



Essay Writing for Civil Services Examination

Understanding Essay Writing

An essay is a short piece of writing that sheds light on any given topic. M.H. Abrams, the American literary critic, notes that the essay is *“Any short composition in prose that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, or persuade us to accept a thesis on any subject.”*

Broadly speaking, there are two types of essays - formal and informal. In the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE), we are concerned with the formal essay. The formal essay is relatively impersonal, the author writes it as an authority and such essays tend to be less emotional. Formal essays can also have factual elements in it, like quoted statistics from a government report etc. It is never in the form of a conversation, never uses first-person references and seldom gets intimate with the audience. In short, a formal essay has a certain degree of seriousness attached to it.

Essay writing for CSE

- For the CSE essay paper, two essays have to be written under 3 hours in the 1000-1200 word limit. Each essay carries 125 marks for a total of 250.
- The essay paper is divided into two sections - A and B, each carrying a choice of 4 essays each, and the aspirant has to choose only one essay from each section.
- The instructions in the syllabus are clear in what is being expected from the aspirant. Aspirants are 'expected to keep their thoughts closely to the subject and arrange their ideas accordingly. It further states that, credit will be given for effective and coherent expression'.
- The underlined keywords are important because after content, these are the exact parameters on which the essay will be evaluated.

Beginning Essay Writing

Practice makes perfect. For scoring good marks in the essay, one needs practice. But, before we get to the practising part, we should do some basic homework first. We would start by looking at what a well structured essay is, how it can be planned, what elements can be added to make the essay more scoring, and most importantly, how to do it all within the prescribed time limit.

Basic structure of an essay

The most common method of structuring an essay is breaking it up into paragraphs. In this technique, besides the introduction and the conclusion, there will be body-paragraphs. In these body-paragraphs, the aspirant will have to fit in all his content.

- **Body-paragraphs can broadly be supportive, critical or narrative.** Ideally, one can start any argument in an aptly phrased narrative paragraph which describes the topic in some detail and then move on to a supportive paragraph containing a few positive facts/ideas on the topic. Though critical paragraphs look best when they are placed last, there are no such rules, and for some topics it can be used as the opening paragraph for the topic.
- The most important part of the essay is perhaps the introduction. First impressions are very important, and a well thought out introduction will definitely make a positive impression on the examiner. We will discuss how to write a proper introduction later in this strategy.

- Similarly, the conclusion is where one can score additional marks if done properly. This will also be discussed later.

Keywords of the essay syllabus

- **'closely'**: Any deviation from the topic will be tolerated only up to a certain point. One must, therefore, as a rule stick as closely as possible to the topic at hand. Any example, quote, anecdote or reference must be on topic or related closely to it.
- **'arrange'**: The essay must be in an arranged form. The aspirant is supposed to plan ahead and form a structure of the essay before actually writing it down.
- **'orderly'**: The ideas or arguments put forward in the essay must follow an order. A haphazard essay that does not flow sequentially, must be avoided at all costs.
- **'concise'**: The essay and the matter discussed therein must be expressed as precisely possible. Clarity of thought and brevity of expression is what is looked for in the CSE essay.
- **'effective'**: The essay must be written in a language that makes a strong impression. Thus, one needs to be conveying a point with every sentence, every paragraph. Flowery language is best avoided.
- **'coherent'**: Coherence is required of all forms of writing, including answer writing, but in the CSE essay one must be extra careful to check that all individual sentences in the essay are making sense. Also, paragraphs as a whole must convey a clear and well thought out exposition on the theme of the essay.

Planning to write an essay

A good essay needs planning. There are three steps to it - defining or understanding what the essay is going to be about in very clear terms, brainstorming on the topic and thirdly, devising the outline of the essay.

Central idea of the thesis statement

- All CSE essays have a thesis statement. For example, in CSE 2016, the following essay was asked— *'Innovation is the key determinant of economic growth and social welfare'*. Here the central idea is 'innovation'. The aspirant is supposed to explore those dimensions of innovation that affect 'economic growth and social welfare'. In doing so, the aspirant should not veer from the central topic of innovation but if possible add a few related ideas which may supplement the overall central idea that not only socio-economic but also other areas like technology and culture are affected by forces of innovation.
- In another essay asked in CSE— *'Water disputes between States in federal India'* - the central idea is how the water disputes between various Indian states have played out and what are its various dimensions. Constitutional, legal, social and political dimensions, for ex, are a must for addressing this topic. In order to find out the various dimensions of any given topic we should perform a brainstorming exercise.

Brainstorming for essay writing

- Brainstorming for essay is a crucial step. Brainstorming helps you get all the ideas at one place for quick reference. There are no hard and fast rules, but typically one can begin with the given topic and immediately start listing the things that come to mind. One can ideally devote an entire page for this exercise.

Brainstorming guide

- The first requirement for brainstorming is focus. One should be able to focus single-mindedly on the job at hand, which in this case is jotting down as many points as possible regarding the essay topic.
- Boundaries must also be properly defined. If the topic does not absolutely require a particularly

complex point or if it does not require following a difficult train of thought, it should be avoided. Keeping the essay as simple as possible without sacrificing the most valid points is what we should be looking for.

- Then we must set a time limit for the brainstorming session. Ideally, for CSE that time limit works out to about 25 minutes per essay. Within that time limit one is supposed to come up with all the necessary points and plans for writing the essay.
- Another important point to be made here is that aspirants should have a fair understanding regarding the expectations of the CSE examiner from the essay. Every topic will have some basic ideas that the aspirants must necessarily try to explore or address. During brainstorming such a requirement can be searched for.
- In the brainstorming exercise one may also take help of diagrams, flow-charts, mind-maps etc., if needed. Sometimes doing this may clear things up to a great extent or even save precious time.
- Three things that one must exclusively do while brainstorming are — *identify causes and factors, define the various issues and make a list of associated ideas*. Doing this is key to success in the entire brainstorming exercise.

