

RELEVANT TO ACCA QUALIFICATION PAPERS P1, P3, P4, P5, P6 AND P7

## Passing the Professional level papers

The purpose of this article is to highlight the key skills required to achieving a pass in Paper P3, *Business Analysis*, and identifies the key skills required to ensure that candidates are well prepared for the exam. Although it specifically refers to Paper P3, the points made are relevant to most Professional level papers.

What prompted this article is the disappointment felt by markers who see an otherwise well-prepared candidate fail the exam. By this, I mean a candidate who is well prepared in the sense that they have covered the study material, but do not do themselves justice in the exam. This is usually due either to the candidate lacking knowledge about how to approach the exam or, more commonly, a failure to practise the skills required to achieve a comfortable pass before they actually sit the exam.

The day of the exam is when candidates should be showing the sharpness of their knowledge, exam technique and presentation skills. However, it is evident that – for many – the day of the exam is also the first time that they have put into effect their exam writing and presentation skills. This is not a good strategic approach to a Professional level paper, hence the focus of this article.

Broadly speaking, the skills needed by candidates to secure a good grade in a Professional level are:

- technical knowledge – a good understanding of the course material and, more specifically, a good application of that knowledge to case-based scenarios
- exam technique – showing their skill in question selection, timing, scoring marks, and optimising the time available in the exam
- presentation skills – writing a paper that is legible, well structured, professionally presented and maximises their chances of scoring marks efficiently across the whole paper.

Now let us look at each of these elements in turn.

### 1. Technical knowledge

A Professional level paper requires candidates to have technical knowledge across a range of topic areas as set out in the relational diagram in the *Study Guide*. While technical knowledge is essential, it is insufficient to secure a pass. What is important is an understanding of the skills the examiner is testing. What the examiner is interested in is the *application* of knowledge and, hence, how candidates use their technical knowledge and models in context – so *adding value* to the lower level skills of description, definitions and listing of attributes.

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Papers at the Professional level are at the higher end of learning skills, and require such skills as analysis, evaluation, assessment, decision making, critical analysis and discussion. They require application of knowledge rather than repetition of textbook material.

To put it succinctly, the examiner is more interested in *what you can do* rather than *how much you know*. This is reflected in the fact that the examiner wants candidates to *apply* technical knowledge that they have acquired during their course of study, such as the application of tools and models to business scenarios. This requires candidates being able to use models, for example in Paper P3, such as PESTLE, SWOT, Porters Diamond and other models and frameworks described in the *Study Guide*.

Furthermore, as many of the Professional level papers contain questions that are case-based scenarios, textbooks cannot provide all of the answers. Like in the work environment – for which the exam is preparing candidates – you have to work with incomplete information and the information that is available may be interpreted differently by different individuals depending on their experience and requirements.

When answering case-based business scenarios candidates need the following skills:

- To identify key issues/defects (almost directly from the case material).
- The ability to use analysis to make inferences from case material and to delve deeper into case study problems.
- To identify things noticeable by their absence. That is, things the firm should be doing but is not doing at present.

It is the ability to *add value* to the scenario in this way that scores marks in the exam – repetition of case material or long introductions or descriptions score very little, and is time wasting, but more of that later.

Typically, the Paper P3 exam has the following characteristics:

- The examiner examines widely and will cover many sections of the *Study Guide* in a single sitting, covering diverse areas with the capability of integrating several topics.
- Candidates are required to act in the role of consultant/adviser and, hence, the paper is a test of competence.
- Data will be presented in tabular format and typically some financial data is provided. The examiner expects this information to be used, giving greater insight into the issues described in the case study. However, many candidates chose – to their detriment – to ignore this information or to not explicitly use it in their answers.
- The examiner expects candidates to show evidence of breadth and depth of knowledge across the paper.

- The emphasis is on the higher learning skills of analysis, evaluation, etc. It is a feature of past exam papers that less than 20% of the marks are awarded for knowledge purely related to textbook material.

## 2. Exam technique

Having good exam technique is a vital skill for passing Professional level papers and, like all other skills, it requires insight and practice. Good exam technique entails three essential elements. These are as follows, and will be dealt with in turn:

- Things candidates must do/understand before they get to the exam hall.
- Things candidates should do when given the paper in the exam hall.
- Things candidates should do when starting to write – that is, presentation skills.

