

STUDY AND EXAMINATION SKILLS



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Developed by David Walker.

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1. Introduction

Aims of this booklet

The CIPFA qualification is not gained easily. It involves for most people a high degree of commitment and an intensity of study which they may not have experienced before, and which they may not experience again. It can be a life changing and life defining experience.

To arrive at where you are now you must have had some success in passing examinations and assessments. I'm sure that some of you have become very good at this sort of thing. You will have noticed that assessments vary and there has been a movement away from a pure examination based approach in recent years e.g. in GCSEs, A levels and most degrees.

CIPFA has moved the other way and is totally examination based. This puts an emphasis on the examination which some people find difficult to cope with. This booklet aims to help you;

- to prepare effectively for the examination; and
- then to sit, the examination successfully.

Take some time to read through this booklet. If you only pick out a couple of things to apply to your learning, and if those two things work for you it'll have been worthwhile.

The booklet concentrates upon the Certificate and Diploma levels but you should be aware that a lot of the skills are also transferable to the rather different forms of examination that make up the Final Test of Professional Competence.

How should you use this booklet?

This depends on you and your needs. I hope you will all at least read through it. There is an opportunity to use it interactively if you choose to complete the learning exercises. You can, however, use it to suit your own requirements. You may not want everything in here, or you may find the approaches described are not for you. If you already have a style of learning, revising and tackling examinations which works for you do not change it in any radical way. But still take a little time to think about what is in here. There may be some incremental improvements that you could make.

What is different about the CIPFA qualification?

There are two distinctive features about studying for CIPFA. First is the assessment, which is totally examination based. The second is the method of study which is based around the published learning materials. Those materials remain the focus of your study regardless of whether you add value through attendance at an approved course or not.

What can we learn from the examiners?

Before preparing for an examination and certainly before sitting an examination, you need to be absolutely sure that you know what kind of examination it is and what it's all about. What is the syllabus trying to achieve? What is the examiner trying to do?

Where do you get this information from? There are obviously lots of useful tips in the materials and it goes without saying that you should study them - all of them. There are shortcuts but you need to know what you're doing.

Another source is to have a look at examiners' reports (which are available on the CIPFA website www.cipfa.org.uk). The examiners know what they want from candidates but they often do not get it. If you look at the examiners' reports you will find a rich seam of practical information which you need to think about and then act upon.

As we proceed through the booklet I will refer to specific comments, all taken from the June 2005 examinations but typical of previous comments.

The booklet covers two main areas:

- Preparing for the examinations – learning and revising.
- Sitting the examinations.

2. Preparing for examinations

This could have just been about revision but learning begins before revision and your approach to revision depends upon the learning that has gone on before.

You need to be able to answer a number of questions and think through the implications of those answers in order to be effective in your examination preparations.

What do I need to study?

".....the candidates who perform best are those who are prepared across the whole of the syllabus rather than only selected areas of it."

Audit and Assurance

"The overall message is clear – adequate preparation for this paper should produce a pass mark. This preparation should address key elements of the syllabus, especially those that directly relate to the organisation for whose professional qualification you are seeking to qualify."

Public Finance

"Other common problems were ignorance of the new non-corporate distribution rate of corporation tax, muddled treatment of trading losses and a poor grasp of the system of payment by instalments. All of these topics are given extensive coverage in the OLM and the inescapable conclusion is that many candidates had just not prepared properly for a corporation tax question."

Taxation

You will have finite resources of time and energy to devote to your CIPFA studies, but the good news is that what you have to study is also finite and extremely well defined. Everything you need is available to you in published form. The key things are;

- The open learning materials which includes the syllabus, some tips on how to study, a major learning resource in the main body of the materials themselves, and the question bank which indicates how the syllabus is likely to be tested in the examination.
- Revision notes in the form of the Pass Cards.

In addition you have access to the website facilities where you can find:

- Past examination questions with model answers and examiners' reports.
- Help and guidance.

This is all you need but you may also have a value added course to help you with your studies and to provide you with additional materials, guidance etc.

Remember that the examinations are based upon the syllabus and the open learning materials. Remember also that the examinations have a form and structure to them that may change incrementally from diet to diet but remain fundamentally unchanging.

Approaches to learning

“Candidates are reminded that they will be expected to analyse and interpret the information given in the question and apply the principles as well as simply recite the theory learned from the textbook.”

Audit and Assurance

“Students need to be able to think about how techniques may be applied and also which techniques might be the most appropriate to a given situation. Question 1 (c) was the prime example of poor performance due to a lack of ability to think and identify what the question required. Other questions also demonstrated this weakness. Question 2 required analysis not just description and question 5 required consideration of application.”

Accounting for Decision Making

You are individuals. Your approaches to learning vary. What is the best way for one person may be disaster for someone else. But it might help to consider what kind of learning CIPFA is testing. This may change from level to level and may vary across subjects.

