

PROFESSIONAL

RELEVANT TO ACCA QUALIFICATION PAPER P1

IN THIS ARTICLE, WE'LL LOOK AT A PAST EXAM QUESTION AND REVIEW AN EXAMPLE OF HOW NOT TO APPROACH THE PROFESSIONAL MARKS, AND THEN SEE HOW THE EXAMINER CHOSE TO ANSWER IT AND LOOK FOR WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM HIS APPROACH.

Can you afford to give away four marks in your Paper P1 exam? Members of the marking team have reported that few candidates gain all of the available four professional marks in the compulsory question 1, which could be the difference between a pass and a fail.

There are professional marks available in all ACCA Qualification Professional level papers. On P1, these marks will be found in the Section A scenario question. In each of the three exams to date for Paper P1, there have been four marks awarded. These marks are worth approximately seven minutes of your exam time (4% of 180 minutes), which should give you some idea of how much investment to make in earning these marks.

So, what must you do to earn these marks? In this article, we'll look at a past exam question and review an example of how *not* to approach the professional marks, and then see how the examiner chose to answer it and look for what we can learn from his approach.

Paper P1, June 2008, Q1 (d) [excerpt]

Prepare the statement for Mr Markovnikoff to read out at the AGM. The statement you construct should contain the following:

- (i) A definition and brief explanation of 'sustainable development' **(3 marks)**
- (ii) An evaluation of the environmental and sustainability implications of the Giant Dam Project **(8 marks)**

Professional marks for layout, logical flow and persuasiveness of the statement. **(4 marks)**

Example 1 is an example of what *not* to do. Note that in the **Example 1** answer, the marks for content would be awarded; it would just be the professional marks that would be lost.

Example 2 shows how it should be done [excerpt from examiner's answer to this question].

Specific format that answers could take

There are many formats that may be required. What follows are notes on a number of possible formats.

1 Letter (December 2007 Q1 (d))

A letter should start with the sender's address details (put the company name and follow with 'Address line 1, Address line 2', etc below it) and the date. The letter should commence with 'Dear XXXXX' as specified in the requirements.

Throughout the text of the letter, write in the first person, using phrases such as 'I', 'we', 'your board', and 'our company' to personalise this. Keep the audience and their interests in mind throughout, and refer to them on occasions to make it clear how your answer is still clearly focused.

Conclude with a suitable sentence, thanking the reader for their interest or time. Use 'Yours faithfully' where the addressee is anonymous, such as 'shareholders'. Use 'Yours sincerely' if the addressee is named.

2 Presentation (June 2008 Q1 (d))

If you are required to write a presentation that should be delivered, ensure it can be read out. Writing for the spoken word takes practice, so try reading out your own answers. You will soon learn which phrases or sentence structures do not work when spoken.

Again, write your answers in the first person. You may be required to write notes supporting a presentation, in which case you will need to use short sentences, focusing on key points. Remember that the purpose is to support someone delivering a presentation, as they will have limited time to look at detailed text.

3 Briefing notes

These will be required to provide information to brief a board or committee, or external parties such as institutional shareholders, on a particular event or decision. They will need to be well-structured, focusing on the key points at the start, with background information provided later. Briefing notes, along with management reporting narratives and press statements, should be written in the third person, referring to 'the company', 'XYZ Ltd' and 'the board', rather than 'I' or 'we'.

MARKS

EXAMPLE 1: HOW NOT TO ANSWER PAPER P1, JUNE 2008, Q1 (D) [EXCERPT]

This is a letter format rather than a Chairman's statement/speech

An introduction is required – to set the context for the statement and the issues to be discussed within it

No headings have been used

There are no sentences that link the paragraphs, or provide fuller explanations

Wrong ending ('Yours sincerely') – requirement didn't ask for a letter

DD-MM-YY

Dear shareholders

(i)

- ▣ Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
- ▣ This definition has implications for energy, land use, natural resources and waste emissions. In a sustainable development, all of these should be consumed or produced at the same rate they can be renewed or absorbed so as to prevent leaving future generations with an unwanted legacy of today's economic activity.

(ii)

- ▣ An environmental argument against the Giant Dam Project relates to the loss of important habitats due to flooding. This may mean the removal of balanced environmental conditions for certain plant and animal species.
- ▣ An environmental argument in favour of the project is that it will create a large source of clean energy for economic development that will be sustainable.
- ▣ This will contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gases in the environment.
- ▣ Another problem with the proposed project is that it will result in the loss of productive farmland, which will mean reduced capacity for the country to grow food and support citizens.

Yours sincerely
Chairman

Bullet points cannot be read out in a speech

There is no logical order to the points – they appear to be written down just as they came into the author's head.

THE PAPER P1 QUESTIONS WILL REQUIRE YOU TO PRESENT YOUR ANSWER IN A MANNER PRESCRIBED IN THE REQUIREMENTS, SO NOT ONLY DO YOU HAVE TO THINK OF THE TECHNICAL CONTENT OF YOUR ANSWER BUT YOU WILL ALSO NEED TO DELIVER IT IN THE FORMAT SPECIFIED.