### Things candidates must do/understand before they get to the exam hall

Before going to the exam, candidates should have covered the course, have practised past paper questions and honed the skills outlined and discussed below. In an ideal world, they would have also undertaken some structured revision. But, as students for professional exams, it is likely they have a busy life between working, studying and – if they are lucky – a bit of social life. If you fall into this category, then you need to read on and – before you go to the exam – follow my suggestions. Most of them are very simple but there is a reason for them all.

- *Learn to multiply by 1.5 – vital to good time management in the exam*  
So how hard can that be? Why 1.5? Well, that is the number of minutes you have to get a mark on Paper P3 (180 mins/100 marks = 1.8, but allowing 30 minutes to read the paper even *after* planning time leaves 150 mins/100 marks = 1.5 minutes per mark). This is recommended because it is common for candidates to spend a disproportionate amount of time on questions with few marks. It is not uncommon to see three pages written for, say, six marks, and then to see two pages written for 10 marks (or more). The examiner examines for *breadth* in the paper (that is to cover a lot of topics) and for *depth* (to give greater detail in certain topic areas). To do this, the examiner balances the marks by weighting them against the appropriate areas of the syllabus.

For candidates this means that if there are six marks for a part question, an answer should take nine minutes. A question worth 10 marks should take 15 minutes to complete, and if the requirement is for 20 marks then it should take 30 minutes, and so on. It should be evident that the more marks there are, generally the more points candidates will have to make and the more time it will take (and, indeed, a little extra planning will also be needed – but more on that later).

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- *Understand what you have to do to get just one mark*

Students often ask how many points you need to make in the exam and how much you need to write to score a mark.

A Section B part question may be worth 12 marks. In general, the examiner allocates one mark for each appropriate point made in the answer. The only general exception to this is for professional marks. However, if you follow the advice of this article concerning presentation, you should gain most of the available professional marks.

If you have 1.5 minutes to gain a mark then you should – if all goes to plan – gain two marks every three minutes in the exam; that is 40 marks per hour. As you will be writing for two and a half hours, you will score 100% if you keep this up.

So what do you have to do to get one mark? It is fairly simple. You have to write two or three good sentences about the topic under consideration – more about this in presentation. If you practise writing to get one mark, you could score 13 marks every 20 minutes in the exam. Even if you only gained six marks every 20 minutes, you will still score 51% and pass.

- *Say a little about a lot of things*

You have to get into the habit of saying a little about a lot of things (breadth), rather than saying a lot about a single point (depth). This is a balancing act to some degree, but as a general rule if you identify a point that is relevant and can state it in a clear heading or sentence, you will gain one mark. If you elaborate and state why it is of importance and explain, illustrated with relevance to the scenario, how it will solve a problem (depth) in two more good sentences, you will gain two more marks. And all this in 4.5 minutes – but it can be done with a little practice.

- *Realise that it is highly unlikely that you will bluff or waffle your way through this exam*

The markers for this exam are mostly lecturers in the subject matter, with many years' experience of teaching. Many of us are qualified accountants too, so we know what it is like to undertake professional exams. As professional educators, we take our subject seriously, are committed to getting our students prepared for the exams, and are able to spot bluffing and poor work from page one of your answer booklets.

Lacking adequate preparation is a recipe for failure. However, it is worth noting that adequate preparation may not mean that you must have covered 100% of the course to 100% proficiency. Indeed, it may be better to have covered 60% of the course to 100% proficiency and know something about the remaining 40%.

**Things candidates should do when given the paper in the exam hall**

Doing an exam is essentially a strategic exercise. It concerns deciding how to get organised, which questions to answer, in what order and, most importantly, how to score the most marks out of the questions to ensure that candidates reach the magic 50%. So how should you approach a Professional level paper in the exam hall? I would make the following suggestions on how to proceed once you have opened the exam paper.

- *Plan your time from the instant you receive the paper*  
How candidates approach time planning for the paper is crucial for completing the exam and to ensure best use of the time available.

On opening the paper look at the rubric for every question and multiply them all by 1.5, writing it in brackets to the right of the marks for a question component – this indicates the time you should be allowing for each and every part of every question.