You need to learn knowledge and you need to learn skills. You also need to be able to apply knowledge and skills to different situations, in order to solve problems. Some of the skills may involve the use of techniques, as in Financial Management Systems and Techniques or Financial Accounting.

Other skills may involve thinking and using models based upon concepts and principles, as in Audit and Assurance and Leadership and Management.

How do you learn?

We each have our own approach to learning, some will be more enthusiastic than others, some will be more logical in their approach and so on. We will naturally be more comfortable doing our own thing, but it is important to realise that few of us are perfect learners and generally we each have our own strengths and weaknesses. Reflection on this can help us to identify what they are in order to build on our strengths and compensate for our weaknesses.

To learn effectively you must do something with your knowledge or skills. Consider this model:

Learn _____> use/act _____> reinforce

By reflecting on the theoretical knowledge you have gained, mulling over the concepts and then applying them in your own work environment or at least questioning why they might not be applicable, you can bring the issues to life. They will stick in your mind and subsequently they will be easier to recall. You may not have time to do this for everything you study but you could try it out with the main issues and for topics which you find particularly difficult. This whole idea is based upon the concept of active or action learning originally introduced by D.A. Kolb. (cited in Weinstein, 1995). As Kolb said:

"Theoretical knowledge if not related to experience and itself experimented with is not productive learning" (Organisational Psychology, 1984).

How can you apply these ideas in practice given the nature of the learning required for CIPFA and the means available to you?

Active learning

"A well-prepared candidate should have been able to achieve a pass mark without undue difficulty but it appears that many candidates were not well prepared. It is vitally important that candidates do not confine their preparation merely to reading about accounting. As many practical exercises as possible should be attempted (including questions drawn from past papers) in order to ensure a reasonable chance of passing this examination."

Financial Accounting

When you read through the materials don't just read. You can't just curl up in a comfy chair and read through for example the 1,200 pages of the Financial Management Systems and Techniques materials. They are not meant to be used like that. You should probably read them sat at a desk or somewhere you can easily make notes. You must regard this activity as a study session and you must give yourself an aim to achieve something by the end of the session. This will depend upon how much time you have and how far you want to read in your study session.

As you're reading you must participate. You must attempt the self assessment tests and the learning activities. They are there for a purpose, which is to get you to apply your learning, and to reinforce the learning through doing something. It is a simple principle.

The same principle should be applied to other learning sessions. If you are attending a value added course you may be given examples, examination questions or simply topics to think about. Do it. Don't leave it until the end of the course. That doesn't work and doesn't make sense as an approach to learning.

The key to successful learning is active learning and an important element of this is reflection. CIPFA recognises the importance of reflection in the IPDS portfolio where you are required to reflect in writing. Reflection is basically thinking back over your learning experience and trying to make some sense out of it by relating it to knowledge you already have or situations you are familiar with. Again it's about working through your learning experience in a practical and active way.

Breaking down your learning

A second lesson to consider is "learn as you go". Try to spread your learning over the whole learning period. This helps to break it down and it helps to build it up where it is a matter of accumulating knowledge or of building one concept or principle upon another. If you do not learn as you go you are going to set yourself a much greater task when it comes to revision. It is much easier to revise something which you have already understood and learned than to start the process from scratch. The modular approach of the materials and/or the regularity of the teaching that takes place in a value added course can help establish the right rhythm of learning, but only if you approach it actively.

Improve your note taking

One key way you can attain this cumulative approach to your learning is to improve your note taking. It may initially appear that making further notes is not necessary when you already have materials and pass cards. But you need to own your notes. You can improve your capacity for learning and recall by personalising the material you use. This is particularly true if you are on a value added course and you want to remember the content of a lecture or a seminar.

Most of us have been trained to take long hand notes. This is precisely what not to do. It is too linear and if you are trying frantically to capture every word that is being said to you, you are inevitably not concentrating upon the meaning and you are certainly not able to listen or interact effectively with your tutor. You are therefore not maximising the opportunity for learning or for thinking about the issues. When you make long hand notes you are spending time writing down a lot of redundant words, wasting time initially and again when you re-read them. Try to concentrate your notes on key words which will evoke the issues for you.

You should then take the time to reinforce your initial learning through reflection and review. There are proven steps that will help you to commit the key aspects of a study session to memory. You could try this and see whether it works for you.

Two step approach

Step 1: at the end of the study session (whether it's your own reading, listening to a lecture or whatever) completely revise your notes. Tidy them up, get rid of redundant words and organise them into a logical sequence. Add some personal notes which will help you to recall the session in detail, for example, were you particularly interested in the topic, was there a good class discussion or indeed were you bored, distracted, uncomfortable etc. Do this as soon as you can after the session.

Step 2: preferably within the next few days, jot down everything you can remember without referring to your notes. Then compare this to your notes, identifying key words you have omitted, by picking them out you will help yourself to commit them to memory.

