

STUDY ADVICE for ACCA – “The Exam”

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1. THE LAST FEW DAYS

By the time you reach these last few days you'll probably be looking forward to taking the exams and then having a well deserved rest! It is, however, *vital* that you make the most of this *important* period. The work you do, or do not do, during these last few days can pass or fail you. There is still enough time for you to 'pull up' those extra few marks you need *but* there is also enough time for your exam performance to slacken off.

2. YOUR STATE OF MIND AND BODY

- (a) Avoid excessive eating and social drinking (especially social drinking) during your last week.
- (b) Get a reasonable amount of sleep - in bed *before* midnight is the general rule. During your final revision period, and perhaps whilst you're studying at weekends, you may "catnap", possibly after lunch, particularly if the weather is warm! If so, you'll have the strength and energy to extend your studies into the night.
- (c) It's most important to maintain a sensible balance whilst studying. You'll inevitably be working much harder in the period immediately before the exam. However, remember:
 - (i) check your "revision efficiency" at regular intervals, say every 30 minutes. If you're not making satisfactory progress, either have a short break or switch subjects. There is no point whatsoever in sitting with books in front of you if your learning process is not working efficiently.
 - (ii) avoid time wasting distractions such as switching on the TV to see what's on. Certainly watch your favourite TV programme, but switch off as soon as it is over.
 - (iii) make sure you maintain your "fitness" at the highest standard by looking after yourself. It would be tragic if you caught a cold or flu at this stage.
- (d) Do *not* underestimate your knowledge. If you've studied hard and efficiently you automatically have the advantage over most other candidates. *DO NOT* lose it by unnecessary lack of confidence. Walk into the exam hall with a *positive mental attitude* towards your ability to deal with the exam paper.

3. THE DAY BEFORE THE EXAM

The day before an exam can be an extremely taxing time. What you do during this day really depends on you. Some people 'switch off' completely, preferring to watch television, or read a novel, or go fishing or generally relax. Others will put in a full day of studying. It really depends upon your 'metabolism'. Some people find it impossible to 'switch off', for others it's a natural reaction to the nervous pressure which is beginning to build up.

Whatever you decide, some points should be borne in mind:

- (a) Don't be overambitious. In other words, don't learn new things, or consider things from different points of view, or decide to work through hundreds of marks worth of questions.

- (b) Be satisfied to survey your notes and study material (see **SQ3R**, in the Tony Surridge free e-guide, '**The Art of Reading**')
- (c) Make sure you know how to get to the Exam Centre and how long it will take you to reach it.
- (d) Check the time of the exam and make sure you have your exam registration identity card or whatever you're required to produce as evidence of identity.
- (e) Prepare the equipment you'll need for the exam:

YOU SHOULD CHECK THE FOLLOWING:

- Your pencils. Are they sharp?
- your pen, nib, cartridge, refill or ink bottle
- your rulers. Are they usable?
- your rubber. Is it clean? Should it be changed?
- your calculator. Is it fully charged? Do you have sufficient spare batteries (if your calculator has back up batteries)? Do you know how to fit them?
- your templates. Are they usable?

YOU SHOULD PACK THE FOLLOWING THINGS READY TO TAKE WITH YOU TO THE EXAM:

- several sharpened pencils and a pencil sharpener.
 - spare pens (if you write using ink, take at least one ball-point pen).
 - a set of coloured pencils or inks.
 - a clean rubber.
 - several rulers - one long, the other short.
 - a calculator (spare batteries, if applicable).
 - a template.
 - any other instruments needed for the exam.
 - your 'exam registration identity card'.
- (f) Finally, you should get to bed early, but not before you've had some relaxation. In the early evening go for a walk, watch television or read a good book. This will help take your mind off things and may help you to fall asleep quickly. **BUT DON'T FORGET TO CHECK AND SET YOUR ALARM CLOCK BEFORE YOU GO TO BED.**

4. EXAM DAY

The exam day is the meridian of everything you have been working for on the course and you should plan the day carefully.

- (a) Get up in plenty of time. It might be wise to rise earlier than normal on this day (unless you rise early anyway!)
- (b) Dress comfortably - don't worry too much about looking smart or attractive.
- (c) Have a good breakfast. It's not easy to eat when you are nervous but you will be able to work better if you've eaten well.
- (d) You may find it helpful to glance through a few revision notes before you leave home. This sometimes helps to boost confidence.
- (e) Make sure when you leave home that you take the equipment you packed the night before - pencil, pens, etc. - and that you have your exam registration identity card'.
- (f) Don't carry your case in the hand with which you will be writing. Your writing hand will have a hard day's work and carrying a briefcase won't help.
- (g) Make sure that you don't have any revision notes in your pockets. You cannot afford to have any misunderstanding with invigilators in the exam hall who will be entitled to contend that such notes are "crib sheets" and cause you to be disqualified and struck off the Association's student register.
- (h) Allow yourself plenty of time to reach the exam centre - under no circumstances rush!
- (i) Go to the toilet before entering the exam room.
- (j) Go to your place as soon as you can and arrange the table with your pencils, pens and other equipment.
- (k) Be self-contained and not distracted by conversations with your fellow examinees - they may cause you to be nervous quite unnecessarily.