This will take you less than one minute and you will then know where the examiner requires breadth and depth. It will indicate how many points you have to make in each section of the paper and it will give you your timing for each section. For example, if a part of a question is for 10 marks it should be capable of being completed in 15 minutes. When you start this part of the question note the time, and after 15 minutes move on to the next section *whether you have finished or not*. By doing this you will have most likely scored the easy marks in the question and this will also ensure that you finish the entire paper – failure to complete all of the questions is a common cause of failure.

- *Planning your answers*  
On receiving the paper in the exam hall, the 15 minutes before you start writing is vital to exam success. Ask students what these 15 minutes are for and invariably they say it is reading time. But it is not – it is reading *and planning time* and it is this second element that is critical – planning.

Planning involves selecting the questions you intend to attempt. Question 1 is compulsory, so your only choice is where to focus your effort. Should you attempt Section A Question 1 first, or do the shorter questions in Section B? This is a matter of personal preference. However, I would always recommend attempting Section B questions first. My reason for this is that the questions are shorter and more focused. There is less to read in the narrative and they are rich in information, which will help you with your answers. While Section A Question 1 is also information rich, there is so much more to read to extract the required information. If you do start on Question 1 and get bogged down it can take up a disproportionate amount of time and, thus, affect your timing for the whole exam. So, although it remains a matter of personal

preference, it is my suggestion that you focus on Section B in the early stages. I recommend the following:

- Read the rubrics of Section B Questions 2, 3 and 4 very quickly and decide which questions to attempt. This will allow you to eliminate the question in this section that you will *not* attempt because it concerns a topic area you aren't keen on, have not practised, or requires a model you do not know. You can now concentrate on the remaining two questions.
- Now select one of the Section B questions and plan an answer for this on your exam paper. There is usually sufficient room at the end of each question. This will involve reading the rubric carefully and identifying exactly what the examiner wants you – as a candidate – to do. Great care should be taken doing this as this is where many candidates stumble – often, they do not answer the question the examiner has asked, but the one they thought the examiner has asked or – worse still – they answer the one they wished that they had been asked. I have encountered many disappointed students who have made this mistake. Having ensured that you have read the rubric carefully, do the following:

- i. Read the question scenario quickly to get a feel for it. Then read it again – this time more carefully – to extract information relevant to the rubric. The information given in the scenario is key to successfully answering the question.
- ii. Having read the question carefully, write down notes that will assist in answering the first part of the question beside the exam question – there is usually plenty of space and a blank page on the paper for this purpose. Having done this, do the same for the other parts of the question.
- iii. What you should have now is a rough plan of the answer. The points are not in any order of priority but that is easily taken care of when you start to write. However, you will have covered the breadth required in the exam – a good first step – and you can incorporate the depth when you write the answer.

It is also worth mentioning that it is not worth rewriting your plan once you start the exam. This just wastes time and, as we now know, time equals marks. Conversely, lack of time means lack of marks and the only occasion in which a plan should be included in your answer is if you have managed your time badly, which should not happen if you follow the advice given in this article.

While on this subject, if you manage your time badly the penalty can be quite severe. Markers often observe candidates who have reached 46%, only to find that the next page is blank and there is nothing left to mark. This is generally the reason for marginal fails. If you manage your time badly your chances of passing reduce dramatically – how much tougher is it going to be to get 50 marks if you only answer 90, 80, 75 or 70 marks of the paper?



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Once you have made notes for the first question you intend to answer in Section B, make notes for the other Section B question that you intend to attempt – in the 15 minutes *reading time* you will have two answer plans completed. You might also have sufficient time to read the rubric to Section A Question 1 and this would be a real bonus. You are ready, with two questions fully planned when the invigilator gives you permission to start writing.

Once you are ready to write, I would suggest that you answer the Section B question that is *easiest* for you because:

- it will settle you into the exam and help you score marks early in a question in which you have less content to read and for which you already have a clear plan
- you already have the plan and the key points stated. There will be a need to prioritise points, but what you are going to write about is already clearly identified
- it facilitates sticking to the timing for the question and, if managed well, will ensure you have adequate time to attempt Section A Question 1 with good marks already under your belt. For example, were you to score say 32 out of a total 50 in Section B in 90 minutes, you would be an unfortunate candidate indeed not to then gain 18 marks out of Question 1 to secure a solid pass.

