



Strategy: Answer Writing for CSE MAINS

In this strategy we will tackle one of the most important challenges faced by CSE aspirants i.e. how to write a good answer in the Mains examination.

It is said that answer writing is an art. The good news is that any form of art can be learnt over a period of time. All it takes is will and effort, regular practice and some guidance. We are here to provide you help with the guidance part and we hope you successfully integrate the tips we are going to provide in your preparation.

This answer writing guide has been divided into three sections – **Basic, Intermediate and Advanced**. As the names for the section headings suggest, one should proceed step by step, understanding each section completely before proceeding to the next. Ultimately you should be able to use the tips from all sections in your answer writing in a holistic manner.

The Basics

The Basics section of answer writing tackles the bare minimum requirements needed for *effective answer writing*. The answer you are going to write has to be effective in order to earn an advantage over the competition. To write an effective answer there are certain basic tricks that you need to know and these are discussed below.

Do's and Don'ts

- **Do understand the question fully and correctly before contemplating an answer for it.** Questions in the Mains examination come with certain **directives** like 'discuss/ critically discuss' etc and you should be able to grasp clearly what that particular directive is asking you to do. You should consult the accompanying table on various directives and their meanings for a proper appreciation of what the examiner is expecting from you in the answer. This is also the most basic and yet a very important skill that you should have for effective answer writing.
- **Do develop a basic mental framework of the answer before actually committing anything to paper.** This is a very crucial skill that you need to develop on a war footing. It should be that the moment you have read and understood a given question, you immediately start forming the structure for the answer in your mind. With practice, it becomes easier and easier to do this and if required, jot down (with a pencil) whatever you remember as and when you remember it. The last point is important because sometimes we tend to forget or we simply are unable to recall from memory at the very last minute (or while writing) which can drastically affect the quality of our answer.
- **Don't wait for the answer to come to you, instead force it out.** It is important that you learn how to force an answer out of you. This is not something very hard to achieve. Think of it in this way. You are a serious aspirant and you have prepared considerably for the Mains examination and as a result you are in the possession of a considerable amount of information, facts, ideas etc. If time were not an issue you could contemplate generously before each and every sentence you write but within a given time limit you do not have such luxuries of time. **For example**, suppose you can recall only two points (fully) for an answer and you think you need at least four points for a

complete answer. In such a case you should not waste time trying to recall all the points before attempting to answer and instead force yourself to write the answer with whatever information you've got. That way, without wasting time you give your best shot to the question.

- **Don't overstretch your imagination.** UPSC requires that you have a good understanding of a given issue and that the same should be readily understandable when expressed. Thus, one should not slip into thoughts, ideas or arguments that are not absolutely necessary for writing a particular answer. Overbrooding and philosophizing may lead to confusion and as such it should be left out of Mains answer writing. Moreover, this can save you time and effort which can be used in answering other questions efficiently.

How to structure your answer

- **Step 1: Write a fitting introduction to your answer.** Ideally, the introduction should not only introduce the topic/issue/idea to the examiner but also (very) briefly narrate the central premise of the answer. If the question has two or more parts, then all parts must be introduced briefly. The introduction should not be lengthier than 20% of the word limit at any cost, and its ideal length is about 10% of the word limit. For 200 words, 20-40 words is what you should be looking at for the introduction (and the conclusion too).
- **Step 2: Divide the main body of the answer into paragraphs or bullets as required.** Each paragraph or bullet should have one point only (unless it is very necessary to do otherwise) and the most important points or the points that you have recalled fully should go first. When you are asked to discuss both positive and negative aspects of an issue, you can either list all the positives in one paragraph and then list the negatives or you can go for a positive-negative combination in each paragraph. Do the latter only when there are very less points in the answer (because 3 paragraphs for 200 words looks best) and for all other purposes go with the former.
- **Step 3: Wrap up your answer with a well balanced conclusion.** You can balance your conclusion with a healthy positive opinion. The opinion does not necessarily have to be original but ideally (and mostly) has to be a positive one. Never end on a negative note or tone, you must be able to see the silver lining in the clouds. Also, never end the conclusion by posing another question. If you want to pose a question as part of your answer, do so in the main body of the answer only. Also, avoid ending your answer in the rhetoric and instead try to put forward a solution or a way-forward. This shows a positive bent of mind and a willingness to find solutions - things that any CSE aspirant should possess.

