

This is the third article in a series of five written as resource for lecturers and candidates for Professional 2 exams. The series has as its goal the improvement of exam pass rates at the Professional 2 stage. Each of the articles in this series can be used individually but are most beneficial if used collectively. Candidates and lecturers are advised to review all the articles to obtain maximum benefit. While there is some overlap between the articles every attempt has been made to minimise this overlap while striving to achieve a consistency of terminology and key requirements throughout.

Reading the Rubrics for Exam Success – How to Maximise your Exam Performance

By William Meaney

The purpose of this article is to outline the skill of reading the exam requirement to help you to maximise the marks gained in each section of a paper and by so doing maximise your chances of exam success.

As an experienced marker of candidates' examination scripts for professional examinations candidates it is evident that questions are attempted in three ways.

Candidates attempt to answer the question they:

- Thought the examiner had asked. This is because they did not read and / or properly understand the rubric (the "Requirement" at the end of the case or scenario). Consequentially, they did not address the verb(s) used by the examiner properly – a good example of this is where some candidates when asked to 'evaluate' only include in their answer with positive factors (or negative factors) but not both.
- Wished they had been asked. This is because it contained a key word or phrase that perhaps featured in a revision question that, as part of their examination preparation, they had revised. You might recall overhearing in a post exam conversation between candidates one saying *"I thought what was being asked there was.....and so that is what I about."*
- Were actually asked. Of course this is the only answer that will gain marks. Even when you attempt to address the question actually set by the examiner you only maximise the marks if you have sufficient:
 - Breadth in your answer – i.e. identify and include enough points to address what is asked
 - Depth in the answer- i.e. give a sufficiently robust answer to convince the examiner to give you the marks.

A key skill for exam success is the ability to read the rubric in the exam in such a manner as to maximise your chances of doing **exactly** what the examiner wants you to do in the time available. Too many candidates fall at this first hurdle.

Furthermore, having read the rubric and planned your answer you then need to write in a manner to maximise the marks you score. These are complementary skills and with a little practise you can improve your exam score and manage your time better. Within each examination paper, questions or components of questions of varying degrees of difficulty will be set.

The best way to illustrate this is to look at some sample questions from past papers. To save you having to look up the paper the text of Q2 from the Advanced Corporate Reporting paper April 2011, the first example, is reproduced below.

The question read as follows;

Q2. The Chief Executive of Pryax, Terry Glass, is aware that the use of glass in the food and beverage sector is increasingly being questioned by consumers. The balance of opinion up to recent times was that 'glass is good' as it is recyclable and environmentally friendly. However, the plastics industry is now countering with the argument that other factors such as the lower transportation and storage costs associated with plastic containers significantly reduces the total cost to society of the use of plastics. Terry is becoming increasingly concerned about how this might be perceived by environmentally concerned customers.

REQUIREMENT:

Prepare a memorandum addressed to Terry Glass, Chief Executive which:

**(a) Explains what is meant by Corporate Social Responsibility.
(5 marks)**

(b) Outlines its relevance to the Pryax group and any issues the Pryax group should consider. (10 marks)

Careful reading of the rubric (requirement) is essential if you are to maximise the marks which can be gained from this question. As a general approach the following steps are recommended, irrespective of the question or the subject matter

- Read the requirement to determine the format in which the examiner wants the answer to appear
- Read the verbs to determine the level of response required. Are the verbs lower level verbs such as describe, list, define, etc. or higher level verbs such as analyse, evaluate, critically evaluate, assess, discuss etc.
- Note the available marks and determine the time that you can allocate to answer the question stated. As a general rule you will have about 3 hours writing time in the exam so to gain one mark you have a maximum of 1.8 minutes per mark (180 mins / 100 marks = 1.8 mins per mark)
- Determine the number of points that you will have to include in your answer to earn the marks available, or to least earn half the marks available for each section.
- Finally, visualise what your answer should look like to the examiner to give the examiner the opportunity to award you marks after every significant point that you will make.

