

The ACCA logo is a red square with the letters 'ACCA' in white, bold, sans-serif font.

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A high-angle photograph of a man and a woman in business attire walking on a paved path. The man is on the left, wearing a dark blue suit and tie, carrying a black briefcase. The woman is on the right, wearing a grey plaid blazer over a white top and black pants, holding a smartphone. They are both looking at each other and smiling. The background features a large green bush and a set of stone steps.

EXAMINING TEAM APPROACH ARTICLE

STRATEGIC BUSINESS LEADER (SBL)

Think Ahead

Examining team approach article part 1 – SBL exam overview

STRATEGIC BUSINESS LEADER (SBL)

The aim of this article is to highlight the overall aim of, and the main skills and capabilities required for, the SBL exam. It is relevant for students sitting the SBL exam from September 2023 onwards.

A Overview of the SBL exam

SBL is a three-hour and 15-minute integrated case study exam. It is sat as a closed book exam, but pre-seen information is released two weeks prior to the exam session. The SBL exam aims to test key technical and professional leadership skills. The requirements within the SBL exam will therefore focus on the application of knowledge and will include strategic thinking, business direction and problem solving to prepare students for the workplace.

The pre-seen information provides students with background information on the case study organisation and the industry in which it operates. The aim of the pre-seen information is to provide students with more time to become familiar with the business activities of the case study organisation and its industry. This better reflects real life, where advice and recommendations are only offered in the workplace when a broader understanding of the organisation has been established. The pre-seen therefore provides important contextual information that will help students to better understand the further information provided in the exam exhibits.

In the exam, students will be provided with further specific information in the form of a range of exhibits to help carry out various tasks. The exhibits may take a variety of forms such as financial reports, media sources, presentations, spreadsheets, tables, web pages, memos, emails, briefing notes and interview transcripts etc. The pre-seen information will also be available to students in the exam.

The exam is an integrated case study with three compulsory tasks. The tasks are of varying total marks, but there are 100 marks available overall (80 technical marks and 20 professional skills marks).

The exam length is three hours and 15 minutes as students will already be familiar with the background material and the context of the case study organisation through the pre-seen.

In the exam, students should use the time to:

- i Read and comprehend the additional information in the exhibits provided. The best approach is usually to read the exhibits with the tasks in mind.
- ii Identify and extract information from the exhibits which is relevant for each task considering the integrated nature of the exam which may mean that more than one exhibit may be useful in answering a task.
- iii Plan and write answers that fully consider the integrated technical and professional skill requirements.

B The syllabus

SBL requires students to demonstrate organisational leadership and senior consultancy or advisory capabilities and relevant professional skills, through the context of an integrated case study.

The syllabus assumes essential knowledge and technical skills have been acquired in the Applied Knowledge and Applied Skills ACCA examinations.

The exam will test the SBL syllabus widely. Students may be required to take on various roles of organisational leaders, consultants, or advisers to senior management in different contexts to demonstrate a wider set of leadership skills.

All parts of the SBL syllabus are of equal importance and all areas of the syllabus are equally examinable, so it is essential to study the **whole syllabus**.

C Essential skills required for SBL

Both technical and professional skills are required to pass SBL. As the exam will be sat in a CBE environment, students will also require digital skills to help in managing and delivering answers in a CBE environment.

1 Technical skills

The exam marking scheme will comprise 80 technical marks for the correct use and application of syllabus knowledge. The tasks will be used to test students' knowledge and their ability to demonstrate this appropriately in the context of the case study.

The technical skills that are assessed in SBL are more practical and analytical rather than technical or academic. For example, students are expected to learn models and frameworks, but tasks will not generally require the specific use of any single model. Students in SBL therefore will often have the freedom to answer tasks with or without a model in mind. If students are using a model or framework to structure their answer, they should apply it flexibly to best answer the task rather than rigidly applying all its elements. However, using an inappropriate model in a requirement may limit the scope of a student answer or result in a student not providing a relevant answer.

2 Professional skills

In addition to technical skills, there are 20 marks available for professional skills and competences. This approach allows an assessment of the student's ability to demonstrate more than just their technical proficiency and to show professional skills which are deemed essential for a successful accountant and business leader.

There are five categories of professional skills as follows:

Communication: To express clearly and convincingly, through the appropriate medium, while being sensitive to the needs of the intended audience.

Commercial acumen: To demonstrate awareness of the wider business, and external factors affecting business, using commercially sound judgement and insight to resolve issues and exploit opportunities.

Analysis: To thoroughly investigate and research information from a variety of sources provided in the case study (pre-seen and exhibits) and logically process it with a view to considering it for recommending appropriate action.

