

How to plan & prepare for UPSC Civil Services Mains examination

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267 Views

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UPSC Mains Exam Preparation

So you have cracked your IAS Prelims exam. Preparing for UPSC Mains can now look like an even more of a daunting, never-ending prospect, but it does not have to be. Having a clear strategy for UPSC Mains exam preparation and then implementing it diligently, is the best way to prepare for it.

UPSC Civil Services Mains Exam Pattern

In UPSC Mains Exam there are nine papers and candidates are shortlisted for the IAS interview based on their marks obtained in the Mains written exam.

Paper details



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1. English - 300 Marks - Qualifying Paper
2. Language - 300 Marks - Qualifying Paper
3. Essay - 250 Marks
4. GS Paper 1 - 250 Marks
5. GS Paper 2 - 250 Marks
6. GS Paper 3 - 250 Marks
7. GS Paper 4 - 250 Marks
8. Optional Paper 1 - 250 Marks
9. Optional Paper 2 - 250 Marks

From the above list of papers, it is clear that GS has more weightage (1000 Marks), but those papers are common for all the candidates.

To get shortlisted for the interview, the strategy is to score good marks in Essay and capitalise your score in the Optional subject.

To understand much better, read our comprehensive preparation strategy for cracking your IAS mains exam.

The ideal time to start your [IAS Mains exam preparation](#)

The best time to begin your IAS Mains preparation is along with your Prelims preparation. Basically, Prelims is the subset of the Mains exam. If you cover the Mains syllabus, then your Prelims portion will also be covered in it.

Ideally, you should allocate at least ten months for Mains exam preparation, which includes three months specifically dedicated only towards Mains and seven months of consolidated preparation (Prelims+Mains). You should not wait for your Prelims result to begin your Mains preparation.

Plan for preparing IAS Mains exam

Here in this article, we will provide a detailed study plan for your Mains exam preparation, which will be helpful for you to plan your exam preparation.



Every year UPSC conducts Prelims exam at the end of May or first week of June. Mains exam is held in October/November. So, we suggest you start your preparation one year before your Prelims exam, i.e. in April/May.

Basic facts and information about IAS Mains exam

1. Understand the structure and [Syllabus of UPSC Civil Services exam](#)

The first step is to be very clear about the structure of the exam, the marks carried by each paper, as well as what kind of questions are addressed by each paper and their syllabus. This way you will come to know what to read and how to read.

2. Develop a daily newspaper-reading habit

UPSC preparation revolves around current affairs and recent developments. Be it Prelims or Mains exam, most of the questions are asked based on Current Affairs. So you should follow newspaper on a regular basis. Recommended newspapers for IAS exam are The Hindu & Indian Express.

3. Have a proper study plan

As we said earlier, UPSC takes year-long preparation, and for that, you should have an appropriate plan of study. Ensure that your study schedule is realistic and sustainable. Make sure your schedule includes time for leisure and allied activities. Usually, having three 8-hour cycles in the day (8 hours x 3 cycles =24 hours), with 8 hours each for study, leisure and other activities is a good rule of thumb to follow. Within the time allocated for study, divide your time according to your strengths and weaknesses in study topics.

4. Inculcate the Habit of Writing and Making Notes Regularly

You should form the habit of writing regularly to improve your writing skill in Mains exam. It will help you to identify your strength and weakness, apart from that you will also come to know how to structure and present your answers as time progresses.

Detailed Roadmap for your Mains Preparation



The best practice to prepare for IAS preparation is an integrated approach. Instead of approaching Prelims and Mains independently, prepare comprehensively considering Prelims portion as a subset of Mains syllabus.

Here is our roadmap for your preparation journey of IAS.

Phase 1: April to July

This is the beginning stage of IAS preparation, and many aspirants will have a feeling - 'How I am going to start such a tedious process?'

Don't think about the final stage at the beginning itself, instead, start your preparation with essential reading and lay a firm foundation.