How to introduce and conclude your answer

- **Introduction:** For introducing your answer choose first the crux of the problem/issue/idea that the question is inquiring about. Then add to it the one line version of the answer that you are planning to write. Finally, if space permits write the 'verdict/sentiment/judgement' in another line. So, basically the introduction is 3 sentences that lets the examiner know beforehand that you know the answer and that you are not going to beat around the bush looking for the right answer.
- **Conclusion:** To conclude your answer, begin with a simple sentence that brings together all the main elements/points/arguments of the answer. Follow it up with the above-mentioned positive opinion. The last sentence should be a general statement reiterating the 'verdict/sentiment/judgement' mentioned in the introduction.
- **An example of introduction and conclusion:** For the question '*What is meant by Employment 4.0? Discuss the benefits and challenges posed to Indian economy by Employment 4.0.*' we can introduce thus - 'Employment 4.0. refers to an on-demand, digitally driven labour market characterised by independent workers in temporary positions for short-term engagements or contracts like freelancing for a magazine, driving cabs through Uber etc. It is also referred to as Gig Economy. According to a recent report, India is the largest supplier of online labour, hosting 24% of such workers globally.' (59 words). For **conclusion** we can write - 'There is a large gap between the way gig economy is growing and the adoption of regulations, as the law associated with it is incomplete and antiquated in many respects. But given the huge potential of gig economy going forward, there is a case for the state to deftly balance the interests of business exigencies and social welfare.' (58 words).

Whether to write in bullets or in paragraphs

- **An opinion-based answer should ideally be written in paragraphs.** Such answers are generally essay type answers and could consist of an Introductory paragraph, Main body of the answer in paragraphs, and the Concluding paragraph. **A fact-based answer can be written in both paragraphs and in bullets or in a combination of both.** A fact-based answer in bullets would consist of the Introductory paragraph, Main body of the answer in bullets, and the Concluding paragraph. Since, most questions asked in the CSE would invariably be a mix of both facts and opinions, it is best that you develop a method that suits you naturally. For example, have a look at this question from CSE 2016 – ‘**Discuss the role of land reforms in agricultural development. Identify the factors that were responsible for the success of land reforms in India.**’ – and then take a look at the suggestions given below.
- **Case 1: The opinion-based question** – ‘*Discuss the role of land reforms in agricultural development*’ – this part of the question is opinion-based and as such could be attempted in paragraphs.
- **Case 2: The fact-based question** – *Identify the factors that were responsible for the success of land reforms in India*’ – this part of the question has factual elements to it and as such can be presented in either paragraphs or bullets. Choosing the latter here could surely save time if not fetch extra marks.

The Intermediate

The Intermediate section will handle the second set of challenges that aspirants face in the Mains examination. To score well and above the competition it is important that you understand and follow the guide given below.

Sticking to the word limit

The ABC of Answer Writing

- Accuracy
- Brevity
- Clarity

- The **General Studies (GS)** papers, with the exception of GS paper IV which is the Ethics paper, has a limit of 200 words per question. This is a justified word limit given the time that you are given to answer a question. The trick here is to write sentences that are short. Avoid compound sentences even though you may feel that by joining two sentences with an ‘and’ you have saved time and words. Instead use a semicolon to separate a sentence into clauses with each clause addressing a related but different idea or argument. You can also break into bullets if the question is asking you to list down factors, causes etc.
- **GS paper IV (Ethics)** has 150, 250 and 300 as word limits. 99% of the time the questions are opinion-based so, it is best to write the answers in paragraphs. Follow the tips mentioned in the above point and add two more tricks to it. **First**, for open-ended questions like ‘*Explain how ethics contributes to social and human well-being* (CSE 2016)’ that have to be answered in 150 words, spare 30 seconds to figure out a framework for the answer. Once you have a vague idea that this is what your answer is going to be, sticking to the word limit becomes much easier. **Second**, when answering the case study questions avoid bringing unnecessary justifications to your ideas and arguments (instead, you can use a paradigm to justify an answer, for example, the paradigms of Rights-based approach, Justice based or Utilitarian approach etc.). State your ideas in a plain and simple manner, cite an example or two (or quotes) when necessary and make sure that you do not repeat the same thing in one or more paragraphs.
- Most **Optional subject** papers carry the 150 word per question limit for the **short-note** section (the optional History is a notable exception). Generally, a well prepared aspirant should be able to write more than 150 words on a given topic. Therefore, the trick here is to learn how to compress a (say) 500 word answer to a 150 word short-note. In order to compress something get to the gist of it first. The root idea/information should not be ignored at any cost. Ignore only the peripheral, unnecessary, redundant or repeated things. You can also use the ‘comma’ creatively as illustrated by this example – ‘*the Battle of Buxar, 1764, was fought and won by the British, led by Hector Munro, who faced the combined armies of Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Bengal; the Nawab of Awadh;*

