Effective Time Management in Strategic Professional exams

The examining team walk you through how to allocate your time in the Strategic Professional exams

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Introduction

There is a lot of evidence from the marking teams and within examiners' reports that many students taking Strategic Professional (SP) examinations are failing to manage their time adequately and are performing poorly in later questions or running out of time altogether. Students are also reporting that when they are taking the CBE versions of the examinations, they feel more time pressured than when sitting a paper-based exam.

This guidance is about the following:

- how to use the time required for reading and planning for the exam
- how to allocate your time to answering the exam requirements
- how to adopt examination tactics and techniques to maximise the effectiveness of your time management when navigating the examination
- how to answer questions, making the best use of the time allocated to each requirement, to avoid wasting valuable examination time.

Reading and Planning Time

For all Strategic Professional exams other than Strategic Business Leader (SBL) there are 15 minutes for reading and planning, in addition to the three hours or 180 minutes of writing time.

In SBL there are four hours (240 minutes) but no additional reading and planning time is given, so time must be allowed for reading and planning. It is recommended that this will require at least 40 minutes to do effectively.

For all Strategic Professional exams, it is important to use the reading and planning time effectively because this will give you the opportunity to read the examination from beginning to end. By doing so you will save time in the examination, locating and finding the relevant information more quickly when writing out your answers. In SBL, you should highlight key information and make brief notes to yourselves about which exhibits are relevant to which exam requirements. Doing this in an organised way will make it much easier and much quicker for you to navigate through the exam information and to easily identify which information to access and use when progressing through the task requirements. In other Strategic Professional exams where there is only 15 minutes reading time, it is more important for the candidate to clearly focus on, carefully read and fully understand the requirements and to identify what needs to be done and in what order.

In all Strategic Professional exams, effective and careful reading needs to be practised before writing the exam answers.

In SBL, first read the background section as this will provide some context for the overall case study. Next, focus on the requirements and finally read through the various exhibits. This approach is clearly requirement-driven and ensures that when you read through the exhibits, you are thinking about the tasks you have been presented with, so you can identify and highlight relevant and any useful information from the scenario which will help you answer the questions.

In the other Strategic Professional exams, it is also important to review the requirements first and then read background and other scenario-based information within the material you will be provided with. As with SBL, already knowing what you have been asked to do, helps you read other information with greater focus and clarity. The opening screen contains

explanations of the exhibits and these can be linked with the various requirements within the examination itself, so that they can be readily and quickly accessed as needed.

When planning, the student should carefully consider how many marks are available for each part requirement and how many different points they need to make in order to achieve these marks. For written points, Strategic Professional exams are usually marked on a one mark per relevant point basis for explaining what and why, using evidence, possibly with an extra mark for more fully developing the same point.

Allocating time to answering the requirements

In SBL, as there are 240 minutes to complete the entire exam and 40 of these are for reading and planning, 200 minutes remain for writing answers. As there are only 80 technical marks, this means that there are (200/80) 2.5 minutes available for each technical mark earned. This is because the 20 professional skills marks are being earned as the technical points are being made.

In Strategic Business Reporting (SBR), there are a total of 100 marks (including 4 professional skills marks). This means there are effectively (180/100) 1.8 minutes allowed per mark available in the examination for any marks allocated.

In the Strategic Professional options exams there are a total of 80 technical marks. This means there are effectively (180/80) 2.25 minutes allowed per mark available in the examination for each technical mark earned. This is because the 20 professional skills marks are being earned as the technical points are being made.

Table 1 below shows the breakdown of part requirements of an exam task in SBL, SBR and in an SP options exam.

Table 1: Mark breakdown of a task/question in SBL, SBR and SP options examination

Part requirement	SBL Exam Task	Part requirement	SBR Exam Question	Part requirement	SP options Exam Question
a)	Do X *and* Y (12 marks)	a) (i)	Do X (6 marks)	a)	Do X (13 marks)
Professional marks	(3 marks)	a) (ii)	Do Y (8 marks)	b)	Do Y (7 marks)
b)	Do Z (8 marks)	b)	Do Z (10 marks)	Professional marks	(5 marks)
Professional marks	(2 marks)	Professional marks	(4 marks)		

For the SBL task the candidate should allocate their marks as follows:

For part a) because you need to do X *and* Y, you should assume that X and Y are equally weighted, so you should allocate (12 marks x 2.5 mins), giving a total of 30 mins in total to part a). 15 mins should be spent on X and 15 mins should be spent on Y. Note that no

additional time is required for the professional marks in SBL, as these are assumed to be earned for *how* you are making your technical points.
For part b) you should allocate (8 marks x 2.5 mins) 20 minutes to it.
In total you should therefore allocate 50 minutes to this task before moving on to the next task.

For the SBR exam question in Table 1, part a) is already split into sub-parts (i) and (ii) so the candidate knows how much time to spend on each aspect. For a) (i) you should allocate (6 marks x 1.8 mins) or about 11 mins and (8 marks x 1.8 mins) or about 14 mins for part (ii). This is approximately 25 mins for part a) as a whole.
For part b) as there are 10 marks you should allocate (10 marks x 1.8 mins) 18 mins. As this question also has 4 professional marks, it is assumed that an additional (4 marks x 1.8 mins) 8.8 mins can be allocated to presenting your work in the format required.

