

Farhana Asif (FSP) - Tips for CSS examination

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Dear All,
Assalamoalikum,

For all those who are really ambitious to join the civil services and also for those who want to take the exam to test their caliber (or destiny), and even for those, like me, who think of giving it a shot just because they do not find any thing else to do __ I would like to share my experience of CSS exams I took in the year 2005.

Not being an exceptionally hardworking student who would sit up late at night, studying till the clock ticks 3: 00 a.m.; emptying as many mugs of coffee as could be possible, to keep the eyes wide open; spending twelve to fourteen hours skimming and scanning through those thick dry books in the tiniest print __ I used to wonder at the people who pass this exam. The very term 'muqable ka imtihan' has such a frightening air about it that one thinks many times before taking the leap.

It was just four months before the exams when my teacher (himself a CSP officer) gave me the really 'big push' for the much dreaded exam. The twelve paper drill, without enough breaks to reclaim your energies, the most unexpected questions that appear despite extensive and thorough study, the shortage of words you face just when you are about to wind up the last paragraph, the facts and figures that simply vanish from your mind the moment you sit for the exam, and most importantly the agony of writing non- stop for three tiring hours, all loomed before my eyes and I said __ No!

After all I had never dreamed of becoming a CSP officer. I was the one who while taking any annual exam used to say: 'This is the last exam of my life and I am never going to study further.' How could I suddenly turn so ambitious to sit for CSS exam? To this I have yet not found an answer. My plan was only to avail the first chance. I thought that if I clear __ well enough, if I don't __ still OK. CSS is such a prestigious exam __ it's glorious even to fail. With that, I reassured myself that if I fail, I won't take it to my heart __ but in case, I pass __ I won't take it to my head. And finally, I sat down to study for the 'muqable ka imtihan.'

A Master's degree in Economics helped me a lot. Though the minimum qualification required for appearing in civil services exams is bachelors, it is much better if you appear with a higher degree. You will be amazed at how the number of candidates shrinks by with thousands applying in the beginning, a little less thousand appearing to take the exam, a few hundred being lucky enough to pass the written and even fewer, luckier to clear the interview and viva voce and perhaps the luckiest few to get the allocation in the service of their first choice. What is it that takes to reach that final allocation list? This is what I would like to comment upon.

To be precise it is a blend of your background knowledge, retentive and recalling capacity of your memory, command over language, clarity of thought and the ability to get your ideas across with the same clarity and intelligibility. If you have these qualities, you only need to give a thorough study to your subjects and all is fine.

As far as the optionals are concerned, in my opinion, if you are genuinely interested in a subject and like to grasp its concepts and meanings and are willing to explore a little further than the few books meant to ensure you passing marks, it does not matter how theoretical your subject is, you would still score well. Going for a subject just thinking that it is scoring; having least interest in it, might not be a good approach.

In the choice of optional subjects, obviously you would consider your past fields of study or areas

of specialization; however certain subject might be new to you. Get a thorough understanding of those before you sit down for the final preparation. It helps a lot if you take your own notes, summarize them in a few points and go through them regularly. This combined with your ability to relate newer concepts with your previously learned ideas would help you have a quick grasp on the subject.

One thing I would like to make mention of is that, it is extremely important to distribute your time between the twelve subjects. At times the optional subjects are given so thorough a study that little or no time is left for the compulsory papers. This costs heavily during exams as in CSS failing in one means you have to take all papers again.

This is my observation, that no matter how many wonderful suggestions you get for doing well in the examination hall, in the final analysis, you are the best judge of yourself. Your study style, concentration span, learning pattern, comprehension power, notes-taking method, revision procedure and your approach towards attempting the paper all are your own and have developed over the years. They cannot change over night. You can take ideas and suggestions from others but see to it you go for the method that suits you best.

The syllabus for the CSS exams is so vast that if you do not have ample time, there might be some topics that would remain out of your reach. So you have to be very careful while being selective. Keep a booklet of past papers with you. List the topics that appeared in the past, say, ten years. You will find that certain topics appear almost every alternate year. Highlight them. Then there would be those that appear after few years. Place them on the second ranking. And then there would be those that are entirely new. Put them on third ranking. Now with this list you can create guess papers of your own. I have used this strategy since my Metric exams and it really works. In fact, I used to spend more time making my guess papers than actually preparing for them.