and the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam' (38 words). In this example, we ignored the exact date of the battle (unnecessary), the name of Awadh's Nawab (peripheral), the description or location of Buxar (unnecessary) etc.

- The rest of the questions in the **Optional subject** paper do not come with a word limit. The word count in this case can vary from 150 to 350 words depending on factors like time, marks, writing speed and how much you can recall at a particular moment. Though, the lack of a predetermined word limit might look encouraging, we would advise against filling up the entire provided space with words just for the sake of it. But, do write your answer carefully and comfortably and do so without any compulsion on adhering to word or space limits. The various tricks mentioned here will definitely help you achieve that.

Word Count	Marks
150 words	10 marker
200-225 words	15 marker
300 words	20 marker
350 words	25 marker
Approx. word count; may vary from question to question.	

- In the **Essay paper** you have to write two essays in the 1000-1200 word limit. The booklet provided for you to write your answer is very very generous so, do not worry over space or large handwriting. Writing a very good essay, within the stipulated time and word limit, is very much possible, provided that you follow some of the basic rules. These basic rules are - **brainstorming, outlining, idea/argument placement and structuring**. There are also well established types of essays like the narrative, descriptive, expository and the persuasive essays that you need to know. Generally, the more prepared you are in the GS papers the more content you will have for your essay. Also, do not choose a topic for the essay only because it looks exotic or impressive. Instead, choose a topic that is most comfortable to you, and on which you can recall many interesting things, and can develop the most vivid dimensions. Ultimately, a good essay on an average topic is likely to fetch more marks than a bad essay on an exotic topic.

Time management in the exam hall

- To manage time while attempting the Mains examination mean that you know how to allocate the right amount of time to each question so, that you can complete all the questions within 3 hours. The **three rules of thumb** for time management in this case are **i)** go with the flow while writing and thinking; learn to trust yourself; do not indulge in self-doubt like being unable to decide whether to write a particular thing or not **ii)** write in language that comes naturally to you; do not use forced made-up writing styles, and **iii)** do not get stuck with one question - temporarily leave the question that you are unable to write at a particular moment and move on to the next question; come back to the difficult question as and when you get the opportunity to do so. With practice you should be able to master the time management aspects of the Mains examination.
- Always stick to the word limit; develop a good writing speed; try to consume as less personal time as possible - in the exam hall, drinking water, going to the bathroom, changing pens, imagining how others are faring etc qualify as personal time; and lastly, do not try to reach 'perfection' with your answers - the Mains examination is not the right platform for such things - instead try to consistently maintain above average quality in all your answers. Consistency matters more than writing one excellent answer and then following it up with a bad answer.

Choosing when to attempt a question

- One good question for the Mains examination is, **should we attempt the questions we are confident on, first?** We would like to answer this question in the positive. Always try to answer this type of questions first, as these will come from you fresh and spirited. Also, due to higher energy levels and lower stress levels during the initial period of the exam, such answers can turn out to be dynamic in content, well favoured in style, and yet completed in less time.
- You should also, always revise your answers. The question is when should you do it – **should you revise as you go or should you revise after completing the entire paper?** Revising the answer immediately after you've completed it, is untenable, given the time factor of the exam. Instead, we recommend that you 'revisit' your answer immediately after its completion and check for spelling mistakes or other errors. Ideally, you should also underline important points only when you are 'revisiting' your answer and not while writing it. Underlining important points after you have seen the complete answer, helps greatly in the correct identification of important points. If, after you've completed all your answers, there is time remaining, you should revise or at least check for errors. You should also always be relaxed and extra careful while carrying out any revision work so as to avoid the tendency to make any unnecessary changes or additions.

