. Skim through the topic to remind yourself what it covers. Refer to exam questions set on the topic, so you can see where the examiners put the emphasis. Then read your notes and course book carefully, **writing down** the significant points and summarising the concepts involved *in your own words*. Some people like to write on small cards, which can then be referred to in odd moments for further revision. Others just use scrap paper, but the very act of writing, particularly in your own words, helps you to **internalise** the knowledge, assists memory, and brings to light bits you don’t really understand. Remember, extra time spent writing is more than repaid by greater understanding and retention: don’t fall into the trap of superficial revision by a rapid read-through of your notes and course book.

**Active revision**

Familiarity with the Highway Code is not sufficient to pass your driving test; you need plenty of hands-on experience and to have the best chance of passing you should be familiar with the routes examiners take and do a mock test beforehand. Similarly, for CII exams, passive revision is necessary, but actual practice in working under exam conditions is essential. **Don’t just ponder-practice!** Practice gives the opportunity to gain confidence in **reorganising** your material to answer exam questions properly and in doing this you also help your **recall** of the subject.

Choose a question on the topic being revised. Try to see exactly what the question is getting at and go back over those parts of your notes and the course book which you think are most relevant. Draft a short plan of your answer. Then put your notes away and see if you can write a suitable answer in the time allowed in the exam. Afterwards, refer to any relevant Exam Guides. Also, see if your college tutor or some other qualified person is willing to read your answers and make constructive suggestions. Practice in approaching a question,
planning the answer and writing it down within the time limit will never be wasted, even if that particular topic does not come up, because you will gain confidence and improve your technique. Even if you don't have time to write out many full answers, it is nearly as beneficial if you can just produce an outline answer. The skill you have to develop is to be able to apply the knowledge you have acquired to solve the problem set by the question.

**EXAM TECHNIQUE**

Commonsense advice

You need to be in the right place at the right time, so check before the closing date that you are definitely entered for the subject(s) you are studying. Details of the exam venue, exam timetable and candidates' Instructions come with your admission permit if you don't receive these within ten days of your first exam, telephone the Office of Administration office at Woodford, quoting your identity number.

Arrive early, to allow for parking and finding the right room within a building. You can sometimes pick a better desk and you don't have the avoidable strain on your nerves of worrying about being late. Bring adequate equipment: check and double-check that you have reliable pens, pencils, ruler, eraser, calculator (if allowed) and a watch. In case you can't see the exam room clock.

If you are in a panic, take deep breaths when you sit down at your desk: this helps to calm nerves. Check that you have the right exam paper and that its format is what you were expecting; sometimes changes occur of which candidates are not aware. Everyone knows that you should read the questions, but the best plan is to read right through the paper before starting. Don't be in a panic to start, and ignore candidates who appear to be steam ing ahead: their exam technique may not be as good as yours!

**Play the advantage rule**

a) Use your exam time to best advantage.

The golden rule is to spend your time according to the allocation of marks. Know exactly how long you should spend on each question; before the exam, knowing the format of the paper, you should have done your calculations, on the lines of this example:

**Example**

Specimen CIP foundation paper

3 hours - 180 minutes. Total marks available 200

20 short-answer questions, totalling 200 marks. Therefore allocate the time evenly between them, allowing a few minutes at the end of the exam to check your answers.

180 minutes

20 questions = 9 minutes per question.

So aim to spend 8 minutes on each question, with 20 minutes for checking answers at the end.
Then, stick to this time allocation. Why is this so vital? Consider how a typical candidate acquires marks while tackling a question with a maximum of 30 marks and for which 27 minutes are allocated. The time taken gaining the first few marks is relatively short, but successive marks take an increasingly long time to gain. As our typical good candidate is not a genius, she won't gain 30 marks even if she spends all night on the question. How many more marks is she likely to gain from spending another ten minutes on the question? What marks could she gain by starting another question instead?

