

This is the second 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.

Understanding the Skills Required to be Successful in Case-Based Exams

By William Meaney

Introduction.

This article follows on from ‘How to Approach Professional 2 Stage Exams - the **10’Ps**’ Approach’ with a view to delving deeper into the skills required for exam success.

A review of recent exams indicates that candidates are required to have a significant range of skills from the ability to advise on an appropriate future business strategy to producing consolidated accounts. It is also notable that the verbs used in the rubrics across the full set of Professional 2 papers include:

- analyse, evaluate, critically assess, critically analyse, justify, discuss, propose, advise, specify and analyse (higher level verbs requiring application of knowledge), and
- explain, describe, outline, identify (lower level verbs requiring textbook knowledge) and

In addition to the verb requirement candidates are required to write reports, memos, draft letters, briefing notes and present data in various technical formats for reporting results and assessment of situations to aid reporting and decision making. What is notable from this list of verbs and activities is the range of skills tested. Further analysis of the papers indicates a heavy emphasis on synthesis and application of learning (from across all subjects) and judgement to solve clients’ problems in a variety of scenarios over all the subject areas.

Given the scope of the exams, both in technical content and problem solving requirements, it is interesting to note that examiners are essentially testing four key skills across the exams.

Broadly speaking the skills that you will need to secure a good grade in any of the Professional 2 Stage exams are:

1. **Technical Knowledge** – An in-depth knowledge of the course material demonstrated through the appropriate application of this learning to case-based scenarios.
2. **Exam Technique** – Showing your skill in question selection, timing, scoring marks, and maximising the time available to you in the exam.
3. **‘Adding Value’** to your case **‘client’**
4. **Presentation Skill** – Preparing and presenting an answer script that is legible, well structured, professionally written with relevant solutions will maximise your chance of earning marks efficiently within questions and across each paper.

Now let us look at each of these elements in turn.

1. Technical knowledge

The Professional 2 exam requires you to considerable technical knowledge across a range of subject areas. The course providers focus heavily on the covering of the necessary **content** to ensure that you have sufficient technical skill to attempt the exams. Although course providers include insights and advice on exam skills and techniques it is up to you practise and develop your exam technique and presentation skills.

You should be aware that there is a blend of the technical and narrative skill that is essential for exam success. That is not to diminish or minimise the importance of the heavy technical content and bias toward quantitative skills in Advance Corporate Reporting, Taxation, Strategic Performance Management and Strategic Corporate Finance.

While in-depth technical knowledge is essential, alone it is insufficient to secure a pass. That said, the better your technical knowledge the easier it is to approach the technical element of the case-based scenarios so ensure that you spend sufficient time honing your technical skills particularly for subjects with a high quantitative element. Reaching exam standard requires lots of practise sessions on past papers. This is most beneficial when you try to do past questions under exam conditions and timings. To paraphrase the old golfing adage *'the more you practise the luckier you get'*. This is true of all papers and not just the highly quantitative papers. There really is no substitute for putting in the hard work, 175 hours per subject split between lectures, your own revision, revision days and practise sessions is a reasonable estimate of the time involved. (Think back and tot it all up). All this work and learning is tested in 3.5 hours.

It is also important to realise that although the exams are 'open-book' this does not diminish the in-depth technical learning and skill that is required. Technical shortcomings cannot be overcome, in the exam hall, by reaching for the textbook. Time, or more accurately, the lack of time is your greatest enemy in there and searching for, trying to absorb, and then trying to apply textbook content is likely to take more time than is available. You must have the technical work done long before your arrival at the exam hall.

2. Exam technique

Good exam technique is vital in all exams and critical in those that are case- based. An exam is about earning marks and therefore you have to learn the skills required to earn one mark at a time in order to pass. In an exam you are not marked out of 100 one time, you are marked out of 1 a hundred times! Therefore, it is vital to know; how to identify where the marks are, what you have to do to get them, and how to present your solutions and answers in a format to encourage the examiner to give you the marks.

A few simple tips that, irrespective of the exam subject, you should always apply now follow:

- Read very carefully the rubric (the "Requirement" section at the end of each case or scenario) to ensure you understand exactly what the examiner wants you to do. This is vital to success. Where this is not done it is a common cause of failure. As an experienced marker of professional examinations I can give personal testament that that many candidates simply do not do what is asked in the examiner's requirement. For example, it is not uncommon for candidates to do workings, present calculations, write 2 pages on the outcome of their calculations without once using the phrase 'I would advise' when the rubric in the exam starts *'Advise X on the actions necessary to ensure the VAT returns will be compliant with Revenue requirements.'* Always

ensure that you read the rubric very carefully and the answer that you provide addresses what is actually asked.