Adding elements to the essay

- Any good essay will definitely have a multitude of elements and dimensions to it. For CSE essay writing, there are certain basic rules that one can follow while searching for these elements and dimensions.
- The first of such rules would be to **follow and uphold Constitutional values at all times**. This is very crucial for essay writing in CSE, that the values enshrined in our Constitution reflect in whatever idea, problem or solution we discuss in the essay. At no point should one try and support an idea that is unconstitutional.
- One must also **be democratic while addressing issues**. The concepts of 'freedom and equality' should be the guiding principles while suggesting solutions and while criticising events or issues.
- Generally, one must also **avoid taking absolutist/non-compromising positions**. In fact, the best way to handle complex problems is to find the middle ground.
- One must also **try not to make sweeping generalisations** on any given issue. Instead, there should be hints of patience, justice and understanding in addressing or discussing any given topic.
- Lastly, there are two more things that an aspirant need to keep in mind while attempting the CSE essay. **(A) Do not question the topic itself**, which is to say, in other words, do not contradict yourself. Pick a position (ideally, the middle path) and stay true to it throughout the essay. **(B) Never use positively, things that are universally considered or used in a negative sense**, and vice-versa. *For ex*, one must not say that 'terrorism' under certain conditions is equivalent to a freedom struggle, even though quotes like '*one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter*' are quite common.

Elements in an essay

- The three basic elements — *social, political and economic* — form the bedrock of a good CSE essay.
- To these, one may add other dimensions like Constitutional, legal, technological, technical etc.
- Another important element is the *persona* Good personal experiences or anecdotes can no doubt be used to increase the effectiveness of the essay but these should stay within the accepted framework of ethical conduct.

PESTLE Analysis

- **Political - Economic - Sociological - Technological - Legal - Environmental Analysis.**
- Use PESTLE Analysis to figure out the various aspects, dimensions, factors etc of any given topic.

Outlining the essay

- Before writing the essay, it is best to outline it. To outline an essay means to figure out what to say in the introduction/conclusion, which idea comes where, or even what quote to use for the essay etc.
- Outlining the essay in rough helps us grasp the entirety of the essay before actually writing it. It helps us get the big picture, and also see what we could be missing.
- It is said that once we can figure out the conclusion to our essay, it becomes much easier to not only begin but finish it with confidence.

Writing An Essay

Sticking to the time limit

In the CSE, one has to write two essays in 3 hours which translates into 1 hour 30 minutes for each essay. Out of this, around 45 minutes to 1 hour will be required to write one essay. One can add another 10 minutes for the revision of one essay. This leaves us with roughly 30 minutes of time to prepare the essay in rough, and it includes time for carrying out the brainstorming and outlining exercises.

How to introduce the essay

- The goal of the introduction should be to arouse the reader's interest in the topic and to prepare the reader for what is to follow.
- A good introduction to the essay can be a brief explanation of the essay topic itself. It can be made further interesting by adding to it some personal experience, or some relevant anecdotes or quotes
- The introduction should not be confusing or lacking in clarity, rather it should be able to immediately clear up any doubts regarding the topic if there is any.

Writing in paragraphs

- In a stand-alone paragraph, the concluding sentence announces that the paragraph is finished, complete. In an essay, the concluding sentence of a paragraph is more likely to play the role of a transitional device, joining one paragraph to the next.
- Flow is very important in an essay. It is also connected to writing order. Writing orders are of two types
- Known-to-New is the order of writing where the author by choice goes from known (given) concepts to unknown ones. New material is gradually added to build on the unknown.
- Simple-to-Complex is the order of writing where the author first establishes a base of concepts that are easily understood and then develops over it increasingly complex ideas.
- One can use the FREQOES method to add matter to the various paragraphs.

How to conclude the essay

- The purpose of the conclusion is to bring a smooth end to the essay. It is also important to note that a strong finish is as important as a strong opening. Both are important for scoring better marks.

| FREQOES |
|------------------------|
| ▪ Facts and statistics |
| ▪ Reasons |
| ▪ Examples |
| ▪ Quotes |
| ▪ Opinions |
| ▪ Experiences |
| ▪ Senses |

- The essay can be concluded in the following ways - restating the main points in brief and with different wordings (summarizing), suggesting a way forward or a course of action, or adding an interesting personal comment or any relevant anecdote.
- Another way to conclude the essay is by returning to the discussion begun in the introduction. This

is called the 'cyclic return' and a lot of essays follow this simple method of concluding an essay.

- The conclusion should bear a positive outlook, it should see the silver lining in the clouds. It should also be as clear and concise as possible.

Revising the essay

- To revise, read the essay in its entirety, underlining (preferably with scale and pencil) important words or phrases. Correct spelling or grammatical mistakes if any. Make sure the pages look clean and tidy.
- One may add or omit a few words but it should not be overdone. It is also not advisable that entirely new ideas/sentences are inserted in the essay at the time of revision, unless such information is critical to the essay.

Some tips on essay writing

- One can go through the CSE previous year's essays and understand the concepts, dimensions and solutions required to solve those. Having a simple understanding of complex social problems is the secret to writing a good essay for the CSE.
- One can also keep handy a small collection of quotes or quotable phrases and citable anecdotes to be used while writing the essay. This keeps one prepared for writing any type of essay.

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