Another approach to consider is the use of mind maps.

Mind maps

Mind maps can be a very useful tool in the learning process but you would need to train yourself to use them. They help the learning process by identifying the links between subjects and topics and representing a lot of information using a few words presented as a diagram. Tony Buzan, in *Use Your Head* (BBC Books 2003), is credited with creating mind maps and he says that they work by drawing on both sides of your brain, the scientific and logical left side and the artistic or creative right side. The approach may sound a little daunting but you only need to be able to produce pictures that mean something to you.

How do you go about it?

Ideally you will be aiming to condense everything you need to know about an individual topic on one side of A4 paper although in practice you may need subsidiary maps for more complex subjects.

- Start with a sheet of blank A4 paper on its side, landscape style.
- In the centre of the page draw an image or symbol, or write (in as few words as possible) the central theme of the map.
- Attach to this central theme the main ideas using key words linked to the centre using thick lines. Write the key words for the main ideas in capital letters or use colour to emphasise their importance.
- Use thinner lines in a kind of fishbone style to add subsidiary issues to the main ideas, again using only key words. Use abbreviations or symbols (or even devise your own code for common "CIPFA" words) wherever possible.

Your aim is to make a visual presentation of the logical links between the ideas, a kind of hierarchy of issues. If you are developing a mind map whilst reading, the chapter title and section headings will probably provide you with the logic for the main themes, but remember that one of the most important aspects of this process is personalisation and ownership. If you are trying to do a mind map for a lecture or seminar it may prove quite difficult to see the logic or hierarchy to the session until its completion. Mind mapping could be an activity you leave until your reflection stage of your learning at least until you become more practised and confident at it.

It is quite difficult to write about an essentially visual framework. If you want to know more about mind maps and see some examples you should read *Use Your Head* by Tony Buzan (BBC Books) or you could log on to www.thethinkingbusiness.co.uk/mindmappingcreate.htm

Learning Exercise

Take one Study Session from a subject you are learning and produce a mind map using the approach outlined above.

Responsibility and planning

The final lesson is that you, and only you, must be in control of your learning. This means what you learn, when you learn it and how you learn. Other people can help and you can expect help, particularly if you are studying on a value added course. But no-one else can do it for you.

Planning and the effective use of your resources is a key to being in control. Use the planning guidance at the front of the learning materials. Work out how much time you have, compare that with an assessment of what you have to do and then plan how to use that time most effectively. Use timetables, lists, reminders. Review them constantly and continuously. Write things down. You can gain a psychological edge and ease your stress levels by, at the very least, giving yourself an illusion of being in control.

Effective reading

A problem that you may face is the sheer volume of reading that you need to do, or think you need to do. Think about it – you have about 4-5 months to prepare for two CIPFA exams. This is two volumes of over 1000 pages, and at the same time you are working and possibly attending value added classes. How do you do it? Can you do it? Should you do it?

The answer to the last two questions must be Yes. So, how do you do it?

Learning to read faster and more effectively not only saves you time but can broaden your mental horizons and help you to pass examinations. The way in which we learn to read i.e. across each line and line by line down a page becomes ingrained but is a style which functions at a far slower pace than that at which our brain can assimilate text. This inefficiency is compounded by our tendency to read and then re-read a passage in full when we revisit it.

We can easily train ourselves to read much more quickly but to do so without suffering loss of comprehension takes practice. This is not something to be attempted in a last minute panic before an examination. But if you have the time to develop it, speed reading is a skill which will benefit you throughout your working life. There are many books and courses available on this subject but the basic aim is to reduce the number of fixations made by the eyes on each page of text by increasing the word span in each fixation. Many of the words on a printed page are superfluous to our attempts to comprehend the ideas conveyed by the text. Words such as these, they, and, the, for example, often simply help the flow, are not essential to interpretation but take up time in the reading process.

Your eyes need help to unlearn their normal slow pattern of reading each word in turn from left to right across the page, you need to help them to focus on the centre of the text and move downwards vertically, looking for ideas not individual words.

Try either drawing a pencil line vertically down the centre of a page of text or simply holding a pen or pencil point over the centre of the page, then read by either following the pencil line or point down the page, consciously stopping your eyes from wandering from side to side in the text. This will feel very uncomfortable at first but you will very quickly realise that you actually understand what you have read even though it feels awkward and your reading speed will increase almost immediately. You will need to practice this for some considerable time before it begins to feel natural and you can eventually discard the line or pointer.

If you don't have time for this don't despair, there are other, simpler things you can do to make more effective use of the time you do have for reading.

1. Determining the purpose of you reading before you start and staying focused on it will help you to achieve the outcome you want from the session. The structure of the learning materials really helps here. By fixing on the learning objectives at the start of each section of the material and reading with them in mind you can be sure you have covered the key points in each section.
2. Do as much as you can to avoid distractions whilst reading. Make sure you are comfortable, that the temperature of the room is comfortable, that there isn't a distracting level of noise, that the light levels are right and that you're not hungry or thirsty and so on.