- Note in brackets beside the marks the time available to complete the requirement (allowing 1.8 minutes per mark ($180\text{minutes writing time}/100\text{ marks} = 1.8\text{ min per mark}$) If you are writing for a 10 marks exam requirement the maximum time you should devote to it in the exam is 18 minutes. Not a second more. If a requirement is for a 15 marks you should allocate 27 minutes for its completion and not a second more. Allocate time to each requirement as soon as you get the paper in the exam hall. When you start to write your answers stick rigidly to these timings.
- Plan before you write. By taking time to plan your answer it will assist you to:
 - Determine clearly, without ambiguity, exactly what the examiner requires.
 - Identify sufficient issues to write about and thus allocate your time better.
 - Identify the number of points you will have to make to earn the marks available.
 - Prioritise your answer dealing with the most important issues first.

The marks allocated to a particular requirement provide an indication as to the breadth and depth required by the examiner. For example, if the requirement is for 5 marks it is likely to be 5 points x1 mark each. If a requirement is for 12 marks it is more likely to be 6 points x 2 marks (rather than 12 points x by 1 mark each) each. Examiners look for **Breadth** (requiring you to make sufficient points) and **Depth** (sufficient explanation of each point made) in your answers.

- You must understand what you have to do to earn one mark. This will generally require writing a headed paragraph with no more than three or four good sentences and, at a maximum, 6 to 8 lines of a standard answer book. If you write much more than this you will be likely to spend too much time on a requirement and not earn sufficient marks across the whole paper. Indeed, worse still you may not provide answers to the required number of questions. Strive to write what you know in the time specified.
- Having started writing you must be disciplined regarding the time allocated to completing a requirement. There should be a very close correlation between time spent writing an answer and the marks obtained for that requirement. Your target is to get at the very least a minimum half the marks for each requirement (though that is quite dangerous). Failure to be disciplined has a cost. This is usually reflected in a lack of balance across the section requirements or failure to complete sufficient questions. It is not uncommon to have candidates present 4 pages for a 12 mark requirement and then present later in their answer book 2 pages for a 20 mark requirement.
- Know when to quit on a particular requirement. Spend too much time on some requirements in an exam, even if you know a lot and want to show the examiner your comprehensive knowledge on those particular points, you are unlikely to present all

the answers required. Your chance of passing drop dramatically if you do not get the paper finished. What is the chance of scoring 50% having only completed 85% of the exam paper? Having the discipline to quit even if you have not written all you would like is vital to presenting all the answers required.

These are essential skills to ensuring proper exam planning. How to put these skills, which require considerable practise, into action is dealt with in a further article in this series entitled **'Reading the Rubrics for Exam Success – How to Maximise Your Exam Performance'**.

3. **'Adding value'** to your case **'client'**

What is at least as important as the understanding of the technical knowledge for exam success is an understanding of the skills the examiner is testing. A common feature evident on reading Professional 2 Stage papers is that there is a **'client'** requiring advice. Giving advice, irrespective of the specific terminology used generally requires the **'application'** of knowledge. To test application examiners are more interested in your *use of* technical knowledge to assist in **'adding value'** to the case based scenarios. It is the **'added value'** that is the key to success. For example, value is added by use of the skills of evaluating scenarios, making appropriate judgements and assessments and recommendations which will assist the **'client'** in the case.

Cases differ because each organisation is different and indeed the subject matter the examiners are seeking to test is varied. The underlying thread in all cases, irrespective of the subject, is the use of appropriate techniques to solve the problem stated.

Case studies and case analysis require a number of skills including;

- **Analytical skills**, involving the recognition, assessment, categorisation, analysis and evaluation of quantitative and quantitative information
- **Application skills** in which theoretical frameworks, analytical tools, concepts and prior learning and/or personal experience need to be applied – and the key word is applied (rather than described) to address the examiner's requirement
- **Creativity** and **exercise of judgement** in identifying alternative solutions and making decisions as to which solution is best given the context in the case study and the particular specialism.
- **Ethical sensitivity**, being able to identify potential ethical challenges and conflicts and propose an appropriate response and course of action.
- **Communication skill**, necessary for the construction and presentation of written reports, a typical exam requirement. Presenting well written answers using good structure to make it easy for the examiner to allocate marks is a valuable skill, essential to achieving grades that are above 50%. A well prepared candidate should have a good insight as to whether he / she has passed the exam (and by how much) upon leaving the exam hall.