Should you choose to do Section A Question 1 first you must strive to complete it in one hour and 30 minutes. It is unlikely that you will be able to read the whole paper and plan all the answers in the 15 minutes' reading/planning time available. However, you must use this time effectively, with at least 50% of the paper thoroughly read and planned so that when the invigilator gives you permission to start you are ready to score a mark for every 1.5 minutes you are writing.

**Things candidates should do when starting to write – that is, presentation skills**

Presentation skills are a subset of good exam technique on which many articles have been written. I will treat this as a separate topic, focusing on what to do when you start to write, whereas the focus of good exam technique is about what to do before you write.

As stated earlier, Paper P3 is a test of your knowledge of business analysis, but it is also a test of candidates' professional competence. When passing final exams, many candidates will be reporting to senior managers and board level – indeed, some may be managers already and future board members. Good presentation skills are a vital exam skill. Ironically, it may be something that we, as markers, pay little attention to when it is present, but how it manifests itself when it is absent may be the difference between passing and failing. That is not to say that if you have good presentation techniques you will always pass – far from it. However, if your script is well presented, many benefits accrue in a subtle way to both you (writing the exam) and to the marker marking it.

Scripts are generally presented in three overall formats with a blend of content and presentation. These are:

- they have good content and are well presented – these are easy to read and mark
- they have good content and are poorly presented (sometimes frustratingly poorly presented) – these are difficult to read and to mark
- they have very good presentation but poor content.

Now which of the above would you say scores the passes? Which of the above gets the marker on your side? Which of the above is likely to facilitate picking up marks, achieving breadth and depth, facilitating good time management? Which of the above will clearly indicate where one point starts and finishes?

Would you agree that the answers to all of the above questions are self-evident? If so, why not strive to produce a paper with all the positive characteristics required?

Good presentation involves many facets on which most people will agree. These characteristics include legibility, use of appropriate language and clearly signposted sections of answers – both within a question and across the whole paper. This is something that I have struggled with in writing this article – having plenty of time to write it – but candidates have to achieve this almost without thinking in a time-pressured exam. Indeed, to achieve good presentation so that it comes naturally in the exam requires much practice, but it is time well spent not just for the Paper P3 exam, but for all Professional level exams and, indeed, for your entire professional career as an accountant.

As a marker, what you notice about presentation is – as I have said before – nothing much when it is present, although it makes a paper much better in every way and easier to allocate marks to. Hence, what I have chosen to do below is not to point out what candidates should do, but to identify what they do *not* do. My intention is to highlight the common defects that need to be addressed.

### **Common defects in candidates' presentation techniques**

The key defects are as follows:

**a) Defect 1 – writing is virtually illegible.**

**Solution** Make the writing legible. If we cannot read it, we cannot mark it. Though we will strive to give you the benefit of doubt, it is very difficult to mark what we find difficult to read. While it may be hard to change years of bad habits, it is worth the effort. It may be better to write less neatly, rather than write two booklets that are largely illegible.

**b) Defect 2 – A lack of professional style; failure to use proper layout, headings, etc.**

**Solution** Do the following for each question and part question:



- If asked, answer using an appropriate format and style – for example, in report format.
- Write a very brief introduction to set the context for your answer (no more than two sentences). This could be to state what you have been asked to do, to explain a theory or model, to state what the person in the scenario needs to do, or to highlight what exactly you are doing in your answer – for example, giving advantages and disadvantages. Good professional style should be evident from the opening paragraph of your exam script through to the very last page. Good signposting for the marker may involve skills as simple as:
  - i. entering the question number at the top of each page
  - ii. numbering answers and part answers appropriately
  - iii. indenting text to make points stand out from the narrative
  - iv. leaving space between points to clearly show where one has finished and another begins
  - v. appropriate use of bullet points
  - vi. appropriate salutation and conclusions using appropriate professional language.