As for the answering styles, students vary in their methods of replying a question: some pay more attention to the factual side other would emphasize the theoretical content. In descriptive papers, I think, a well-attempted answer ought to have a brief introduction and background, a comprehensive and methodical elaboration of issue you have been asked in the question, augmented by facts and figures, and finally your comments and analysis ending in a meaningful conclusion. Quoting and referencing is a strong plus and is highly recommended provided done with relevance. You should be extremely vigilant about spelling mistakes or grammatical errors. No matter how well attempted your paper is such flaws leave a very bad impression. Use your time well and keep a balance in the length of your answers. Make use of headings where appropriate and do not stuff your answers with too many of them. This breaks the flow and connectivity of your answer. Once you have done the paper and you are lucky enough to get a couple of minutes, read through the paper again and correct any errors. These suggestions have proved to work well with the descriptive papers both compulsory and optional. For the subjects of technical and computational sort you will need a different approach. Be careful of formulae, calculations, signs and symbols and the logical continuity of your solutions. In subjects of scientific nature, it is as easier to lose marks as it is to gain them.

The schedule for CSS exams is quite hectic. You may not get enough days off in between the papers. So do not leave anything to the last moment. That is not the time for preparation. What you couldn't do in months how can you do in minutes. You might have noticed that at times you are well-prepared for the exam but just because of nervousness, tension, a sleepless night, or a missed meal __ you do poorly in the exam. A nice breakfast, backed by a good night sleep, tension-free and relaxed mind, a few inspiring quotes that you read out aloud to yourself __ these are the ingredients of my recipe for attempting a good paper.

Once you clear the written exam, there still remains an up hill task. Yes! the interview and the viva voce. You wrote well. Good enough! That has got you through the written exam. Now you got to speak well too. And how do you do that? Remember the A, B, C rule of interview. It is accuracy, brevity and clarity. Begin preparing for the interview well in advance. Work hard on your areas of improvement. Get command over the basic concepts of your optional subjects and keep yourself up-to-date regarding current affairs. Having a good general knowledge is very helpful and being witty, a real strength.

Practice having dummy interviews with your friends or by yourself. Imagine what could be asked. Raise questions yourself and find answers to them. Think what you would like to ask the candidates had you been in the interviewing panel. Do this hot-chair exercise. Reply to that as a potential officer. Analyze again as a panelist. Keep practicing. You might have heard, first you fake it then you make it.

When you appear for the final interview, keep a few things in mind. Almost ninety percent of your judgement would take place in the initial five minutes. If you don't prove your potential then, its difficult that you would do in the rest of the interview. So, listen to the question carefully and comprehend the question thoroughly before replying. Say what is factual. Do not state anything you yourself are not sure of. Be brief and to the point. You might get trapped by your own statements. Avoid sweeping statements and generalized remarks.

Most importantly be who you are. Be original and genuine. They are going to judge you on the basis of the information you have provided them in your psychological profile. Do not be hesitant in admitting if you do not know something and do not be apologetic of any areas of improvement. Neither be rigid and unyielding nor try to appear to be excessively agreeable. Your language should be lucid and your statements well-articulated. Avoid flowery or slang language. Pay special attention to your attire. Dress professionally and carry yourself with grace. Your appearance, gestures, posture, facial expressions speaks more than your words. Let it speak good of you.

So folks, don't let this 'muqable ka imtihan' send a shiver down your spine. One of the stanzas I often keep on repeating to myself is:

If you think you are beaten you are;
If you think you dare not, you don't.
If you like to win but think you can't
It's almost certain that you won't
For out of the world we find
Success begins with fellow's will
It's all in the state of mind!

And last but certainly not the least: 'Prayer should be our first resource rather than the last resort.' Who knows, someday you might be landing in the service of your first choice. Wouldn't it be like a dream come true? __ May be a dream you had never dreamed of!

Wishing you all the best
Farhana