5. THE EXAM ITSELF

(a) General Plan

As soon as you get the question booklet or paper, read the instructions carefully and comply with them. Fill in the computer 'blobs' on your 'header' sheet in the ways required. It's essential that you do this accurately.

The following points are important:

(i) Read carefully the notes and instructions on the **FRONT PAGE** of the exam question booklet or at the **TOP** of the exam paper. Don't make assumptions. Instructions **DO CHANGE** and it's **VITAL** for you to comply with them.

(ii) Allocate your time to the questions in proportion to the marks allotted. **YOU SHOULD HAVE ONE EYE ON THE CLOCK ALL THE TIME!**

(N.B. Time allowed for a question can be calculated as follows:

Say the exam is for three hours, therefore

- exam is for 180 minutes
- 100 marks = 180 minutes
- 1 mark = 1.8 minutes
- 5 marks = 9 minutes
- 20 marks = 36 minutes
- 25 marks = 45 minutes and so on.)

(iii) Answer the questions in the order you find easiest. This has two advantages:

- you may well be able to complete the answer to a question for which you're well prepared in less time than that allocated. This will then leave you with more time for difficulties you may encounter later in the exam;
- it would be sad if you failed by not getting the easy marks!

(iv) Stop after you have spent two-third of the time allowed for a question and consider your progress.

- **IF ALL IS WELL**, proceed and finish within the time limit;
- **IF YOU ARE IN DIFFICULTY**, and believe that you're not likely to finish the question, go for the easy marks by out-lining the information required and then move on the next question.

(v) You **MUST ATTEMPT THE FULL NUMBER OF QUESTIONS REQUIRED**. For instance, if there are 6 questions on the paper and you're required to answer 4, you **MUST ANSWER 4** - no more, no less.

(vi) Above all, keep calm and *don't* get flustered at the first awkward question. Just deal with the problem in hand - steadily.

(b) Your approach to questions

(i) You should, by now, have an understanding of the relevant principles and theories. Note that the key word is 'understanding'. The examiner is not merely content to see that you've memorised the study text - he will be testing your knowledge and understanding of the concepts used.

(ii) Watch the following points carefully:

- Allow a few minutes at the beginning of the exam for a thorough look through the paper. Where optional questions exist, determine which of these you'll answer. Plan your attack on each question before commencing. Intelligent planning at the beginning will save you frustration and anxiety during the exam.
- Never generalise. Never Waffle. Always be concrete. Always be specific.

- Wherever possible apply theories to real life practice, but be sure to explain the principles behind the theory. Don't assume that it's self-evident.
- (iii) When confronted with a two-part question, the first part of which involves the theory, the second, application of theory to a problem, proceed in the following manner:
- State the principles of the theory.
 - Explain the principles as fully as possible but never write descriptively.
 - Apply the principles to the problem given, stating why it's relevant to that particular problem.
 - Tabulate points, explain each one, and then argue logically.
 - State your conclusions briefly (and cautiously).

COMPUTATIONAL (OR NUMERATE) QUESTIONS

First and foremost, follow the requirements of the examiner very carefully. If he asks for three separate statements or computations, produce each one clearly headed and in the same order. Any workings which you've found necessary should be on a further page behind the actual answer. The workings should, of course, be as neat and tidy as the rest of the answer and where a figure in the main body of the answer has been calculated in the workings, there should be a cross-reference so that the examiner can see clearly where the figures came from. This is particularly important if you've made a mistake in your calculations. The examiner is likely to be generous with numeric errors but will obviously mark you down more severely for an error of principle. Your workings will clearly show how any error that may exist in your answer arises.

If you don't have time to finish all the computations, sketch out the outline of the answer so that the examiner can at least see how you would have completed the question if time had allowed. Pay particular attention to presentation. Important marks will be gained if the work that you do is clear and easy to follow. Always be sure to include headings and \$ signs and label axes on graphs. Always underline your headings with a ruler. If you have to cross out, do so neatly and write in the new figures or words above the old ones; never over-write one figure or a word on top of another as this will certainly cost marks. Some students use "Liquid Paper" correction fluid to deal with alterations and the results appear to be satisfactory.

