

RELEVANT TO ACCA QUALIFICATION PAPER P6 (UK)

Improving your technique

This article is relevant for all candidates preparing to sit the Paper P6 (UK) exam. It covers exam technique and also includes a summary of all of the articles relating to the exam.

This is one of four non-technical articles that focus on the structure of the exam and exam technique. The other three such articles are:

- [‘Examiner’s approach to Paper P6 \(UK\)’](#), which explains the structure of the Paper P6 (UK) exam and the skills required of candidates.
- [‘Stepping up from Paper F6 to Paper P6’](#), which provides guidance on the progression from Paper F6 to Paper P6 in terms of the syllabus, the style and format of the exam, and the approach necessary to maximise your chance of success.
- [‘Guidance on approach to questions in Section A of Paper P6 \(UK\)’](#), which provides detailed guidance on the approach to be taken when answering Section A questions.
- Although exam technique is important, and can be the difference between failing and passing the exam, it is clearly not as important as technical knowledge; excellent exam technique on its own will not be sufficient to achieve exam success. Accordingly, I have written the following series of technical articles to support you in your studies. These articles are all available on the website.

Generally:

- [‘Exam technique and fundamental technical issues for Paper P6 \(UK\)’](#)

Income tax:

- ‘Taxation of an unincorporated business – parts [1](#) and [2](#)’
- [‘International travellers’](#)

Capital taxes and trusts

- [‘Capital gains tax and inheritance tax’](#)
- [‘Trusts and tax’](#)

Corporation tax:

- [‘Corporation tax’](#)
- ‘Corporation tax and groups – parts [1](#) and [2](#)’

This article covers four aspects of exam technique: reading the question, satisfying the requirements, thinking, and time management. It then addresses the importance of practising exam-standard questions.

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1 READING THE QUESTION

The questions in the exam are detailed and the facts of a particular situation may be complicated. Although you will feel time pressured, you must resist the temptation to 'get on with it' before you have taken the time to understand what is going on. If necessary, draw a diagram or a timeline to organise the information in a manner that is easier to assimilate.

As you read the question you should be thinking about the relevance of the information provided. Almost all of the information in the exam is given for a reason; it is up to you to identify that reason and the tax implications flowing from it. For example: the date on which a company began trading is important because that is the start of an accounting period; the level of an individual's shareholding in a company affects the availability of entrepreneurs' relief and gift relief.

If you do not identify the relevance of a particular point you may well be giving up the mark(s) available for identifying the tax implications flowing from that point.

The chronology of the question must be treated with care. Events that occurred prior to the date of the exam cannot be altered. The same is true of events that have been contracted to occur in the future unless the question makes it clear that the agreement can be altered in some way.

On the other hand, events that are simply planned for some point in the future can be changed. Tax planning often revolves around the timing of events and changing a particular date may be sufficient to improve the tax implications of a proposed transaction.

Finally, you should take careful note of any guidance from the 'manager' (in the Section A questions) and of any notes following the requirements regarding the approach that should be taken when answering the question. Guidance from the manager is given to help you plan your approach to a question in situations where it may not be obvious how to begin solving the problem. The notes following the requirement will often exclude particular areas of the syllabus from a particular question or question part, such that you will be wasting your time if you address those areas in your answer.

2 SATISFYING THE REQUIREMENTS

Marks are awarded in the exam for satisfying the requirements and not for other information (regardless of how interesting or technically accurate it may be). Accordingly, it is vital to identify and then address the particular requirements in the correct amount of time.

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Addressing all of the requirements

It is very important to attempt to satisfy all of the requirements in the exam. Accordingly, you must answer four questions: the two in Section A and two of those in Section B, and you must answer **all** of the parts of the four questions.

The reason for this is that the first marks in any question part are easier to earn than later ones – ie where there are 10 marks available for a part of a question, you will find it easier to increase your mark from zero to four marks as opposed to from four marks to eight marks. Accordingly, you will benefit from attempting all parts of all four questions. You will have time to do this provided you manage your time carefully, and do not allow yourself to be sidetracked.

The nature of the requirements

The structure of the requirements of a Section A question is different from that of a Section B question.

The formal requirements at the end of a Section A question may consist of a broad overview of what needs to be done together with a reference to the document provided in the question where the detailed requirements can be found. However, these broad, formal requirements are important as they indicate the number of marks available (and, thus, the time available) for each of the broad areas of the question. In a Section B question, the formal requirements at the end of the question also contain the detailed tasks to be performed.

The detailed requirements should be seen as a list of tasks, all of which need to be performed. You may find it useful to number these tasks so that you can ensure that you address all of them. Where there are a number of tasks within a particular area of the question, some initial thought will be required to determine the time available for each task. This requires you to identify the relative size of each of the tasks by thinking about what needs to be done to carry them out.

Think about the best way of satisfying the requirements and relate your approach to the time available (by reference to the number of marks). Work your way through the tasks in an organised and consistent manner.

The approach to be taken in your answer

When planning what needs to be done to carry out a task, you should take into account any guidance provided by ‘the manager’ in the question and the command words used in the requirement.

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The guidance from the manager may suggest a particular approach to take, a good place to start or simply point out matters that do not need to be addressed. This guidance is intended to help you carry out the tasks within the time available.

The command words used in the requirement provide an indication of the level of detail required. For example, 'state' requires no explanatory detail, 'outline' is asking for something brief, whereas 'describe in detail' expects, not unsurprisingly, a detailed description. 'Calculate' requires calculations in order to arrive at a figure; it does not require explanations unless they are asked for separately. The command word used in the requirement is another way of providing you with guidance to help you complete the answer in the time available.