Try not to start a reading session when you are not emotionally prepared for it, being angry, upset or distracted by wishing you were somewhere else or with someone else will mean that you'll almost certainly be wasting your time. You need to be in a frame of mind which will help you to stay focused.

3. If you can't speed read, at least avoid reading and re-reading. A highlighter pen is a real boon for this. Read the full text once only, highlighting key words and ideas. When you read again for review or revision, read only the highlighted words thus eliminating the time wasted on joining words and unessential bits.

Remember these key points for more effective reading;

- Eliminate distractions.
- Avoid reading and re-reading.
- Reduce fixations.
- Look for issues.
- Focus on purpose.

3. Revision

What to revise

“Again, the message is clear. The examination paper contained (and will continue to contain) straightforward questions about key elements of the syllabus. Those candidates who prepare adequately should encounter little difficulty in obtaining a pass mark. “

Public Finance

“Candidates who master the contents of this Guide will certainly have no trouble passing the examination and the fact that some candidates were unable to cope with certain parts of this paper can only be put down to poor preparation. Candidates are strongly advised to cover the whole syllabus (not just part of it) and to be prepared for questions drawn from any area”

Taxation

This may be obvious but it is still worth giving it some thought. You have determined the totality of the potential learning task through identifying all the sources of learning. What do you need to concentrate upon for the examination? Everything? Ideally, but we do not live in an ideal world and you do not need 100% to pass the examination. Not everything is going to be tested anyway. The following may help you to place a boundary around your revision task. But remember, you must decide. You must make decisions and live with their consequences.

Facing up to the examination

The start and end point is the examination itself. What do you know about the test you are facing?

Formats and rubrics

You need to find out, for each of your examination subjects;

- how long is the examination?
- how many questions are there on the paper and how many must you complete?
- is the paper split into sections and, if so, how do the sections match with the syllabus and with the open learning materials?
- are there any compulsory questions on the paper and what areas of the syllabus are they likely to be drawn from?
- are the questions of equal weighting and, if not, how are they weighted in relation to the syllabus?
- are there any special features of the examination that you need to be familiar with e.g. reading time, use of calculators and are there any pro formas or formula sheets provided for use in the examination (you need to familiar with the contents of the CIPFA formula sheet and also the statistical tables used in the examinations)?

- are there marks set aside for presentation and what do the examiners say they are looking for?

Style of questions

You also need to find out what kind of questions are contained in the paper. Some of the papers may have questions requiring a written response, others may require calculations or there may be a mixture of both. Written responses may be in essay form or they may specify some form of business presentation such as a report or a briefing note. You may find that past questions have specified other formats such as draft notes, email responses or even slides for a presentation. You must be clear in your mind what all this means and how the formats can be related to the possible examination topics. Use past papers and specimen papers, and also find any articles which may have been written by examiners (available through the student website and/or PASS magazine).

How much thinking will I need to do?

“In the interpretation question (question 2) many answers would have been significantly improved if candidates had spent more time thinking about the evidence available and less time writing down everything they knew about the ratios.”

Financial Reporting

“Students are becoming more aware of the content of the materials and this cohort was certainly better prepared overall than the previous one, but there is also a need to apply the material and to be prepared to do some thinking within the context of the examination.”

Financial Management, Systems and Techniques

Some questions may require you to do more thinking than others. You would expect generally that the amount of thinking required will increase as you move from the Certificate to the Diploma level. There may still be some questions that need little more than a recall of facts as set out in the materials but a lot of questions will ask you to apply, compare, contrast etc. Calculations and the use of techniques may follow a standard format but you may also be asked to simply solve a problem using whatever knowledge and understanding you have at your command. For example, at the Certificate level a Financial Management Systems and Techniques question may ask to you use a specific technique to solve a problem, but at the Diploma level in Accounting for Decision Making you might also have to decide on which techniques should be used.

Can I do any of it beforehand?

You can help yourself if you anticipate beforehand the need to think about what you are learning and incorporate into the learning processes discussed earlier. If you have already thought about how a particular technique might be used in your own workplace or in the public sector generally it saves you having to confront this from scratch in the examination.

You can look ahead in doing this but a more general question is whether it is worth while trying to question spot.

Question spotting

"In almost all cases failure can be attributed to inadequate and/or inappropriate preparation for the examination. Candidates often did not prepare the whole syllabus or relied too much on 'question spotting'. Candidates should also try to understand the conceptual underpinning for the topics they study and rely less on rote (and surface) learning. This paper presented few difficulties for the adequately prepared candidate who was able to demonstrate appropriate breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding."