For the SP options exam question, the candidate should allocate their marks as follows:
For part a), you should allocate (13 marks x 2.25 mins) a total of just over 29 mins. For part b), you should allocate (7 marks x 2.25 mins) a total of just under 16 mins. Note that no additional time is required for the professional skills marks in the SP options exams, as these are earned for *how* you are making your technical points.

If Strategic Professional students strictly apply these time limits to themselves for each requirement, it will be much more likely that they will be able to complete all the requirements in the time allowed. Evidence is showing us that in all Strategic Professional exams, candidates are taking much longer on the first question than they should be, meaning that when they come to the later questions they are rushing or even running out of time altogether. What is most important is to manage your overall time against the clock, so that you know roughly at what time you should be moving from one question to another in real time.

Table 2 below shows how you might be able to plan this for an SBL, SBR or Strategic Professional options exams starting at 09.00.

Table 2 – Timeline to follow when taking an SBL, SBR or SP options exam

SBL Exam	Technical marks	Time allowed (minutes)	Clock time		SBR Exam	All marks	Time allowed (minutes)	Clock time
Start time:			09:00		*Start time:*			09:00
RAPT*		40	09:40		RAPT*		15	09:15
Task 1	30	75	10:55		Q1	30	54	10:09
Task 2	18	45	11:40		Q2	20	36	10:45
Task 3	18	45	12:25		Q3	25	45	11:30
Task 4	14	35	13:00		Q4	25	45	12:15
Total	**80**	**240**				**100**	**195**	

SP Options Exam	Technical marks	Time allowed (minutes)	Clock time
Start time:			09:00
RAPT*		15	09:15
Q1	40	90	10:45
Q2	20	45	11:30
Q3	20	45	12:15
Total	**80**	**195**	

*RAPT – reading and planning time

Examination tactics

Before you take any live exam, make sure you have practised thoroughly on the CBE specimens which are available on the ACCA Practice Platform. Having familiarity with how to use the platform to take exams in the simulated live environment will save you a lot of time in the examination itself.

You should practice extensively on the specimen CBE exams before you take a live exam and work within the time limits allowed. Remember that no one would ask you to take a driving test if you had never driven a car. Only when you are completely confident of how to use and navigate within the CBE technology in which the exam will be set, should you enter for your live exam.
Once you have started your exam and after reading and planning and allocating your time to each requirement and part requirement, more time can also be saved by adopting effective tactics while navigating the exam itself.

For CBE examinations there are a number of tips to use:

- Avoid using the scratchpad for detailed workings or notes at Strategic Professional, as markers do not access or mark this
- Make any notes or write brief question plans at the beginning of the word response item in which you will be writing most of your written responses. This plan could form the structure of your answer, such as the headings within a report you may be asked to write. Remember to delete any notes or plans you do not wish the marker to read before submitting your response
- Quickly highlight any key pieces of information particularly key verbs in requirements and any information the exhibits or other information supplied which you think are relevant to specific question requirements. Do this using the highlighter functionality. This allows you to quickly see and access the relevant pieces of information when answering questions
- Always use the relevant response item to answer the requirements, such as using the Power Point tool for presentations in SBL. This will save time and give you the relevant functionality for what you need to do. Sometimes there is only one response option given, but sometimes there will be a choice
- Open sources of information in the left side bar one at a time and close them down when you are not using them, keeping open items you are immediately working on. (Remember that any notes or highlights you initially make in these will be saved automatically by the system and will be visible when you reopen the items)

- Don't spend too much time looking for, or trying to use, functionality within the various response types which you don't really need. For example, using underline or bold headings would be enough in a report.
- When you are using a spreadsheet, cut and paste any relevant numerical data from the relevant exhibit to the spreadsheet response item. When working on the data only use the functionality you need, to save time and perform the task you need to do. Don't waste time by trying to use less critical but more complex functions than necessary, just to make your spreadsheet look perfect. There are rarely any marks awarded for the presentation of spreadsheets.

Using writing time effectively

As already explained, each Strategic Professional exam requirement has a detailed breakdown of marks available for each part and sub-part, which should form the basis of your time allocation to these various parts and sub-parts.

In Table 1, if you were doing the SBL task and attempting part a) you should be spending only 30 minutes on this part requirement. There are essentially 6 marks each, available for X and for Y. This means you should only try and write six discrete points on each aspect. Even if you think you can write much more about a requirement than required for the marks available, please do not do so. This does mean that it is important for you to prioritise the points you wish to include over those you will leave out.

Avoid repeating yourself by making the same point twice. Markers will not reward a mark once already given, so this is wasting more of your time.

Avoid making irrelevant points because they will not gain you any marks. This is why the effective use of reading and planning time is so important in allowing you to properly read and understand the requirements and become quite clear about what the examining team is looking for in each exam requirement.

Conclusion

To manage your time effectively in SP exams you should:

- practice extensively using the ACCA Practice Platform keeping to the time limits, before taking a live examination
- allocate and use reading and planning time effectively to fully understand the requirements of the examination and to quickly identify where to locate and access the relevant information you will need for each requirement
- quickly work out how long you should allow yourself for each question and the requirements and part requirements contained within each question and keep to these time limits as far as you can, ensuring you leave enough time to complete the exam
- use the available functionality within the exam delivery platform efficiently and effectively. Don't overuse the scratchpad. Make notes and plans at the top of the word response space and only keep open items you immediately need. Use the highlighter effectively to identify and later locate, relevant information and only use the functionality within the response items you really need, to answer the questions set

- only make as many points you need to make to gain the marks available and then move on to keep within your time limits. Do not repeat yourself and do not include irrelevant points.