Scepticism: To probe, question and challenge information and views, to fully understand business issues and to establish facts objectively, based on ethical and professional values.

Evaluation: To carefully assess situations, proposals, and arguments in a balanced way, using professional and ethical judgement to predict future outcomes and consequences as a basis for sound decision-making.

It is worth looking at, and becoming very familiar with, Section 1 of the SBL syllabus where these professional skills are covered in more detail.

3 CBE digital skills

Students must demonstrate appropriate digital skills in using the CBE computer functionality during the SBL exam. There are no marks assigned to this skill but developing proficiency in using the CBE workspace and functionality will help students establish a more organised and efficient approach to tackling the exam. There are certain functionalities that although good to use, may waste time unnecessarily. It is therefore strongly advised that students practice SBL questions in the ACCA CBE format to learn the best way to access and manage information and develop a workable approach to complete the exam within the set time of three hours and 15 minutes. Students are also advised to watch the videos that are available on the ACCA website that demonstrate appropriate exam technique in answering SBL [CBE exam questions](#).

CONCLUSION

Students must learn the whole SBL syllabus and apply that knowledge to tasks in the exam. In addition to applying technical knowledge, students must demonstrate professionalism in the context of the five professional skills when making their technical answer points.

Students must also demonstrate an ability to manage and appropriately answer all questions within the exam time by developing good and efficient exam techniques. These are discussed in detail in part 2 of this article.

Examining team approach article part 2 – Exam technique

STRATEGIC BUSINESS LEADER (SBL)

This is the second part of the examining team approach article which is relevant for the SBL exam from September 2023. It aims to provide general advice on exam technique and recommend exam approaches which students should consider in order to maximise their chances of passing the SBL exam.

It should be apparent that the approach required to succeed in the SBL exam differs from other ACCA exams. Therefore, it is essential that all students have devised and practised an exam management strategy before they sit SBL. The examining team has provided the following general advice:

1 Approaching the SBL exam efficiently

Students must learn to be organised and logical in their approach to the SBL exam. Time is a limiting factor in the exam and so efficiency is key.

Good time management during the SBL exam starts with an effective approach to the pre-seen information. Time in the exam will be saved if students have already assimilated and understood the information in the pre-seen. Remember that exam time should not be wasted trying to understand information from the pre-seen and struggling to find specific pre-seen information. The pre-seen should provide context when answering the tasks but much of the information needed to develop answer points is in the exam exhibits rather than the pre-seen.

During the exam, students must read the introductory page that provides key assumptions. The introductory page is likely to include the time period in which the exam is set, the role the student is adopting in the exam (which might be one role throughout the case study or different roles for each task) and a brief explanation of the information contained in each exhibit. Occasionally, this page might also contain other important information that connects the exam to the pre-seen which students must be aware of as they undertake different tasks. For example, the Specimen 2 pre-seen mentions a move to Lympool, and in the introductory page students are instructed to assume the move has already been made. This means that students should answer the tasks by applying the correct context and should ensure that any comment or reference to a future move is avoided, as this would be incorrect.

2 Effective reading and planning

There is no single right approach to reading the tasks and exhibits and planning exam answers. Students should develop an approach that works for them by completing specimen and mock exams. Students could read the tasks first and then the exhibits. This approach is task driven and ensures that when reading through the exhibits, the relevant task is identified. Students can highlight or even copy into the response areas relevant and useful information from the exhibits that will help to answer the tasks. However, the copying and pasting approach is only effective if students remember to add value to the copied text.

An alternative approach is to read the exhibits quickly first to gain an overview and then read and plan each task by going back and re-reading the relevant exhibit or exhibits and extract information to develop each answer before going onto the next task.

However, remember that this is a time pressured exam and students should avoid spending excess exam time planning answers and then fail to attempt some of the tasks. Planning is important, but it should be done efficiently.

It is important that students develop their own approach through practising specimen exams and other exam standard case study questions in a timed environment in order to establish which approach works best for them.

3 Addressing the requirements

i The preamble

In SBL, every task has an introduction (preamble) before the requirement/s. The preamble is there for a purpose. Firstly, it gives the background to the issues in the requirement which may include an indication of which exhibit, or exhibits should be focussed on while carrying out the task. Secondly, it helps in providing the student with an understanding of the reason for the task. This enables students to address the task appropriately and fully. In addition to carefully reading the preamble, the professional skill, (if required), will also provide more detail or additional hints as to what to focus on in the task.

The example below is taken from Specimen 2 Task 2(a).