By implementing these steps I have devised the following plan to maximise the marks. *Please note that my answer may differ from the examiner's suggested solution. At the Professional 2 Stage there may be several valid and correct solutions to many of the questions and problems posed.*

REQUIREMENT:

Prepare a memorandum (*format required specified*) addressed to Terry Glass, Chief Executive which:

Therefore you need to produce a **Memorandum** – *To, From, Regarding, Date* – [memorandum indicates, brevity, short informative sentences, short paragraphs, bullets etc.] and your answer should have as its heading

- **Memorandum**
- **To:** Mr. Terry Glass
- **From; Ms** Fictitious Name (hopefully soon to be a CPA!)
- **Regarding;** Corporate socially responsibility and its impact on the Pyrax Group
- **Date;** Date of exam.

Do this and you will get 1 mark. If reports, memos etc are required four times, you must ensure that you earn all the marks available for using the correct formats. This could be the difference between 46%, a clear fail, and 50% which is a pass. Use short informative paragraphs and well-structured professional sentences and you will start earning relatively easy marks.

The first requirement uses the verb 'Explain' and only requests one action – i.e. the memorandum - Explains what is meant by Corporate Social Responsibility.

(a) Explains what is meant by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Reading a little more and doing some very rudimentary planning and you could determine your answer should have the following to fully satisfy the examiner's requirements.

- **A definition of CSR**
- **Give an example(s) of CSR**
- **Give reasons why firms engage in CSR activity**
- **Give examples of the format of engagement – pollution reduction, donations to local charities, support of local sport or social activities etc.**
- **Appropriate close/conclusion. (5 marks) (Maximum Allocated Time 9 mins)**

It is worth pausing here to consider how the examiner might allocate marks to this requirement. It is likely the format will be as follows.

- **Memorandum format (1 mark)**
 - **Definition of CSR (1 mark)**
 - **Example of CSR (1 mark)**
 - **Reasons why firms engage in CSR (1 mark)**
 - **Format of engagement in CSR activities (1 mark)**
 - **Suitable close (1 mark)**
- To a maximum score of 5 marks (Maximum Allocated Time 9 mins)**

The skill of writing an exam style answer, focused on earning marks. The answer, to this requirement is illustrated in the final article in this series entitled '[The Presentation Skills Necessary to Achieve a First- Time Pass](#)'. **Note;** The solution provided is **not** the examiner's solution but suffices to answer the question and illustrate how to present an answer to provide opportunity to the examiner to allocate marks when material is presented in appropriate format.

Now look a little closer at requirement (b).

The **verb** is 'outlines' and requires **relevance** to 'Pryax'. Therefore you must **apply** the concept of CSR to Pryax, do anything else and you will not fully satisfy the examiner's requirement.

Also the word '**and**' appears in the requirement – this implies there are two parts to the requirement.

(b) Outlines its relevance to the Pryax group and any issues the Pryax group should consider. (10 marks) (Maximum Allocated Time 18 mins)

So after a little review and planning you should have (and it is not necessary to write it all out as I have done here) the following;

Outlines its relevance to the Pryax group

- *Note verb and context – Outline its relevance to Pryax => must relate to Pryax specifically*
- **Relevance to Pryax**
 - *Ensure Pryax seen as socially responsible/ethical/good corporate citizen and not out of line as plastics industry may suggest.*
 - *Become more aware of issues and impact of Pryax on environment.
Could review current operations to determine any areas which could be improved i.e. waste reduction, use lighter glass, recycle a greater % , streamline distribution to minimise environmental impact, possibly set up recycling facilities to make it easier for consumers to recycle etc.*
- **Any issues which the Pryax group should consider**
 - *Pryax may need to put plans in place to avoid adverse publicity.*
 - *Pryax may need to assess cost/benefit of actions to be taken.*
 - *Pryax should try to create awareness across the group to engage staff in appropriate action.*
 - *Pryax may reassess the value chain to minimise its negative impacts on the environment.*
 - *Build counter argument to plastics such as impact on landfill, cost of incineration etc.*

Likely marks 5 points x 2 marks each. This implies make a minimum of 5 points and possibly one extra for insurance! – So even if the examiner had 10 points x 1 mark (which is unlikely) you would score a minimum of six marks – a solid pass.