Start your preparation with NCERT textbooks for GS Preparation and parallelly start your optional subject preparation. Since you are in the beginning stage of your preparation, don't strain too much and try to spend 5 to 6 hours of your quality time. Also, spend one to two hours for your extracurricular activities and leisure in this phase.

Target: Try to cover 40 to 50% of your Optional subject syllabus in this phase. For GS, try to read all subjects' NCERT textbooks.

Phase 2: August to November

During this phase, you should develop excellent command over all GS Subjects and Optional Subjects.

Once your NCERT textbooks are done with, refer to one standard material for GS Subjects, like Polity by Laxmikant, Economy by Ramesh Singh, History from Spectrum and Geography by GC Leong etc.

In this phase, try to spend 7 to 8 hours for your preparation and prepare your notes for revision side-by-side. Also, start practising previous year Prelims and Mains question papers to assess your preparation progress.

Target: Complete coverage of GS Syllabus and Optional subjects

Phase 3: December to March



So far, your preparation was comprehensive where you were preparing with an integrated approach for both Prelims and Mains. But in this phase, you should focus only on GS Prelims preparation.

In UPSC, Prelims is the most uncertain stage since the questions asked are straightforward but tricky. For Prelims, you need to have a clear understanding of all subjects and also you should have good command over relevant data. The best way to clear this stage is by proper revision and taking enough mock tests before the prelims exam.

Apart from the GS Preparation, spend 5 to 6 hours every week for CSAT (GS Paper 2) preparation. Though it is a qualifying paper, you shouldn't take it lightly.

Target: Consolidation of GS Subjects for Prelims exam

Phase 4: April and May

During this phase revise all the subjects from Prelims point of view. We advise you to revise all the subjects at least twice, and the maximum depends upon your reading potential. Apart from that, identify and rectify your mistakes.

In the last week before the exam, avoid reading too much. The most important thing in this phase is to avoid reading any new topic as it will affect your entire preparation.

Target: Revise all GS Subjects for Prelims exam

Phase 5: June to October

Most of the aspirants wait for their [Prelims result](#), and if they are shortlisted, then they resume their Mains preparation. Such practices are not good. Once Prelims is over, take a break for one week and start preparing for your Mains exam without any delay.

During this phase, you should consolidate your Mains preparation which you left during the second phase (August to December). Apart from that, join



Mains test series or practice two to four questions on a daily basis to score good marks in Mains.

Finally, in last 20-25 days before the mains exam revise all the topics once before the exam. Since mains is an analytically oriented exam, analyse every GS topic from various perspectives, so that you can reproduce it in the examination hall.

Target: Equip yourself for Mains exam with good answer writing ability

Phase 6: Post Mains Exam

Don't relax and enjoy once you have completed your Mains exam, because this phase is very critical - either you may get shortlisted for the Interview, or unfortunately may need to prepare for next Prelims exam. So, we would suggest preparing for both your interview and revising all GS subjects parallelly. That doesn't mean you have to prepare for 8 to 9 hours as you did in the earlier phases. Now you can reduce and focus on other aspects of interview preparation.

Finally, we want to conclude by saying that you should not lose confidence and be afraid of failure. Keep trying and persistently work hard on your UPSC journey. Having a clear IAS Mains preparation strategy is the first and most crucial step in making your dream come true.

Wishing you the very best for your future!

About the Author:



Anish Passi is the Director at [Neostencil](#), which is a unique platform for Test Preparation where you can access live classrooms of the best teachers in India, from the comfort of your home. He is an Engineer from [McMaster University, Canada](#) and an MBA from [IIM, Ahmedabad](#). He previously founded [Testcafe](#) and has extensive experience in the Education industry.



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Also Read:

- [How to plan & prepare for UPSC Civil Services Prelims examination](#)
- [Most Popular Optional Subjects for Civil Services Mains Exam – How to select your UPSC Optional subjects](#)



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