Some computational questions will end with a requirement to comment or write a report. You must NEVER omit this requirement, as it will frequently carry a proportion of the total marks on the question. Even if your computational part is not complete, you should at least attempt to put something down for the final part of the answer, indicating what you would have written if you had time to complete the question.

WRITTEN (OR NON-NUMERATE) QUESTIONS

In a written question it's vital to *PLAN* the answer before actually starting to write it.

When you've read the question through, identify the problem area involved and the basic principles which the examiner wishes to be discussed. Your answer should start by clearly stating the nature of the problem or defining any of the terms used in the question. You should then go on to discuss the problem and, where possible, relate your answers to your own experience. Remember also that marks are awarded for your knowledge of current articles. Show your knowledge by attributing theories to authors' names. This will gain extra marks!

Try, so far as is possible, to restrict your answer to what is required by the question. You leave yourself wide open to losing marks by "waffling" on non-relevant topics.

NOTE : In some of the questions, both in essays and the discussion part of computational questions, it may be that no single view is generally acceptable or that a number of different approaches to the answer may be equally acceptable. If this is the case you should attempt to discuss all the approaches to the area and give arguments both for and against possible courses of action. Marks will be awarded for doing this.

Points on technique

- (i) Make sure your headings are **BOLD**.
- (ii) Underline headings and main arguments - preferably using a red ball point.
- (iii) Use a ruler or straight-edge when underlining.
- (iv) If appropriate, present your answer in a 'table' format.
- (v) When drawing a graph, clearly label the axes (and don't forget to give the graph a bold heading).
- (vi) If possible, present your answer in a 'sub-heading' format (check-list style) rather than presenting it as a straight essay.
- (vii) If you use 'sub-headings', identify each one by underlining in red and don't forget to comply with the

requirements of the question. Sub-headings usually only relate facts. Your discussion under the headings will demonstrate reasoning.

- (viii) If you adopt an essay approach the examiner will want a **ROUTE MAP THROUGH YOUR ANSWER**. As stated above, you do this by underlining the important or significant points in the text of your essay.
- (ix) If your writing is small, try to space out your presentation. Leave a line to two between paragraphs.
- (x) But don't leave glaring gaps in the middle of answers. The examiner will take this as evidence of your lack of confidence.
- (xi) Remember- there is no golden rule which states that your answer should be two sides and only two sides of paper. Always write (a) what time permits; (b) what the question requires; and (c) what you think is sensible.
- (xii) If you're presenting financial figures, remember the convention:

\$	\$
xx	
xx	
—	xx
	—
	xx
	—

\$ sign used at top of columns.

- (xiii) If you're answering a 'fact and think' question and you don't know how to start, try to write down some 'definitions' from the terms used in the question.

EXAMPLE

Question - "There is evidence to suggest that the level of unemployment can be linked to the level of inflation. Discuss."

Approach:

Define (1) unemployment;
(2) inflation.

By doing this you will:

- earn marks
 - break the ice (psychologically speaking)
 - start your subconscious working overtime (thus generating ideas).
-

- (xiv) Be consistent. Don't make a statement when answering one question and then contradict that concept when answering another.
- (xv) Remember - time allocation is important. Consider a 20 mark question – it's likely that the marks being awarded can be analysed into three parts:
 - First 10 marks - Easy marks. These can be gained by demonstrating basic knowledge and presenting answers in a professional way.
 - Next 5 marks - 50/50 marks. These have to be earned by demonstrating that you have a thorough knowledge and aptitude for the topic.
 - Last 5 marks - Difficult marks. These will be given grudgingly. You will have to exhibit above-average knowledge to gain them.

(c) Common exam faults

Many exam failures are attributable to causes **OTHER** than lack of knowledge or inadequate preparation. Here are some common examples:

- (i) **NEGLECT** of the notes at the head of the paper concerning the sub-mission of workings or calculating to the nearest pound and nearest month.
 - (ii) **CARELESS READING** of questions. This includes giving either more or less than the examiner requires or *reading into the question complications and traps which do not exist.*
 - (iii) **ASSUMPTIONS.** You must write a full answer. Never assume that the obvious need not be stated. The examiner looks for this and will mark you down severely if he feels you don't know the 'obvious'.
 - (iv) **INABILITY** to visualise the scope of question and *failure to plan* the answer before commencing the question in the written papers. Make certain you know exactly what the examiner wants **BEFORE** you start writing and then answer the question as set - *not* as you would have wished it.
 - (v) **FAILURE** to express thoughts clearly and concisely. You'll be judged on what you convey through your answers. Don't spoil your chances by vague and imprecise expressions or by repeating the same points in different ways. You may deceive yourself, but you'll not deceive the examiner!
 - (vi) **INABILITY** to apply theoretical knowledge to practical problems.
 - (vii) **CARELESS** and simple arithmetic and transpositional errors.
 - (viii) **UNTIDY WORK**, no matter how complete or accurate it may be, will inevitably result in a loss of marks. **IT PAYS TO BE NEAT.**
- (d) The last stages
- (i) If you finish early, go through your answers carefully - you may be able to improve them.
 - (ii) When you finish, tidy up your answers. Survey what you've done and make sure:
 - all the question numbers are shown on your answers (this includes parts of questions, where questions are sectionalised);
 - all the pages are numbered (if required);
 - your exam number is written on the top of each booklet which you intend to submit;
 - you have underlined (with a ruler) headings and main points of argument;
 - you have not made a **GROSS ERROR** of a sort which cannot be corrected in minutes. If it's a serious mistake, append a quick note to the examiner informing him that you're aware of the error and outline what you would have done had you had the time.

(e) Your very last act

Make sure your script is put together in the way required by the instructions. Ensure that you've not omitted any additional answer booklets from the set. Finally, make sure that your script is handed in or collected in the proper manner.

It would be a pity if, after all your work, your script was lost through your carelessness.

6. THE EXAMINER

Let us digress by looking at the Examiner himself and consider the responsibility he has. Remember examiners are human beings and doubtless find more pleasure in 'passing' students than in 'failing them'. Some things for you to deliberate on are listed below:

- The examiner has been through the 'exam experience' himself.
- The examiner is aware of how important the exam result is to you and your future.

- The examiner will be assessing a large number of scripts and can be *motivated* or *assisted* or *impressed* by his first sight of your answer script.
- The examiner has an enormous task in assessing all the papers that have to be marked - he will get a *feel* for your answer by following the '*route map*' you lay down for him and this will influence his decision on "pass or fail".
- The examiner will not mark you down because your opinion differs from his own (although doubtless his views will be more informed). He will be looking for reasoned argument and logic supported by facts.
- The examiner will want to read your views and not merely a regurgitation of well seasoned and oft quoted text books. Remember we are living in a world of *change, uncertainty, crises, conflict, controversy* and *confusion*, and the examiner will be looking for evidence that you've been reading newspapers and taking an interest in 'current affairs'. Further, the examiner will be looking for evidence that you are a 'real live person' and not just a 'paper replica' of another one thousand students.
- Remember the examiner is humane, possibly idealistic and is on your side. He wants you to pass!

7. THE HOURS BETWEEN EXAM PAPERS

After you've taken one exam paper you may have to wait a few hours or perhaps overnight, for the next paper. How you spend this period really depends on you. As we have already discussed in the section '**THE DAY BEFORE THE EXAM**', some people will relax by going for a walk, or chatting to other people - others will put in some 'last minute' swotting.

Whatever you do, some points should be borne in mind:

- (a) Don't allow yourself to be drawn into discussion with other candidates about the paper you've already taken. There is no value in 'post-mortems' at this stage.
- (b) If you think you've done badly in a paper there is nothing to gain, and everything to lose by worrying about the result. You may have fared a lot better than you think. Self-criticism can be very severe and unrealistic. There are hundreds of examples of candidates returning from the exam stating emphatically they have failed a particular paper, only to find that when the results are declared, they have actually passed that paper.
- (c) Check the equipment you'll need for the next paper. Sharpen your pencils, check pens, etc.
- (d) If you only have a few hours between finishing one paper and starting another, make sure that you have a meal and take some exercise, preferably a short brisk walk.

The way you act in the period between papers may have important consequences on how you perform overall in the exam. The fear of having done badly in previous papers is a common cause of failure in later papers.

8. AFTER YOUR EXAMS

Once you have completed your exams, you will need to take a break from your studies. You'll have to wait a few months for the result of the exams you can spare two or three weeks for relaxing.

The period between the exam and the commencement of your next course should be used wisely. Holidays are times for rest and relaxation and offer you a chance to come alive and enjoy yourself. Such opportunities should not be wasted. You should not leave the exam room and immediately start studying for the next exam, interested though you may be in the new subjects which await you.

Remember, the most important thing is to return to your books after taking a break, alert and really looking forward with eager anticipation to the next programme of studies which awaits you. It's a fresh and open mind which produces the best results and the successful student is not one who has been studying *continuously*.

One further point - don't worry about the result you're waiting for - there is nothing you can do about it at this point. However, it's wise to reflect on your performance and prepare yourself for the most likely eventuality. You may decide to make contingency plans to cover all eventualities - not a bad idea because it's not always easy to know how well or poorly one has performed in relation to other candidates.

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