When answering case-based scenarios a good tip is to approach the case as if you were dealing with a client who, with a clear requirement, has just entered your office. For example if your new **'client'** asks for a review of her tax position what does the client hope to get from you – a professional accountant? At the minimum the client is likely to want you to;

- Review her current situation
- Advise on what may be wrong / problematic with her tax affairs

- Use your skill and knowledge to put her in a better position with the Revenue. You would need to illustrate this by appropriate calculation to show a possible range of options, and finally
- Select an option, from a range of tax planning options, which best improves the clients' position within the constraints of the existing taxation legislation.

If you achieve these essentials the client will, most likely, pay for your services, return for more advice in the future and possibly even recommend your services to others. Why? The answer is simple – because you have '**added value**'. The client knows that she is better off than before engaging your services.

All cases, at Professional 2, require these essential steps, irrespective of the subject in question.

These skills can be broken into the following generic approach.

- a) Identifying key issues / defects (almost directly from the case material)
- b) The ability to use analysis and to draw from case material to delve deeper into case problems. This may require quantitative and / or qualitative assessment.
- c) Recommending, processes, controls or actions that are noticeable to you by their absence. Something the firm / '**client**' should be doing but is not doing at present and which would improve their current position.

It is the ability to '**add value**' to the scenario in this way that scores marks in the exam. Mere repetition of case material, long introductions or descriptions earn very little marks, waste a lot of valuable time and limit your chance of exam success.

4. Presentation skill. – Presentation skill is a subset of good exam technique. The aim is to present an exam script that is legible, well structured, professionally written and that maximises your opportunity to earn marks efficiently both within questions and across the whole paper. Regardless of how much you know it is how your solutions are presented to the examiner that provides him / her with the opportunity to award you the appropriate marks.

Solutions presented to examiners generally fall into three categories. Those that have:

- Good content and are well presented. These are easy to read and mark.
- Good content and are poorly presented (sometimes frustratingly poorly presented). These are difficult to read and to mark.
- Very good presentation but poor content.

Now which of the above would you say earn the passes? Which of the above get the examiner on the candidate's side? Which of the above are likely to facilitate picking up marks, achieving breadth and depth and facilitate good time management? Which of the above will clearly indicate where one point starts and finishes?

I think that you would agree that the answers to all of the above questions are self-evident? If so, you should strive to produce a paper with all the requisite positive characteristics.

Good presentation involves many facets on which most people agree. These include characteristics such as legibility, use of appropriate language, clearly signposted sections of answers both within a question and across the whole paper, something which I have struggled with when writing this article (although I had plenty of time). However, candidates have to demonstrate these almost without thinking whilst in a time-pressured exam situation. Indeed, the ability to present a good exam script requires a lot of practise. However, it is time well spent not just for the Professional 2 Stage exams, but for your entire professional career as an accountant. While the general points required for good presentation have been mentioned in this article, they are addressed in more detail in the final article in this series entitled: **'The Presentation Skills Necessary to Achieve a First- Time Pass'**

Conclusion.

This article looks at the key requirements for success in case-based exams appropriate to Professional 2 Stage papers. In order to achieve success you must understand the nature of case-based testing and the skills required. In addition, you need to understand the key requirements of having in-depth technical knowledge, excellent exam technique, the skills required to **'add value'** to the case-based **'client'** and finally the importance of presentation skill in preparing your answer script. These skills overlap and interact. In order to get the most return for study effort you need to ensure that:

- Sufficient time is been devoted to the covering of the course content and achieving exam proficiency on technical requirement in all the papers
- You have reviewed and practised past exam papers so as to be familiar with the range of examiners' requirements
- Used past papers to hone exam techniques to assist in identifying key verbs, facilitate exam planning to get insight into time management and to develop the skill of earning marks efficiently in exams
- Practise, using past papers, to get into the mind-set of 'adding value' to clients in the scenarios presented in exam papers, and
- Develop excellent presentation skills so as to maximise marks that you may earn from the final document presented to the examiner, your examination script.

Understanding, practising and implementing these skills will improve your exam technique and more importantly the marks that you earn.