TASK 2

Yexmarine's board is currently discussing seeking a listing on Neoland's stock exchange. The governance requirements which Yexmarine will have to fulfil if listed are in line with generally accepted governance best practice.

The chief executive is drafting plans to establish a number of board sub-committees, to meet these corporate governance best practice requirements.

The first committee he wishes to establish is a strategy committee and he has set out his proposal for it.

He wants your views on the benefits of, and problems with, his proposal. Consideration of the problems should include discussion of any omissions from the proposals.

Required:

(a) Write a letter to the chief executive which assesses his proposal to establish a strategy committee. (16 marks)

Professional skills marks are available for demonstrating communication skills in clarifying the benefits of, and problems with, the proposal to the chief executive. (4 marks)

It can be seen from Task 2(a) above, that neglecting to read the preamble and the professional skill could lead to a student producing an answer that may not fully address everything that the chief executive wants, and this will limit marks.

Reading the preamble and the professional skill properly would indicate that:

- Students need to focus on the first part of exhibit 3. This information is highlighted in yellow.
- The chief executive needs the answer to focus on three areas: benefits, problems, and omissions. This information is highlighted in purple.
- Communication is key and the answer to the task should clearly explain (clarify) the three areas. This information is highlighted in green.

It is therefore very important to read the preamble and the professional skill carefully to ensure that answers fully address the requirement.

ii Technical verbs

Having read the preamble and the professional skill, students should read the requirement again and note each technical verb to ensure that nothing has been missed. In addition, students must consider the marks available which will help to determine how many different technical points are expected.

Specimen 2 Task 1 will be used to illustrate this point. In this task, there are several things that the board is asking you to do which are highlighted in the figure below.

TASK 1

Yexmarine's board is considering two investment projects (a new range of sailing dinghies versus a new range of luxury yachts), which have been summarised by the finance director. Yexmarine will use the \$10m excess funds from the sale of its two Hameldon sites to finance any investment it makes. However, it will not have sufficient resources to choose both options.

The chief executive believes that a successful significant investment could have a large impact on the financial performance of Yexmarine over the next few years and is seeking your view on whether either of the proposed investments should be chosen.

Required:

Prepare a report to the board which:

- **Advises on the financial and non-financial benefits and drawbacks of each of the investment projects; and**
- **Recommends with reasons, which, if any, should be chosen.**

(26 marks)

Professional skills are available for demonstrating evaluation skills by making justified recommendations which are based on a balanced assessment of both projects.

(4 marks)

In this task the board has asked that the benefits and drawbacks of each investment are considered from both a financial and a non-financial aspect. Students are expected to include a recommendation as part of their answer. In addition, there are a lot of marks available for this task which means there are a lot of things to do or points to consider.

In order not to miss anything, students should structure their answers to address all the things that have been highlighted above.

- The information highlighted in yellow indicates the technical verbs that need to be addressed (advises and recommends).
- The information highlighted in green includes important clues on what should be covered in answers – the advice needs to cover both the financial and non-financial aspects and the recommendation needs to include reasons.
- The information highlighted in red gives further clues – the financial and non-financial aspects need to include both good (benefits) and bad points (drawbacks) and the recommendation can be that neither investment is undertaken.
- The information highlighted in blue is the mark allocation – which helps students understand the scale of the answer expected and a guide as to how long to spend answering the task.
- Finally, the information highlighted in purple emphasises that the answer needs to be balanced – students need to cover all areas (financial and non-financial, benefits and drawbacks) as part of their answer for each project to score both technical and professional skills marks.

The best approach would be splitting the answer for each investment project between benefits and drawbacks and splitting the benefits and drawbacks into financial and non-financial aspects. Students should provide a recommendation, ie they should tell the board which one of the investments they should undertake, or whether both investments should be avoided. Note that it is clear from the preamble that it is not possible to undertake both investments.

iii Analyse information carefully

Addressing the requirement properly requires thorough analysis of the information in the exhibits. Students must correctly identify issues from the relevant exhibits to build their points AND expand on these points by adding knowledge while considering any professional skill that is being tested.

Students must avoid simply copying and pasting points from the exhibits. Copy and paste is a good exam technique to manage time but if nothing is added to the copied text or no further explanation as to why that point was selected is provided, no marks are scored even if the point is relevant and valid for the task.