Whether to leave or attempt unfamiliar questions

- Leave unfamiliar questions when you know you can use the time thus saved, elsewhere, like in answering a different question properly or in revising. Sometimes, it is not prudent to attempt unfamiliar questions despite having time because it may send a negative impression to the examiner and may also lower your self-confidence for the rest of the question paper.
- Attempt unfamiliar questions only if it crosses a certain minimum threshold for information (information that is available with you on the topic and at that given time). Suppose, if you are able to recall 20-30% or 1-2 points on any topic, only then you may attempt an answer. By many standards, this threshold is very low for answer writing but since this is a competitive exam one must do everything it takes to score marks. The only exception to this should be that it must not work against your getting a good score. For example, beating around the bush, hoping to hit the mark by writing things that you 'think' may be relevant to the answer, can never be recommended. Because doing so, may affect you negatively. Thus, you should be very careful before attempting to answer a question that you are unfamiliar with.

The Advanced

How to practice answer writing

- While practising answer writing, keep in mind that it involves three things primarily. These are the abilities to **recall, process and write down thoughts** in a streamlined and time-bound manner. To do this you need to cultivate a habit of being able to process information quickly and thoroughly. **As such, begin with open-book answer writing - you will have the source/reading material in front of you and you will refer to these while answering a question.** You should continue with open-book answer writing till you get comfortable and reasonably quick at it. Then move on to answer writing from memory - read up a topic first and then answer the questions to it. Doing this would also improve your writing speed because writing from memory is faster than writing from an open book. Also don't forget that answer writing is an art, the more you write the better you get.
- To practice answer writing begin with the CSE previous year's papers which are a great source for quality questions. Now, pick a question on a topic that you may have recently prepared, and simply write the answer to it. Read the answer that you have written multiple times, analyse it and ask yourself whether you have been able to do justice to the question. If yes, then how can you better it and if no, then what have you missed. Always remember that answer writing helps us find gaps in our preparation. At the same time it also helps us get a glimpse into the mind of the examiner. Thus, you should practice answer writing because it will help you not only in knowing what is left in the topic for you to prepare but also what the examiner is looking for in any given topic.

Whether to enrol in a test series

- Ideally, if it is possible you should enrol for a test-series. A good test series can not only guide you

but it can also help you maintain a time-table. Besides, it will tell you where you have fared well and where work needs to be done. In any case, having a regular report card on your answer writing is always helpful.

- If you are pressed for time, or if for some reason it is not possible for you to join a good test series, you should try and do the following.
- **First**, if you are in a coaching or have a mentor then you should periodically get your answers checked by them. Then, you can also go for **peer review** where aspirants check each other's answers.
- **Lastly**, you can also ask your friends and family (if they are qualified) to review your answers. The bottomline is that you should not keep writing answers solely but get feedback as well.
- Feedback is a very important part of the learning process and good feedback can help you with course correction in your preparation, and also help you in the evaluation of progress in your answer writing practice.

How to develop a lucid answer writing style

- To develop a lucid answer writing style, first and foremost discard the use of complex language. **Use words that have a chance of being universally understood**, for example, use allocate instead of bestow. **Write simple and easy to understand sentences**, for example, read the following sentence from the Economic Times - 'India's agricultural growth will accelerate to 4.1% in the current fiscal from a sluggish 1.2% in drought-hit 2015-16, the Economic Survey said while raising concerns that inadequate supply may lead to a spurt in prices of milk, sugar, potato and onion as happened in the case of pulses last year'. This sentence can be converted to multiple sentences, like 'India's agricultural growth will accelerate to 4.1% this year from last year's 1.2%. Yet, the Economic Survey is concerned that if the supply of milk, sugar, potato and onion does not increase it may lead to a price rise. Last year, the price of pulses had spiked due to a drought.'
- An advanced strategy for successful answer writing would also be to **develop templates for answers that you can recall at a short notice**.
- For example, you can have a universal answer template consisting of an introduction, body/bullets and a conclusion, or you can have a particular template for answering science-based questions and another for socio-economic ones, etc, or you can have both. It would help tremendously if you can recognise in the exam hall that a given question fits one of your templates (perfectly, or with slight modifications) and all that you need to do now is start writing your answer. In order to develop this template you will need to understand what **interrogative directives** are and how to approach them. In the final part of this month's strategy we have compiled a comprehensive list of frequently used interrogative directives that you can use to develop and retain your own answer templates. We hope that you will find it useful and valuable.