Financial Reporting

Is it worth trying to look for patterns in past examination papers? It might help you to be familiar with what has happened in the past as long as you do not place too much reliance upon it. If you have the time to analyse past examination papers what you should be looking for is;

- topics that have been examined frequently.
- when and how these topics have been examined.
- topics that have not been examined frequently or which may not have been examined at all.
- patterns that may appear to have emerged, for example, that a topic has been examined every other examination diet over a certain span of time.

This can all help you in understanding the examination better but what about question spotting - is it a viable approach? Quite simply, no. Forget it, unless you're completely desperate. You can look for patterns in past papers and you can look at the frequency with which different topics have been examined but remember that the examinations are not set by computers. They are set by fairly normal people who are not into playing games with students and who themselves are probably not that aware of past patterns in the examination questions. They will be seeking each time to set a paper which they think is a good and fair test of the syllabus.

This leads to a final question of whether you should be selective with your revision or not, and if you do select how should you do it. The decision must rest with you but consider these points;

1. The whole syllabus and the whole of the learning materials can be tested in the examination.
2. In any single examination diet it is improbable that the whole syllabus will be tested.
3. There may be topics that are more or less likely to be tested. Some topics are of key importance whilst others are more peripheral.

4. You only need 50% to pass the examination.

The choice is yours but don't gamble with your future.

Learning exercise

Obtain copies of the last three papers in the subject you are preparing for. Analyse the papers by topic and by question type. Can you reach any conclusions from this?

There's a lot you can do to prepare for the examination. It's easy to understand what you have to do. It's not easy to do it. Obviously there are a lot of candidates who are not getting anywhere near doing this. These are the people who are getting 15% or 20% in the examinations, or they may be getting 49% which is even more regretful. Why? What makes one person put themselves through a long and difficult but ultimately rewarding process and another person leave it all to chance. The answer is motivation.

Motivation

Why are you studying for CIPFA? You will have your reasons and each individual will have slightly different motivations for putting themselves through this. It may be useful for you to identify them. You may not have thought this through before.

Learning exercise

Think about it and write the reasons down. Have you surprised yourself? Is it more important to you than you thought it might be? (If you can't see any good reasons for doing it you might want to stop now!).

Once you have done this you might keep this piece of paper handy for those times when it seems to be too much. Keep those goals and remind yourself of them from time to time.

Time management and planning

You should be developing time management skills during your course of study but where they become crucial is at revision time.

How much time have you got for revision? When should revision start? How do you balance it right? How intense should it be? Make plans, get feedback, measure progress, test yourself, give yourself rewards, provide incentives, motivate yourself in little ways, don't get overwhelmed, eat the elephant bit by bit but do it in a logical and co-ordinated way, don't just

revise the things you like or the easy areas but also don't do all the hard stuff at the same time, think about the effect that might have upon you.

How to revise

Once you have decided what you need to know you can start to think about how you should approach your revision.

Timing – when do you start?

This is an important consideration. You need to strike the right balance. On the one hand you need to allow yourself plenty of time to ensure that you are adequately prepared. But on the other hand you do not want to start too early. It may be difficult to begin your revision anyway before you have finished your learning. The start time may be dictated to you by your course programming if you are attending a value added course. When does your course end? When have you planned to finish your open learning study?

Another reason for not starting too early is that if you do, you may find that you forgot some of what you have revised before the time of the examination. You may also find it is difficult to keep your motivation going over longer periods of time. Probably the ideal would be 4-5 weeks of intensive revision immediately leading up to the examinations, but is an individual choice.

Planning

We have already discussed planning in the context of your overall learning. It is probably even more important to successful revision. You must make the most of the time you have available and you must also get the boost that you can give yourself from being in control. This becomes very important as your stress levels increase.

You know what you have to learn for the examination and you have a period of time leading up to the examination. You know what your resource requirements are. You have all the ingredients necessary for successful planning.

A five step approach

Step 1

Quantify the time available to you between the start of your revision period and the examination. Be realistic and take into account all your other commitments. How much real time do you have? For example, if you are working during the day how much time will you

really be able to devote to revision in the evening? Set it out in the form of a table or spreadsheet, such as;

Date	Time available	Time in hours / minutes	Topic / activity	Control / comments

Step 2

Review what you have done. You will have an overall pattern as well as an assessment of both the total time and the periodicity of your revision. When you have done this, ask yourself is it enough? (the answer, by the way, is always no). Do you want to look at it again, are you happy with it, is it the best you can do. Should you reappraise some of your other commitments?

Step 3

Now you need to quantify what you need to revise. You must document this. Get it down on paper. Take into account all the things we have previously discussed and then brainstorm a list of all the topics you think you need to revise, breaking them down into knowledge to learn, concepts and principles to understand and skills and techniques to practise. You will probably have two subjects to fit in. There will be a lot to cover. Do not be disheartened. You may want to prioritise and you may want to identify weaker areas that you may need to put more effort into. How effective was your learning first time around?

