

Unlocking TOPCIMA

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For some, TOPCIMA is not only the last hurdle before qualification, it can also be one hurdle too far. Unfortunately, it is one of those exams which some students find very difficult to pass, and I regularly have people come on my course for the first time, but who are taking the exam for the 4th or 5th time. Over my years teaching TOPCIMA, I have certainly learnt where a lot of these students do go wrong and am often able to pinpoint their problems, although, even then, it can be difficult for people to change enough to pass. So what are the keys to passing this exam? What are the mistakes these people make which you need to avoid? Here are my 8 Keys to passing TOPCIMA:

(1) Focus on a bold, clear and definitive writing style

At the last sitting I did some one-to-one work with a student who had failed TOPCIMA many times and couldn't understand where he was going wrong. His problem lay in what is probably the hardest area I find to change in students, writing style. While he had some very good ideas, the way he expressed himself in his answer didn't read well. Points made were unclear, indefinite and too general. The most difficult thing for me was that I could explain to him how I would rewrite his comments to make them flow well, and sound convincing, but he found it very difficult to do so himself. We worked on his style and it did improve, but it still wasn't perfect. After he'd taken the exam he was convinced it was his worst attempt yet, but our work had obviously had some impact since he passed with a very respectable 59.

To create points which are strong and convincing in the exam:

- Make points simply and clearly
- Explain each point in relation to the ultimate impact or consequences (e.g. the impact on profits, key stakeholders or the ultimate aim of the company)
- Use bold, firm, confident language

To help you do this, imagine that you are a very experienced strategy consultant, with a huge amount of industry experience, and strategic knowledge, and write from this perspective. If you doubt your ability to analyse the company, and you doubt your own advice, this will be reflected in your answer and the language you use.

(2) Pick up the easy marks

Another student I did some one-to-one work with on the last sitting, had also failed a number of times, but was only just below the pass mark. One key thing we focused on, was maximising the easy marks she could score, with the aim that this would be enough to get her through.

I believe that some of the easiest marks to get are by doing 3 business strategy models in the appendices, and doing them well. You score 1 technical mark for each, and if applied appropriately, at least one application mark each too. Make sure you make these appendices in a reasonable amount of detail. One student's post exam report I

read last week, made it clear that SWOTs which had 2-3 word points scored fewer marks than those which explained those points.

The other easiest of marks are in the standard elements of the report such as the formats and introduction. Use the standard formats recommended by the examiner, and ensure the introduction includes two excellent and relevant industry examples. The introduction is largely pre-learnt, and so there really is no excuse for not having two really good examples included in your introduction.

For my student these easy marks were just enough get her through – she got 51, and put down her pass down to picking up the easy extra marks.

(3) Time management

This is without doubt THE most important aspect of passing TOPCIMA. This exam is unbelievably time pressured, and those who manage their time well, will be those with the best chance of passing. To manage your time you must have a clear plan of what you are going to do, with a time schedule of when you are going to do it. You must then, practise keeping to this schedule. After many years of working with students, I have adjusted my suggested timetable a few times and have found that the following is a practical time schedule to use:

Time	What should you be doing?
30 minutes	Read case and prioritise. Notes on key considerations and alternative solutions.
20 minutes	Do calculations (in the appendix) Reconsider priorities given the calculations
15 minutes	Appendices: SWOT analysis, PEST analysis, Mendelow's Matrix (or other models you decide to use).
5 minutes	Report format, Introduction and Terms of Reference
20 minutes	Prioritisation section
55 minutes - 10 minutes for each key issue - 1 minute on each minor issue	Main body of report. For each major issue: summarise, then analyse, give alternative solutions, and provide an industry example.
20 minutes	Ethics
35 minutes	Recommendations and conclusion

(4) Work quickly

At times, I do wonder how fair the level of time pressure in this exam is. One of the people I wasn't able to help pass, simply couldn't work and write quickly enough. The points he produced included excellent analysis, and he was a very knowledgeable student. His difficulty was that, despite coming on my course a number of times, he could never finish his report in the time.

The examiners have made it clear, that the recommendations section is the most important element in the exam, it's often that which gets missed, if people get behind time. You must treat this exam like a race from start to finish and work at a fast pace

throughout. Do as many practise exams to time as you can, timing each section as you progress, until you can do the exam within the time schedules shown above.

(5) Understand the marking matrix, and write a report designed to specifically score marks against this matrix

The TOPCIMA exam is marked according to set marking criteria. Understanding those criteria and tailoring your answer to it is key to passing the exam. If you would like more information on this see my article in the February 2008 <PLEASE CONFIRM> edition of PASS magazine where I examine this in detail, or alternatively visit www.topcima.biz, where you will find my outline of these criteria.

(6) Master your prioritisation approach

Two sittings ago, I had one of my best ever students on a TOPCIMA course. She scored over 70% in the last mock exam, and yet only just passed the real exam. In an e-mail she sent me after the exam, she explained that she had missed one of the examiner's key issues. In the past, the examiners have made it clear that people who make significant errors in their issue prioritisation will fail the exam, so my student could actually consider herself lucky to have passed.

So, how do you become good at prioritisation?

- (a) You must have a clear approach to prioritisation which you are familiar with and have practised. In the August 2007 <PLEASE CHECK> edition last year I gave you just such an approach, so take a look at the past edition for that (or again take a look at www.topcima.biz).
- (b) Understand the examiner's perspectives on prioritisation by doing your own prioritisation on the last 8-10 real exam scripts. Don't read the whole of all the past pre-seen exams, this would simply waste your time, but do a quick skim read and then prioritise the unseen points and compare them with the examiners'. You'll soon learn what the examiner sees as important or not.

(7) Understand the pre-seen and the industry

You must fully understand the pre-seen, including doing a full strategic analysis of this. Discuss the pre-seen with other students (www.casestudyaide.com is a great resource to help you to do this), and prepare your own strategic analysis including the following models:

- SWOT
- PEST
- Porter's Five Forces
- Resource audit
- Product life cycle/BCG matrix
- Ansoff Matrix
- Generic Strategies analysis
- Stakeholder Map

Look out for my view on the current case in a future edition of PASS magazine.

You must learn 25-30 key industry examples to use in the exam, so do significant research into the industry across a range of issues which might come up in the exam.

(8) Practise, practise, practise

There's no doubt about it, that by practising writing out exams in full, to time, is probably the most important thing you must do to prepare for this exam. Even if you've never done this on previous exams, you **MUST** do it on this one. By the time of the exam, I believe that you should have done at least 5 full mock exams to time.

You should also get feedback on each one you take, either by getting a formal mark through a tuition provider or getting another student to give you their independent view. Again, use www.casestudyaide.com to get in touch with other students and offer to swap feedback for each other. Reviewing someone else's script is also a very good learning exercise, so is well worth doing.

TOPCIMA is certainly a very different exam compared with others you will face in your goal to become CIMA qualified. It's strange that there's no new theory to learn, but vitally important that, despite this, you still work very hard. You simply need to work in a different way. If you can master each of the the 8 key points above you will be well on course to qualification.

Nick Best tutors TOPCIMA at Reed Business School. For more advice on the TOPCMA exam, including an analysis of the Electricity Generating Company, and details of courses, visit www.topcima.biz