**c) Defect 3 – Lack of priority in the answer; answers should address strategic, functional and operational issues preferably in that order.**

**Solution** Your answer plan will have identified key areas that you wish to address in your answer. It is a valuable skill to be able to prioritise the problems/issues within the scenario and to show the marker that you are able to think strategically. Though it is not imperative that candidates are able to do this, it will help you focus on key strategic issues in the scenario and, by so doing, you are likely to score higher marks. Consequently, prioritisation – although not essential – illustrates to the marker your high level of preparation and competence.

**d) Defect 4 – Not making enough points to ensure you score sufficient marks on each part of each question.**

**Solution** Though some would argue making insufficient points is not a presentation issue but a planning one, the fact is they are interrelated. If you plan properly your chances of presenting the answer properly improve. The golden rule of making enough points on a one-point one-mark basis is that even if you do not write enough to make 12 points for the 12 marks on offer, you are likely to make enough points to comfortably pass.

**e) Defect 5 – Failure to lay out answers to allow candidates to give breadth and depth and to answer in a professional style.**

**Solution** A common mistake is that candidates will merely write a single line of text or one very short sentence by way of making a point. As a general rule this is insufficient as it is likely to lack depth and will only score half marks at most, rather than the one mark on offer. This is very

problematic when it is repeated throughout the whole question or, worse still, throughout the entire paper. When it is repeated throughout the whole paper, and the paper is a marginal fail, then the lack of breadth and depth gives the marker and examiner no option but to leave the paper as a marginal fail. When the same problem is evident within a question – usually the final question attempted – it usually shows evidence of bad time management.

A common mistake is that candidates will write a lot about a single point on which they are very knowledgeable – sometimes as many as 15 or more lines of text – with the following point being a single short sentence. The balance of time and content should be about the same for each point made. Once the marker is satisfied that you have made the point, you will score the mark – all writing thereafter is superfluous, as the marks have been allocated. Writing more wastes your time and, as stated earlier, time equals marks. This is true for marks gained and lost – how many times have you heard candidates say ‘if only I had 10 more minutes I would have achieved a pass’?

**f) Defect 6 – Lack of balance between sections of questions.**

**Solution** This problem is similar to Defect 5 and has equally devastating consequences. This becomes evident to the marker when the candidate appears to be relatively good but, due to excessive detail in a previous question, the answer to the final question lacks depth and is worth very few marks. Once again, this is down to time management and generally taking too much time on questions that you can do well and are comfortable with. It is better to start the next question on time (as per your plan) and pick up easy early marks in this question.

The end result of this problem is the same as before – the marker has insufficient material to award you sufficient marks for a pass grade. This is equivalent to the equally detrimental sin of not getting the paper finished – that is, trying to score 50 out of 90, 85 or 80, etc. The only solution is to know when to quit in a question or section of a question and move on to ensure evenness of answers throughout the whole paper. Candidates should strive to achieve a good balance within a question and within each section of a question.

**g) Defect 7 – Lack of effective language necessary to illustrate higher-level application skills.**

**Solution** Candidates must learn the difference between the lower-level skill of making a statement and the higher-level skill of driving home the point. Frequently candidates will calculate a ratio – say GP% over two time periods – and show the results in a tabular format. They then fail to give any insight into the significance of what they have calculated.

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Making the point (identifying the problem) will normally score one mark as discussed earlier in this article. However, it is stating why it is a problem and what needs to be done about it that scores the extra marks.

Driving home these points can be easily done with simple phrases such as:

- this indicates...
- the impact of this is...
- to address this problem management need to...

This is a problem because it allows easy marks to slip away. It fails to demonstrate the skills expected of a competent professional accountant.

Correcting these defects will score you more marks. However, to correct these it is necessary for you to practise using past papers. If your tuition provider offers a correction service (most do), or you have an approachable lecturer (most are), it is worth having your practice answers corrected and getting feedback on how you could improve. How can you correct defects in your style if you assess your own skill? The answer is you cannot. So get some assistance from your tutors – the professionals.

### **Conclusion**

Paper P3 is a challenging paper requiring practise of the application of technical knowledge to diverse case scenario material, similar to the situation experienced by practicing managers. It is a test of professional competence that requires candidates to demonstrate not only technical skill but also professional presentation in an exam environment where time management is a crucial success factor.

Master the skills of application, presentation and time management and you will be successful in passing a Professional level paper.

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