Step 4

You now need to break it all down and fit it into the time schedule which you have designed for yourself. Don't expect to get it right first time. Keep going until you have a plan that you are happy with. A little time spent at this stage can pay huge dividends later on.

- Break in down into manageable chunks.
- Sequence what you are doing. Try to find the logic in the syllabus or in parts of the syllabus and build this into your programme.
- Mix it up. Don't stick with one topic over too long a period or you will become sick of it. Give yourself some variety, not only of topics but also activities (reading, skills practise etc).

Step 5

Once you have made your plan don't sit back. Use the plan as a basis for controlling your revision activity. Expect the plan to change. You need to take a flexible approach and this will mean constantly revisiting and revising your plan as circumstances demand. You should use the plan to set yourself targets and you should consider the idea of positively rewarding yourself for success in meeting targets.

You need to be able to balance what you do between having an eye on the big picture but at the same time concentrating on the task in hand. The plan should give you sufficient reassurance that the overall objectives are going to be met that you will be able to give your full attention to the detail.

Learning exercise

Prepare a plan for yourself using the approach outlined above.

Revision techniques

Summarising and the use of memory keys

You should only really use this approach if you have allowed yourself plenty of time and if you have planned to do this from the outset. This is not a method which can be used half-heartedly or introduced at the last minute. Once you have started you should stick with it to the bitter end.

The basic idea is quite simple. You need to work methodically through all your learning material, including lecture notes etc. As you do this you need to be making notes for yourself. These notes should represent the key learning points for you. It is important that you try to put these notes into your own words. Initially these notes will be quite detailed.

You then need to go through these notes a second, third (or fourth etc – as many times as it takes) time and each time you should reduce the volume of the note-form material through a process of summarising and condensing. Eventually you will reach a point where you have an extremely concise set of notes. These notes can be contained on a handful of pages and you can read through the whole set in a few minutes. You could even go as far as reducing the notes to a number of key words which would then trigger off a cascade of messages in your memory.

At this point you may ask why it is necessary for you to do this for yourself when there are Pass Cards already provided for revision purposes. This is simple. The process is more important than the end product. By working through the process of summarisation and reduction you are establishing the links in your mind and these will become conduits for the subsequent recall of knowledge and techniques.

The Pass cards can be used as a short cut method but will not have the same overall benefit as the full process. This method is based loosely on the work of Honey and Mumford and a reference is provided should you want to explore it further.

Mind maps

This is a good point to remind you of mind maps which we dealt with in the section on How to Learn. They can be adapted for revision purposes and share some of the qualities of memory keys.

Testing and practice

You need to think about how you can test what you have learned. You might want to involve friends, partners etc and ask them to test you or you could pair up with other CIPFA students and test each other. Revision need not be a solitary pursuit but beware, once you involve other people you may lose a little bit of control over what you are doing and your time may be more difficult to manage.

The other approach is practice, especially in relation to the use of techniques. Make use of the Question Banks and of past examination questions. If you are on a value added course there may be questions supplied by your college for you to use. There are also revision courses available and they can be very useful, particularly as they will provide a focus and structure for your revision.

4. Sitting the examination

Examinations are stressful. You need a certain amount of stress but there is good stress and bad stress. Good stress can add to your focus and give you motivation. You need that adrenaline rush. Bad stress can make you fall to pieces, so what can cause bad stress?

Coping with stress

Go back to your thinking on motivation and goals. You would agree that you need to be motivated and you need to pursue goals. It is also a good thing to articulate them. But what if they take over, what if they become an all consuming part of your life. When you are going through the CIPFA process you have three areas of your life: study; work; and the rest, which is family, relationships, leisure etc. You need to get all three in balance. The problem can be when work and study take over and you lose your grounding elsewhere. You need anchors in your life, fundamental and unchanging, important constants which you can fall back on and which will sustain you. They may be individuals or groups or they may be leisure interests, hobbies, artistic passions or faith.

Learning exercise

Use your motivation activity list to come up with those things that are important in your life. Consider them over the past six months and now. How well have you balanced them? What can you do to bring about a better balance?

Write this down. It helps.

You need to be in good condition both mentally and physically before your examination. For most people the advice would be - try to relax and make sure you get plenty of good quality sleep. Be careful with your diet. Don't stay up all night before the examination. What you don't know is probably not worth learning at this point. Better to feel fit and relaxed for the examination. Concentration will be enhanced. It is worth considering that this is not what works for all. You may be the exception who does not need sleep, who needs lots of caffeine and junk food. If it works for you, that's fine (but not for long).

The examination itself

Are you ready?

Check that you have everything you will need;

- Pens, pencils etc and spares.
- Rulers, markers and anything else which you need to feel comfortable (subject to examination regulations).
- A calculator (and spare battery or spare calculator).
- A watch (is the time correct?).
- Identification and your examination number.