As a general rule, in SBL a single point scores one mark. If the point is further developed, then it scores an additional mark. To score two marks per point, students are advised to do the following:

- Relate the point directly to the organisation
- Consider the significance of the point
- Explain what consequences the point has
- Support the point with an example either from exhibits or relevant real-life examples

Students must focus on adding more detail about information selected from the exhibits to add value and score more marks.

iv Professional skills

The SBL exam is structured in such a way that professional skills marks integrate with technical marks meaning that students need to focus on both types of marks. Professional skills marks are earned from how tasks are answered in respect of the technical points. Each of the five professional skills will be specifically tested once in the SBL exam and each will be worth four marks. It is important that students understand, in detail, what these professional skills are so that higher professional skills marks can be achieved.

Below are some general tips students should use to approach answering tasks to maximise the professional skills marks:

- Include the most important, relevant, and crucial points relating to the requirement and the organisation. Use judgement to consider which points are the most convincing and compelling and only include less important points if they are needed to achieve all of the technical marks available for the requirement and can be made within the time limit for the task.
- Show deep/clear understanding of underlying or causal issues and integrate or link information from different exhibits to make points.
- Only make relevant points and try not to include superfluous information or make unsupported points.
- Avoid repeating points already made. Professionally competent candidates do not needlessly repeat information or points already made. They may reinforce a previous point, but this is usually made as a development of a point rather than repetition.
- Address the requirements as written, taking notice of the verbs used. Answering the requirement asked is an indication of the ability to read and comprehend instructions appropriately and is a demonstration of professionalism expected in the workplace.
- Show ability to prioritise and make points in a logical and progressive way.
- Structure and present answers in a professional manner as would be expected of a professional accountant.
- Demonstrate evidence of knowledge from previous learning (Applied Knowledge and Applied Skills exams – see *How Applied Knowledge and Applied Skills map to SBL* document [here](#)) or wider reading and apply this knowledge appropriately to strengthen arguments and make points more convincing.
- Write answers using an appropriate tone which is suitable for the intended recipient.
- Remember that demonstrating professionalism in SBL is not about linguistic eloquence, having an extensive vocabulary, or perfect grammar. It is about the ability to express points clearly, factually, concisely and show credibility in what is being said.

While the above advice gives a range of good general techniques for gaining professional marks across the board, candidates must also focus on the specific professional skill being examined. Further information on professional skills in SBL can be found [here](#).

It is essential that students are aware that the way an answer is structured, how points are made, and how the answer is presented are examined through the professional skills marks, which constitute 20% of the overall marks available. Achieving good professional skills marks is critical to success in the SBL exam. These professional skills and how to demonstrate them is a key skill that needs to be developed.

4 How to increase chances of passing

Poor time management within the exam results in poor performance despite a good knowledge of the syllabus. The following are examples of where students can waste exam time without scoring additional marks:

- By spending too much time on tasks without regard to allocated marks. Any extra work beyond the maximum marks, even if points are relevant and correct, does not score marks and so students should avoid giving excessive detail.
- Not focusing on the requirement. Students sometimes write all they know about the subject matter without answering the actual requirement. Displaying knowledge without answering the requirements does not score marks.
- Making the same point in slightly different ways in the same requirement. The repeated points do not score further marks but may adversely impact on professional skills marks awarded due to the repetition of the same points in the answer.
- Giving details about models that are not applied to the case. There are no marks allocated for demonstrating knowledge of models or frameworks. Models are only used to help structure answers, they do not score marks on their own.
- Performing calculations without using them. Calculations in SBL do not gain credit unless they are combined with interpretation in the context of the task. The best approach to calculations in SBL is to first think about the points that should be made in each requirement and then consider what calculations will be needed to support the points.
- Copy and paste information from exhibits without adding anything. Reproducing text from exhibits, even if it is relevant and correct does not score marks. Marks are gained from explaining why this information is important or relevant. Copying and pasting text should be limited and not replace intelligent thinking.
- Writing elaborate and lengthy plans. Plans are not marked and do not score any marks, therefore avoid writing an overly detailed plan.
- Including long introductions. Introductions to the subject matter of the answer do not score marks and therefore should be as brief as possible.
- Inefficient use of the pre-seen during the exam. Searching for information in the pre-seen document during the exam will waste time. Students should be fully aware of the content of the pre-seen before the exam and use this awareness to add context to their exam answers. Remember that most of the marks for the tasks will be found within the exhibits provided in the exam and therefore students should not need to refer to the pre-seen excessively during the exam.

These are just a few examples of poor exam technique practices that should be avoided. Good exam techniques and skills should be developed and practised during the revision stage.

CONCLUSION

Students that are best prepared for the SBL exam have:

- Learnt the whole syllabus,
- Reviewed the wide range of SBL learning resources that are available on the ACCA website,
- Developed an appropriate and efficient exam technique,
- Practised plenty of past exam questions; and
- Assimilated the information contained within the pre-seen before the exam session.