It is a very common fault of exam technique to spend too much time on one question, and it is nearly always unwise. Resist the urge to just finish it off; if you have already used up your allotted time, finish the sentence you are writing, leave a space to return to the answer if you have time at the end, but for now go on to the next question, to be sure that you have gathered in those early, 'easier' marks first. Remember that if you find yourself only halfway through an answer when the allotted time runs out, it may well be because you have rambled too much or have missed the point of the question.

The order of doing questions is equally vital. With short answer or multiple choice questions, it’s best to go through in the order set, but leave a space if you are stuck and go back as necessary. When you start to tackle a section of a paper with a compulsory question, do that first, but only spend the allocated time; this question may well be some sort of case study, but do not get carried away and spend too much time on it. Then tackle the remaining questions you have chosen, starting with the one you think you will be able to answer best. If you do it well, this will give you extra confidence, and because the answer should come fairly easily, it will help to get your brain going for the other questions which you expect to find more difficult.

Always attempt the correct total number of questions set; it you don't, you'll have to gain much higher marks on the smaller number of questions attempted, and we have already seen how much harder that is. Quite simply, you materially increase your chances of passing by attempting all the questions you are supposed to.

If you really are short of time at the end, a few notes as an answer may gain some marks, even if you are supposed to given an answer in essay form; the examiner will be aware of time pressures.

If you have stuck to your timings, you will probably have a few minutes left at the end to read through all your answers and correct any silly mistakes that may lose you marks; at the least, your mistakes may irritate the examiner and mean that he won't give you the benefit of the doubt in borderline cases. Don't worry if you have no time to read through and check; it's better to continue writing and gaining extra marks, but only if you really are adding something extra and not just waffling.

Whatever happens, do not think you are being clever by leaving the exam room early to join your friends down the pub. After all your investment of effort before the exam, it's madness not to give yourself the full time allowed for the actual exam. Even if you think you can't do any more and have read and re-read your answers, do stay and continue to see if there is something you can improve or add.

b) Understand the questions to best advantage
The key here is to have some method of finding out what the examiner is getting at, so you will give the answer he or she is looking for. To do this, you need to answer the question as set, not the one you wish had been set. The best way to prepare for this is to have plenty of practice in answering different questions on a variety of topics. Show the outline answers you produce to your college tutor or mentor at work, and discuss whether you have really understood what the question is about. Read the exam reports to see what answers examiners expected in previous years.

Here are some tips:

- 'Question spotting' is not recommended: you end up preparing answers for questions which do not appear in the exam, or complaining that the examiner has picked a bit of the syllabus you did not consider important!
- Remember this word: IDEM. It stands for Irrelevance Doesn't Earn Marks, so keep to the point: do not waffle or ramble - you are wasting precious time with nothing to show for it.
- Do not twist the question round to suit your knowledge; examiners have a fairly tight marking schedule, and it's up to you to make your answer fit the question, not vice versa.
- Examiners are looking for the selection of appropriate material and its application. To use a military analogy, 'precision bombing' is far more likely to be on target and gain maximum marks than 'saturation bombing'. The latter means here writing everything you know about the topic in the question, and it is very time-consuming for candidates, very irritating for examiners, and is a virtually certain recipe for disaster.
- Exam questions usually give pointers, to what the examiner is getting at, in the form of key topic words in the question, which indicate the topic(s) on which your answer should be based. Remember that you may have to bring together knowledge from a number of topics and integrate them into a logical, reasoned answer this is particularly likely with case studies. Underline or highlight the key words which refer to the topic(s) involved this helps you to focus on what knowledge is required and any relationships between different areas of knowledge. If you try to incorporate the key topic words in your answer plan (see below) you will have a better chance of producing a relevant answer.