You also need to make sure that you have planned all the mundane administrative chores;

- Where is the examination? Do you know where you are going?
- How are you going to travel there?
- How are you going to eliminate unnecessary causes of stress?
- What time should you arrive?

You also need to think about what you are going to wear. The examination room may be very hot or very cold. Can you anticipate this and make yourself as comfortable as possible?

Read the paper – use your reading time effectively. Try to use it as a way of calming yourself down. Be positive at this stage, don't panic.

Choosing the right questions

This is vital. You need to know what choice you have and then to make the right one for you. This is your chance to tailor the examination paper to your own strengths and weaknesses. You need to choose the questions which can maximise your personal mark capability. How do you do this? Ask yourself the following questions;

- What have you revised and what are you confident of answering?
- What are your particular strengths? Are you better at calculations than writing narrative answers? Be sensible about this.
- Do some questions look easier than others? Do you think that there questions where it might be easier for you to obtain marks?
- Are there any questions which you do not really understand?

You need to look carefully at multi part questions. Don't be attracted by what you think will be an easy ten marks if you don't know anything about the topics covered by the other ten marks.

"The final part did not involve calculations but a lot of students seemed to have run out of time and did not answer it satisfactorily."

"Students should note that there is no point writing the examiner notes explaining that they have run out of time. This will be obvious in any case. Another point is that question 1 will always be the main question on this paper; it will be compulsory and will be worth 40 marks. It should also cover a mainstream topic, such as investment appraisal in this case. There is, therefore, no convincing reason for leaving this question until the end, as some students have done. This is not a good examination tactic."

Accounting for Decision Making

Make sure you finish the paper and all the parts of the questions you choose.

Don't throw away marks by avoiding easy bits especially at the end of calculation questions – balance up your time. If you don't answer all of the questions you are giving yourself a handicap and making it much more difficult to pass.

Plan what you're going to do – and then keep coming back to your plan. Be flexible – keep balancing time and marks, and a realistic idea of what you can achieve in relation to the questions. The first thing you must do is choose the questions that you are going to answer and the order in which you are going to answer them. Be logical about this. If there is a forty mark compulsory question at the beginning of the paper it is logical to start with this. If you run out of time and you have left this question to the end you can lose more marks.

"The relevant principle here is to match the length of one's answer to the marks available for it."

Public Finance

Allocate an amount of time to each question. You could do this roughly on the basis of the number of marks for the question as a proportion of the total number of marks, for example a 20 mark question should take about 36 minutes in a 3 hour examination. Remember though to keep reviewing your plan as you go.

It follows that you should use all of your time. CIPFA examinations are usually quite tight for time. Don't expect to have half an hour at the end. If you find you are running out of time still make sure you attempt all of the questions. It is usually better to do this even if it means spreading yourself a little thinly. There's often a temptation to get too involved with a question when you feel you know a lot about the topic and you may be sucked in to writing beyond your time allocation. You will probably get a good mark for your five or six pages but ask yourself how many extra marks have you earned for those extra pages. There is definitely a diminishing marginal return in relation to time spent and volume written.

In an extreme situation you can at least prepare note form answers. This may not be ideal but it is better than nothing and you should get some marks for valid points. Don't start writing messages to the examiner. They rarely will be of any benefit. By the time you have explained that you have run out of time and that you would have tackled the question in this way – you could have added something of positive benefit and perhaps scraped a couple of extra marks.

During the examination

Make sure you understand the question.

“Some wrote everything they knew about ALL types of general IT controls, instead of just environmental controls which the question asked for. Candidates must aim to be selective in how they answer questions and avoid writing the answer they have prepared rather than the one that is required.”

“Those candidates who were well prepared on all aspects of the subject and who paid attention to and addressed the requirements of the questions did well. Those less well prepared, or who gave pre-prepared answers on topic areas which failed to meet the requirements of the questions, did not do so well.”

Audit and Assurance

Don't assume it's the question you anticipated or have been preparing to answer. It may be slightly different. What happens if you think the question is ambiguous? It might be – it could be the question or it could be you. Make your assumptions clear without entering into a lengthy dialogue with the examiner. However you may feel about the examiner don't try to be funny or too critical of them – they are marking your paper after all and they are human.

“There is a growing tendency to answer questions in note form or headings and not to explain points sufficiently to warrant the award of full marks. The key to this is reading the question carefully. Where the question says “identify and describe” it means do more than just produce a basic list, similarly the instruction to “outline” expects more.”

Financial Management, Systems and Techniques

“The standard of answers across this question were varied, with students most commonly losing marks for not answering the question fully and tending to recall fact rather than critique as is required at a diploma level paper.”

Financial and Performance Reporting

Also make sure you know what the examiner wants – is it note form, or is more required? Do you have to comment? Provide illustrations and examples? Do you have to make comparisons? Do you need strengths and weaknesses? Try not to miss anything out but also try to avoid putting in things that are not needed. Whatever you do avoid the “write everything down I know approach”.