A reasonable assumption here is that there would be 2 marks for each point. It is also likely the examiner will allow 1 mark for identification of the point (**i.e. breadth in the answer**) and a further mark for an appropriate explanation adding (**depth**) to the point made by way of example.

The example selected was a short question and hopefully it illustrates to you that the key to success is planning **before** you start to write. By meeting the examiner's expectations you improve your chances of achieving a very good pass mark. It is also important to see from this illustration the importance of timing and having sufficient discipline to quit each section

after reaching the allocated time. Poor time management is a common cause of exam failure. Your chance of success drop dramatically if you spend too much time on answering a section of a question about which you know a lot but use too much time and as a consequence do not get the exam completed. What are your chances of achieving 50% if you have only completed, say, 85% of the paper? It is imperative that having read the rubric, you understood it and properly planned your answer. You must then have the discipline to stick rigidly to the time that you allocated for completion and presentation of your answer. It is much more productive to move on even if you have not included all you want as the examiner will know from points which are well made that you understand the concepts that are being tested. It is also easier to gain marks 'early' in the subsequent requirement than trying to get the last few marks from a requirement you know very well.

A more challenging rubric.

This time the paper considered for illustration is the **Strategy and Leadership paper April 2010**. The requirement of the case was as follows:

(a) Analyse the company's current position, drawing on the present economic climate in Ireland and applying relevant theories and models.

(b) Recommend action for the future direction of the company, based on your analysis at a) above, supported by your reasons for believing that these recommendations will be effective stating any caveats you consider appropriate.

(50 Marks)

A rubric such as this requires the same broad approach as worked through above but requires more skill to plan as greater scope is given to the candidate. Also it requires the higher skill of judgement (which theories and models to use), how to use them, how much detail to include and finally how to write the answer so that it enables the answer to award you sufficient marks to pass.

We will now look at each part of the rubric in turn.

(a) Analyse the company's current position, drawing on the present economic climate in Ireland and applying relevant theories and models.

Reading the rubric carefully the following can be determined from requirement;

- The examiner requires analysis. As there is quantitative and qualitative data in the scenario it is reasonable to assume the examiner would like some use of both.
- "Drawing on the current economic climate" indicates the examiner wants you to bring knowledge external to the case to bear on your analysis. This could include from simple observation that due to the recession gym membership is a luxury / discretionary spend and therefore under threat as families and members strive to reduce spending. Recent knowledge of collapse of some well-known gym franchises which had access to more resources and yet succumbed to more challenging

economic conditions would be beneficial but not essential. There is sufficient material within this case to allow you to complete the requirement. From 2011 candidates will draw upon the external analysis and research they undertake prior to the examination,

- Applying relevant theories and models. This requires judgement as to which models to use, how many, to what depth and how to apply them in a practical way. Appropriate models here may be Porters 5 forces, PESTEL, SWOT and others may be considered (relevance to solving the problem is a key requirement in model selection.) What is really important is that the models are '**APPLIED**' rather than '**described**'.
- Finally, it is reasonable to assume that 25 of the 50 marks available are awarded for analysis in the absence of a specific mark on this requirement. By breaking the rubric into its component parts and answering each in turn will generate more marks than one long tract of an answer that tries to do everything at once.

Likely marks may be (though not definitive);

- Analysis of internal resources (5 marks)
- Analysis of PEST environment (5 marks)
- SWOT (with PEST incorporated) (5 marks)
- Bringing in current economic climate to the answer (5 marks)
- Good presentation of above in appropriate depth (5 marks) to a maximum of 25 marks.