- For multiple choice questions (MCQs), the technique is not to linger on any one questions; do not sit staring in a bemused way at the paper! Leave any questions you are really stuck on, but be sure you return to them. The introductory part of an MCQ is called the stem, and misreading of this often leads to a wrong answer will be accompanied by several wrong ones, call distractors. Some of these will be obviously wrong, but one or two may appear correct. Having read and understand the stem eliminate all the distractors which are obviously wrong will certainly save you getting halfway through, leaving you to choose between a smaller number of 'possibilities'. This helps you concentrate on the answers which should include the correct one, and even if you have to guess, you have increased your chances of picking the right one. Don't rush go through steadily work out in advance how many questions you should have done in one quarter or one half-the time, etc. You must leave time to go back to any questions you left; if necessary make an inspired guess, but don't leave any MCQs unanswered, because no marks are deducted for wrong guesses. If you have time at the end, force yourself to go back over every single question and double-check that you haven't misread or missed something. Once you leave the exam room, you have
no chance of altering silly mistakes. Practice in doing as many MCQs as possible helps you even more than for essay-type questions, because there is a good chance that some of the MCQs in the exam will be very similar to ones you have been practising.

c) Present your material to best advantage

Of course you won't fool the examiner by dressing up rubbish to look impressive, but part of the art of passing exams, especially those requiring essay-type answers, is to present your material well; always present your material in the format indicated by the question. Again, key format words are found in exam questions, which point to the format required. Here are some examples of key format words:

- **Describe** - state the characteristics and features relevant to the topic in a logical way.
- **Discuss** - not the same as describe. Usually related to a problem, so you must analyse the problem, consider the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions, and conclude with some sort of recommendation.
- **Explain** - demonstrate that you appreciate the significance of your material and its relevance to the question by being able to interpret it in a meaningful manner.
- **Outline** - Construct a logical framework of the main relevant points, often in connection with recommending a course of action

Having pin-pointed your key topic and format words, write a brief plan in your answer book, not on a scrap of paper. The plan may impress the examiner, it may give you some confidence, and it will certainly save you getting halfway through and finding you have forgotten a vital point you were going to put in. If you find you cannot produce a plan due to lack of knowledge, it’s better to find out at this stage rather than halfway through writing your full answer! Incidentally, if you do change your mind over which question to attempt, make sure you clearly delete any partly-answered question you do not want marked. Also, don't try to alter question numbers; cross out the old number and write the new number next to it examiners get very annoyed by not being sure whether you are attempting question 5 or question 8! If you incorporate your key topic and format words in the plan, you are much more likely to produce an answer which is relevant to the topic(s) concerned and in the required format.

A simple structure for most essay-type answers is:

**INTRODUCTION**

**MAIN BODY OF ANSWER**

**CONCLUSION**

For the introduction, try to begin strongly, not hesitantly, giving the examiner the impression that you know what you are talking about. Define any technical terms mentioned in the question, especially if they form the subject of your answer. State how you will approach the question: for example if asked to 'compare and contrast', say you will be taking particular aspects and considering similarities and differences. The introduction need not be more than one paragraph.

For the main body of the answer, use clearly identifiable paragraphs, either indented or with a line space between them, to break up the text and set out your main points. As
a general rule, don't write more than half a side of text without starting a new paragraph, and conversely avoid paragraphs with fewer than two sentences in them.

**TIPS:**

**Quality not Quantity:**
There are no extra marks awarded for cramming as much detail onto one page as possible. Remember, answer the question that has been asked and not the question you want to answer.

**Structuring answers:**
Write short sentences and use bullet point where possible. However, if long blocks of text are necessary, use paragraphs to split the text up.

**Marks allocation:**
It is highly unlikely that writing 4 sentences (no matter how good) will be enough to gain 16 marks. Students must look at the marks for each part of the question and write proportionally.

*Typically, 2 pages of text for the case study questions are needed for a good pass park.*

**COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID:**

1) Failing to read the questions carefully and to read all parts of a question before answering it. Read the questions slowly twice; it’s all too easy to misread questions when you are nervous.

2) Failing to read around the subject matter (this is the purpose of the Students Intranet). In some cases, it is evident that even the course material supplied has not been read.

3) Illegible handwriting. Some scripts are impossible to read and marks are inevitably lost despite trying extremely hard to award marks.

4) Failure to provide conclusions and critical thinking. Students are required to do more than list and describe in case study questions. Have a good opening paragraph defining key terms and concepts. The move on to explain, evaluate and offer arguments to the case study presented.