“The need to understand the question fully is also emphasised in questions 1 and 2 where key elements of the required answer were frequently omitted e.g. the calculation of the cost per sack, presumably due to a careless reading of the question.”
Financial Management, Systems and Techniques

Answer the question as it has been set. Do not attempt either consciously or unconsciously to rewrite the question to suit your own ends. You may have been expecting a question in a slightly different form or from a different angle. Keep the examiner happy.

You may wish to plan your answer to each individual question. This will ensure you take a logical approach to answering it. Don't just jump into an answer. It may help for you to stand back for a few moments and either formulate a plan in your head or use a sketch outline. Putting it down on paper may be the safest way of doing this. There's nothing worse than having a bright idea and then forgetting what it was before you can write it down.

“Presentation was often poor which, since a suggested structure was given in the question, meant that marks were being needlessly dropped. At the Diploma level simply putting a heading at the top of the first page is not enough; answers should show evidence of having been planned and constructed in a professional and thoughtful manner. Well presented, well structured answers not only get presentation marks they also enable both the candidate and the examiner to see what points have been made and thus whether sufficient has been written to warrant the marks on offer for that question.”
Audit and Assurance

Give your answer a structure. This will help the examiner and it pays to help the examiner as far as you can. Often the required structure will be signposted in the question, and most questions have clear and specific requirements. Look for key words, for example. If you are asked for a list, provide one; if you are asked for advantages and disadvantages, provide them and indicate clearly which is which. You can give your answer structure through the use of paragraphs, headings, numbering and bullet points.

Learning exercise

Take a past examination paper and choose two questions from it. Draw up a plan for answering both of the questions. Take into account the time available in the examination for each of the questions.

Show your workings and make your assumptions clear. If you get a figure wrong you can still get credit in some cases if you've only made a minor error – but the examiner needs to see the bits you have got correct. It may be that you have worked through a calculation on your calculator but even if this is so you should break down the calculation and show how you have arrived at your figures. As for assumptions and logic, this is particularly important if you are not 100% sure what the examiner is looking for. In some cases there may be ambiguity in

the question and you could pick up marks for presenting a valid alternative response – but only if you have explained what you have done and why.

Check it over at the end. You were told to do this at school, weren't you? All your instincts are telling you that it's over and that you can relax, the last thing you want to do is read your work all over again. Do it. If you have any time left, what else are you going to do? Make that one last effort, it could be all the difference to you.

“Poor spelling and grammar were features of many scripts. The words ‘depreciation’ and ‘deferred’ were commonly misspelled – surely avoidable as these words were already printed correctly in the question paper. “

Governance and Public Policy

One final point – write clearly and legibly. The examiner can not give you credit if he/she can not read what you have written. They will make every effort to do so and they are all very experienced and used to reading poor handwriting. But try to avoid constructing any needless barriers between you and the examiner. Psychologically a clearly written and well presented answer will raise the examiner's expectations and may work in your favour.

On this last point you can be reassured that the marking of your examination will be carried out responsibly and professionally and that the examiners are looking for content (there may be a few marks specifically for presentation). But studies have shown that good presentation can have a beneficial effect on marks and that the converse is also true.

“A final point, which has been made many times before, is that candidates do themselves no good by writing almost illegibly and producing very untidy work. Examiners do all that they can to give candidates maximum credit for the work they have done, but this is not possible if the work simply cannot be read or is so untidy that the examiner cannot follow it.”

Financial Accounting

“Presentation skills varied significantly both in terms of effectiveness of communication and visual presentation. A very small minority of scripts disadvantaged themselves by being almost illegible. It is worth pointing out that another small minority tended to answer questions more tersely than required and may have generated more marks by fuller, more expansive answers.”

Public Finance

The problem with handwriting is that by the time you have reached an age when you are sitting CIPFA examinations if it is bad it will probably always be bad and you may feel there is little you can do about it. Additionally even good handwriting can deteriorate under examination pressures. This is especially so where people are using word processors more and more and handwriting less and less. You may not be used to writing for long periods of time. It may be worth reappraising your own handwriting and even doing some exercises to try to improve it if you feel it is necessary.

After the examination – forget it. You can't do anything about it now. And if you have another examination next day, well it's another day.

5. Postscript

You may have thought about the examiners' comments as you read through the booklet. What do you think the main messages were? For me the six most important points can be summed up as;

1. Failure to have read the materials or to have covered them in sufficient depth.
2. Answers based upon rote learning and not on the application of knowledge and skills.
3. Failure to answer the question as it is set or not relating answers to the scenarios contained in the questions.
4. Not finishing the examination paper or only answering parts of questions rather than whole questions.
5. Poorly organised or structured answers that do not follow the question requirements.
6. Poor presentation and handwriting.

Take account of them and you'll be more than half way to a pass.

Good luck.

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