EXAMPLE 2: HOW TO ANSWER PAPER P1, JUNE 2008, Q1 (D) [EXCERPT FROM EXAMINER'S ANSWER]

Headings used to provide clear professional structure

Formal introduction to meeting

Overview of points to be covered

Connecting narrative between sections

Chairman's statement at AGM

Thank you for coming to the annual general meeting of Rowlands & Medeleev. I would like to make a statement in response to the concerns that a number of our investors have made in respect of our appointment as the principal contractor for the prestigious and internationally important Giant Dam Project. We are pleased and honoured to have won the contract but as several have observed, this does leave us in the position of having a number of issues and risks to manage.

As a project with obvious environmental implications, the board and I wish to reassure investors that we are aware of these implications and have taken them into account in our overall assessment of risks associated with the project.

(i) A definition of 'sustainable development'
One investor asked if we could explain the sustainability issues; I begin with addressing that issue. According to the well-established Brundtland definition, sustainable development is that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This definition has implications for energy, land use, natural resources, and waste emissions. In a sustainable development, all of these should be consumed or produced at the same rate that they can be renewed or absorbed, so as to prevent leaving future generations with an unwanted legacy of today's economic activity. We believe that our involvement in the Giant Dam Project has implications for environmental sustainability, and it is to these matters that I now turn. *Content follows here...*

(ii) Environmental and sustainability implications of the Giant Dam Project
In our preparation for the bid to act as principal contractor for the Giant Dam Project, we established that there were two prominent negative implications of the project but these are, in our view, more than offset by two major environmental positives. *Content follows here...*

Thank you for listening.

Written in the first person, using 'I' and 'we'

Written in a style of speech that could be read out

CAN YOU AFFORD TO GIVE AWAY FOUR MARKS IN YOUR PAPER P1 EXAM? MEMBERS OF THE PAPER P1 MARKING TEAM HAVE REPORTED THAT FEW CANDIDATES GAIN ALL OF THE AVAILABLE FOUR PROFESSIONAL MARKS IN THE COMPULSORY QUESTION 1 ON THE P1 PAPER.

4 Management reporting narrative (such as annual report) *December 2008 Q1 (c)*

The best way to gain a feel for management reporting narratives is to review the annual report of any major company. These can usually be found in the investor relations section of a corporate website.

This narrative should be written in the third person (as described for briefing notes).

5 Press statement

A press statement consists of clear short paragraphs written in the third person. It is likely to have an opening paragraph, delivering the key message with background information and data provided in sections below.

Reviewing the press section of a major company's website will provide examples.

6 Memo

A memo is generally written to a particular person or persons (such as a board committee or the CEO). A memo format will need to be headed 'Memorandum' and have the To/From/Date/Subject information at the top.

The style of writing will be precise and factual, leaving little room for interpretation. It will be written in the first person, directly addressing the person at whom it is aimed ('you') and identifying the author as 'I'.

7 Report

The purpose of a report is usually to inform, occasionally providing recommendations or suggestions for future action. It will have a wider circulation than a memo and is hence more formal in style and wording. Like a memo, it will be written in the first person..

The initial structure of a report is similar to that of a memo, although the heading would be 'Report'. It is good practice to provide an introduction or 'Terms of Reference' section at the start, stating exactly what the report aims to cover, and to finish with a summary or conclusion.

Use of headings and sub-headings will not only improve presentation but also add to the ease of reading by the audience of the report (and the marker of your exam).

Style tips to help you earn professional marks

- ▣ Plan your answer before you start writing:
 - This will allow you to ensure you are clear about the format required, so that you include the relevant headings and introductory paragraphs.

COMBINE THIS WITH THE FACT THAT MANY SCRIPTS ARE MARGINAL FAILS (BETWEEN 46% AND 49%), AND YOU CAN SEE THAT THE FOUR PROFESSIONAL MARKS COULD BE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PASS AND A FAIL.

- Ordering the technical points of your answer in a logical manner will enhance their flow and persuasiveness. Cover key points first, and group similar points together.
- Establish who you are in the requirement, along with who your audience is, and be clear whether you are writing in the first ('I' or 'we') or third person ('it' or 'the company').
- ▣ Use headings, and space between your paragraphs.
 - These will enhance your presentation marks and create a professional-looking answer.
- ▣ In most professional responses, bullet points are inappropriate, so avoid their use.
- ▣ Insert linking narratives between the sections of your answer, particularly if you are writing a speech or statement.
- ▣ Include an explanatory introduction or overview, and a summary to draw points together.
- ▣ Refer to your audience throughout the answer, keeping the answer personal to the intended reader and their interest.
- ▣ Ensure that your answer clearly presents the points required by the question, to earn the marks available for demonstrating persuasiveness and to enable your answer to sound convincing.
- ▣ Be prepared to answer the question from a perspective that may differ from your own (for example, in the December 2008 exam Q1, the requirement was to write from two differing ethical perspectives), regardless of whether you agree with it or not. It's not about your opinions – just use the facts of the scenario and the relevant theories.

CONCLUSION

You cannot afford to throw away professional marks; they could make all the difference to your success in this paper. Spend some time reviewing real-life examples of press statements and annual reports, and practise writing speeches that can be read out. You should then be well-prepared to meet the format requirements presented in the next Paper P1 exam. It is important to remember for whom you are writing on behalf, and who your audience is, at all times.

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