What does a question mean (directives) and how to approach different types of questions:

Directive	Example	Meaning	Approach
Comment	South China Sea has assumed great geopolitical significance in the present context. Comment. (CSE 2016, GS I)	▪ Choose your position on the topic/issue. ▪ Provide arguments with facts/examples in favour of your opinion. ▪ To critically comment, mention both sides of the argument with examples	▪ Introduce the topic ▪ In the main body/bullets provide down the argument and the facts. ▪ End with conclusion ▪ To critically comment, write positive argument first, followed by negative argument
Examine	Examine the development of Airports in India through joints ventures under Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model. What are the challenges faced by the	▪ Probe deeper into the given topic. ▪ Support your answer with details like causes, implications and the	▪ Begin with a brief discussion of the various issues in the topic. ▪ Provide details and conclude in the

	authorities in this regard? (CSE 2017,GS III)	way forward.	same paragraph possible.
Critically examine	India has achieved remarkable successes in unmanned space missions including the Chandrayaan and Mars Orbiter Mission, but has not ventured into manned space missions. What are the main obstacles to launching a manned space mission, both in terms of technology and logistics? Examine critically. (CSE 2017,GS III)	- Go into details along with causes and reasons, strengths and weaknesses - Mention the consequences, implications and action taken for the issue at hand.	- Similar to above write the strengths and weaknesses in separate paragraphs. - Consequences should be in a separate paragraph and conclude without taking
Discuss	Discuss the role of women in the freedom struggle especially during the Gandhian phase. (CSE 2016, GS I)	- Cover broadly, mentioning strengths/weaknesses and positives/negatives. - Mention causes/consequences as well.	- After introduction into the positive/negative aspects, follow causes/consequences. - In addition, provide solutions, suggestions, examples etc and conclude with a holistic view of topic.
Discuss critically	To what extent can Germany be held responsible for causing the two World Wars? Discuss critically. (CSE 2015, GS I)	Same as above, only be very careful with the reasoning applied to arrive at a conclusion.	Same as above
Evaluate	Evaluate the economic and strategic dimensions of India's Look East Policy in the context of the post Cold War international scenario. (CSE 2016, GS II)	- Assess both sides of the statement/topic. - Mention the worthiness or usefulness of the statement. - Mention briefly, positive and negative aspects of the statement/topic	Introduce the statement/ topic then break into paragraphs of positive/ negative aspects and end with a concluding remark on why you think it is worthy or unworthy.
Critically evaluate	Mesolithic rock cut architecture of India not only reflects the cultural life of the times but also a fine aesthetic sense comparable to modern painting. Critically evaluate this comment. (CSE 2015, GS I)	In addition to the above, bring out the value of the topic.	Same as above you can lean towards either the positive aspects or the negative, depending on the topic/subject.
Analyse	The North - East region of India has been infested with insurgency for a very long time. Analyse the major reasons for the survival of armed insurgency in this region.(CSE 2017,GS III)	- Break the main idea into its constituent parts. - Examine each part separately.	- After introduction move to examine each broken down idea one by one. - Conclude by addressing the central idea of

Explain	What is a quasi-judicial body? Explain with the help of concrete examples. (CSE 2016, GS II)	▪ Give clear reasons to show what/how/why something is happening or has happened.	▪ Introduction-main body-conclusion format should be used.	
Elucidate	The Self Help Group (SHG) Bank Linkage Program (SBLP), which is India's own innovation, has proved to be one of the most effective poverty alleviation and women empowerment programme. Elucidate. (CSE 2015, GS II)	▪ To elucidate is to make something clear that was formerly confusing. ▪ To bring clarity, cite evidences, examples, facts etc.	▪ Introduction-main body-conclusion format should be used.	
Substantiate	"The growth of cities as I.T. hubs has opened up new avenues of employment, but has also created new problems." Substantiate this statement with examples.(CSE 2017,GS I)	▪ Give evidence in support of what is being said i.e cite reports, facts, events etc.	▪ Introduction-main body-conclusion format should be used.	
Note	Write a note on India's green energy corridor to alleviate the problem of conventional energy. (CSE 2013, GS III)	▪ Summarize what you know i.e the what/when/how/why of the given topic.	▪ Introduction-main body-conclusion format should be used.	
Other descriptives like backgrounder (brief information on the history behind or background information), highlight (draw special attention to something), describe (detailed account of something), suggest measures, given an account of, etc are also used in the CSE Mains questions. There are no universal way to answer these so, the introduction-main body-conclusion format could be used with great proficiency.				