Answer the question set

You should not think of a question as being about a particular technical area. If you do, there is the possibility that you will answer the question in too narrow a manner. For example, where a question includes a group of companies, one of which has made a loss, it is not helpful to think of the question as being a 'group relief' question. This is because there may be marks available for many other technical areas – for example, single company loss relief, inter group transfer of assets, transfer pricing, VAT and so on.

Also, if a question is thought of as relating to a technical area, there can be a temptation to write about that area in great detail when such detail is not part of the requirement. Your answer should focus on the specific issues and facts of the question and you should avoid generalising.

Accordingly, rather than thinking of a question as being about a technical area, you should see it as being about a set of circumstances and a series of requirements that relate to those circumstances. You should take the time necessary to understand the circumstances and to determine how best to satisfy the requirements.

3 THINKING

A tax exam is as much about the marks you fail to earn as it is about the marks you earn. Marks are 'lost' due to lack of knowledge, lack of care when reading the question, as referred to above, and lack of thought when answering the question.

The marks that you lose through lack of care/thought are the ones you cannot afford to lose. This is because there will always be some technical points in the exam that you do not know, such that you cannot earn the marks in respect of those points. Because of this, you need to do as well as you can in relation to the technical points that you do know. It is a terrible waste of hard work to

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It has already been mentioned that the questions in the exam are detailed and may be quite complicated. They are not as complicated as real life but, given the pressurised nature of the exam room (and the fact that there no reference books or colleagues to refer to), they are quite complicated enough.

Accordingly, in the same way that you wouldn't expect to be able to respond immediately to a real-life client situation without first thinking about it, you should not expect to do so in the exam.

Thinking before you start your answer gives you time to be clear as to the facts of the question and what you have been asked to do. It then gives you the chance to identify as many of the relevant implications as possible and the various aspects of each of the implications such that you maximise the number of points you make and the number of marks scored. Also, by thinking before you write, you should avoid covering irrelevant matters that will not score marks.

You may be asked to prepare calculations in the exam or to use calculations to support the points you are making. It is important to stop and think before you start because preparing calculations is time consuming, such that you want to prepare them in the most efficient manner. For example, it may be that the client will be a higher rate taxpayer regardless of proposed changes to levels of income; the income tax implications can therefore be computed at the margin without the need to prepare full income tax computations.

Thinking before you write will also help you to avoid including irrelevant information or calculations in your answers. Marks are only given in the exam for those parts of your answers that satisfy the requirements and any time spent writing about other matters is wasted.

Thinking before you start your answer is not, however, the whole story. You may be able to increase the number of marks per page considerably by thinking before you write each point. You will not have to think for very long each time; just long enough to identify the best, most concise way of making the point. Recognise that, as most points are only worth a single mark it should only take one or two sentences to make each point. Many candidates' answers take a lot more than two sentences to make each point, such that time is being wasted. As part of this process, you should also focus on making each point once only and avoiding repetition.

4 TIME MANAGEMENT

It is of vital importance to manage your time carefully **throughout** the exam. You should be aware of how much time has elapsed and how much time remains for each particular part of each question and you should tailor your

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answers accordingly. This continuous approach to time management will help you get to the end of each question in the correct amount of time.

If you do not adopt this approach there is a danger that you will be too expansive at the start of a question, when there appears to be a significant amount of time available, such that you may find yourself rushing the final parts of the question or missing them out entirely.

Because time is a finite resource in the exam it is important that you do not waste it. With this in mind:

- think before you write so that you identify the most direct and time-efficient way in which to do what needs to be done
- do not provide general explanations, long introductions or executive summaries unless the question tells you to
- where a question requires you to calculate, there is no need to explain what you are going to do before you do it – just get on with preparing the calculation
- only prepare calculations that have been asked for, or that are necessary, in order to address a particular requirement
- keep your answer specific to the facts of the question and the requirements.

Exam questions contain the following guidance to help you manage your time efficiently:

- The number of marks available provides a clear indication of the amount of time that should be spent on each question part.
- The command word(s) used in the requirement indicates the level of detail required in your answer.

5 PRACTISING EXAM-STANDARD QUESTIONS

You should practise exam-standard questions by working them to time and without looking at the answer until you have finished the whole of the question. This will improve your time management and also your belief in your ability to start and finish a question without any outside help. This, in turn, will improve your self-confidence in the exam. Practising questions will also improve your ability to make a point in a clear and precise manner.

After you have finished a question and reviewed the answer, ask yourself the following questions to evaluate the quality of your exam technique:

- Did you take sufficient time to understand what was going on and the relevance of the information provided?
- Did you address all of the requirements?
- Did you focus on the command words in each requirement and follow any specific advice that was given?
- Did you address the specific facts of the question?

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- Did you stop and think?
- Did you manage your time successfully?

When you come to do another question, think about your exam technique and focus on those areas where you feel you need to improve.

The more questions you practise, the more confident you will be that you have an approach that works for you and the better you will perform in the exam. You will also become more familiar with the way in which information is presented in exam-standard questions and the sort of tasks you will be expected to perform.

CONCLUSION

Good exam technique will enable you to perform to the best of your abilities in the exam and to maximise the number of marks you earn. As a result, you will be able to earn the marks that all of your hard work prior to the exam deserves.

Accordingly, as you prepare to sit your exams, in addition to adding to and refining your technical knowledge, you should be aiming to continually improve your exam technique.

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