Passing the exam is highly unlikely if, for example, 8 pages are presented on a PEST analysis and other tools are ignored. It is better that 8 pages spread across the models cited above.

To see what the examiner actually did by consulting the past exam answer is a valuable learning opportunity. What you did not see as part of the analysis may indicate gaps in your technical knowledge and as such indicate where further study is required. It is worth noting that there is not a single ideal solution, so even if your answer was different it may still be sufficient to achieve a pass. However, a review of a few past papers may indicate a trend in your answers or the examiner's. In either case this is a valuable learning experience in which you will gain insights that reading textbooks simply do not provide.

Looking at the second part of the requirement

(b) Recommend action for the future direction of the company, based on your analysis at a) above, supported by your reasons for believing that these recommendations will be effective stating any caveats you consider appropriate.

Careful reading of the rubric indicates the following;

- Recommendations are required. You should use active language such as the firm must, should, need to take a specific course of action. The course of action may become evident following the **Application** of a model such as Ansoff's matrix or any other that will assist in identifying appropriate choices to recommend.
- Your answer must be linked to the analysis which you carried out in part a).

- Your answer must be supported by the reasons you believing that your recommendation will be effective. These could be factors such as retaining existing customers, encouraging new 'walk in users', encouraging use of facilities off-peak, increase revenue, reduce costs, ensure growth, survival as you see appropriate. There is no absolutely correct answer but you must support your reasons appropriately so as to convince the examiner to award you sufficient marks.
- State any caveats. These are issues to be aware of such as events or activities which may impact negatively on the predicted outcomes. For example if you suggested a reduced rate for schools to increase usage in off-peak times it may upset customers who use the facility off-peak hours. They may respond negatively to having lots of children in their way three times a week resulting in cancelled memberships and loss of revenue from them. It is having the insight to foresee and communicate the difficulties which the client may encounter that is the important point.
- It is reasonable to assume that this requirement is 25 marks (maximum allocated time 45 minutes). Presenting the examiner with 10 pages of analysis and 2 pages of recommendations would not be an appropriately balanced answer. As in the previous example, breaking the requirements into smaller, more manageable, elements is likely to provide structure to the answer and hence gain more marks.
- Finally it is also reasonable to assume that the appropriate format to present your answer in would be a report because you are assuming the role of a professional, charging appropriate fees and reporting to the owner, Mr Ryan Bloom, the owner of *'The Solstice Health and Fitness Club'*.

The likely marks are 5 for each of the above requirements at a minimum. Your answer including recommendations must be appropriate to the market and resources of *Solstice Health and Fitness*, professionally presented and understandable to the client. It is certain that by breaking the requirement down into smaller elements makes writing the answer easier than treating the (b) requirement as 25 marks for a single tract of material presented in continuous prose.

The skill of balancing the use of analysis and recommendations, appropriate use of theories and models, giving appropriate recommendations and caveats in appropriate format in the time available requires practise of previous cases. A comment by students that there is not much use practising on cases previously examined as those cases will never come up again shows a lack of insight of the case method. This makes the challenge in the exam hall even more difficult. Practising past cases is an excellent way of understanding how tools / models / frameworks and theories can be applied to different scenarios. The more candidates practise the more likely their success level when faced with a new scenario.

Conclusion.

The skill of carefully reading and understanding the rubric in the exam is essential to your exam success. You must be able to identify and use the pointers given by the examiner to:

- determine the appropriate format when answering
- understand of the verbs used as a guide as to how to approach the exam requirement
- determine the number of points required
- allocate time to each specific requirement
- assist in the selection and application of appropriate theories and models
- guide in giving sufficient breadth and depth to answers
- enable you to write on smaller topics with better style and structure and hence you will have the opportunity to earn more marks.

You are strongly advised to use past exam papers to hone these skills prior to taking Professional 2 Stage exams. You will, by doing so, greatly enhance your chance of attaining a first-time pass.