**The first few minutes of an exam (Phil Race)**

OK, you’re now at your desk in the exam room. Probably your pulse rate is up a bit. Your palms may be a bit sweaty. Your breathing may be a bit faster and shallower. You may be feeling a little like a scared rabbit – but you *know* a lot more than most scared rabbits. Or of course you may be your normal cool self, completely in control. No matter which, the next few minutes are important. There’s a lot you can do to make the next few minutes pay dividends for you. Here goes.

1. **Check that you’re looking at the *right* question paper.** Just a glance will tell you this. In large exam rooms, there are often several different exams going on at once, and there could have been a mix up, and you may be at the wrong desk. If so, best find this out straight away and get it sorted out. Not a good idea to spend the first half-hour doing someone else’s exam first – even if you know all about the subject.
2. **Don’t start doing anything before you’re given the go-ahead.** Some exam systems get everyone settled into their places and someone says ‘Start now please’. In other places, you just go to your desk and get on with it. Glance around and see what everyone else is doing. When it’s OK to do so, get going as below.
3. **Do the ‘admin’ bits and pieces.** Systems vary, but you’ll no doubt have your candidate number to write onto the exam booklet, the date, the exam topic, and somewhere you’ll have to write your name, so that they know who you are, even if the name is on a slip of paper that is collected in quite separately soon after the exam has started. Doing these admin tasks helps you to settle down. However tense you may feel, very few candidates can’t remember their names. The date, if you need it, will probably be on the question paper anyway. Seems like an age sometimes, but this is the first half-minute or so gone.
4. **You’re absolutely *dying* to see the questions, but don’t look just yet!** First, check the instructions. They call it the ‘rubric’ – the bit which tells you how many questions to do, how long the exam is, whether you’ve got a completely free choice of questions, or whether you’ve got to do *one* from Section A then *two* from Section B. Find out whether all of the questions carry equal marks or not. Find out whether there’s a compulsory question. You wouldn’t believe how many candidates lose valuable marks just because they *didn’t* read the instructions, and did (for example) two questions from Section A – and only the *first* one (usually, Sod’s Law, the least good answer) counted towards the score – and so on. Checking the instructions only takes half a minute or so, but is so important.
5. **Work out a rough timetable for the exam, based on the instructions.** This will depend on whether you’ve got a choice of questions, whether there are compulsory questions, whether all questions carry equal marks or not, and indeed whether you’re told to ‘Answer Question 1 first, then….’. But for example, suppose the exam started at 0930, and is going on till 1230, and all questions carry equal marks, and you’ve got to choose any 5 questions from 8. Your rough timetable could be like this:

0930 ‘beginning’ things – particularly reading the questions

0940 first question (one I like a lot)

1010 second question (another good one)

1040 third question (one I know at least some parts of)

1110 fourth question (one I can get some marks for)

1140 last question (pick up what I can for this)

1210 editing and polishing and picking up a lot more marks!

1230 end of exam.

1. **Remember that ‘equal marks means equal time’.** If, as in the example above, all questions carry equal marks, it’s important *not* to spend far too long doing your first question, and not leaving any time to do your last question. If five questions = 100 marks, and you only give yourself time to do four questions, you’re *maximum* mark is 80. But worse, if you only did three because you spent too long on the first two, say, your *maximum* mark would then only be 60, and in fact your three answers would all have to be *very* good indeed just to pass. And if you only did two – forget it!
2. **Plan in to your timetable some time for checking through your answers.** In the example above, I suggested 20 minutes for this in a 3-hour exam. Even more could be better, but as you’ll probably run out of things to say in your last question (where you don’t know as much about it, for example) there will probably be some further minutes to add to your ‘editing and polishing’ time.
3. **Ignore the fact that everyone around you may seem as if they’ve already written ten pages!** We’re still in the first ten minutes, and you haven’t yet *read* the questions properly. But you *have* invested in some sensible planning, and you *have* read the instructions as your basis for this planning. You’ve already saved more marks than other people have earned – they probably rushed into their first question without any real thought and may come a cropper later!
4. **Now read those questions.** By now, you’ll be able to do so much more calmly than a few minutes ago. You’ve been sensible. You’ve done your planning. Now it’s decision time – if you’ve got a choice of course. If you’ve got no choice – for example if Question 1 is compulsory, it’s probably simply worth getting on with it straight away.
5. **Make your choices carefully (if you have choices).** The only way to do this is to read each question properly. You’ve got to force yourself to read them quite slowly, calmly, deliberately. Work out exactly what the questions mean. Use your highlighter pen to mark the key words such as ‘discuss’, ‘explain’, ‘list five causes of…’ and so on, to help you to think through exactly what each question is asking you to do. As you go, make preliminary decisions about each question, for example putting ticks and crosses against them as follows:

√√ yes, I reckon I can do this question well.

√ possibly – I can get at least some marks on this one.

xx no way – this isn’t a question I want to do unless I absolutely have to!

1. **Optional. Make brief notes about things you’re frightened you might forget.** Sometimes as you’re reading the questions, ideas flood through your mind about things you would wish to make sure you’d put into your answers. It can sometimes be worth spending a few minutes right then jotting down keywords to remind you of your thoughts. Or jot down a key equation, or a fact or figure of piece of data you might want to include or use, just in case it slips your mind later. If you get into this mode, you might need to go back to your timetable again and knock a few minutes off the time you’ve provisionally allowed for each question, to compensate for the time you’re now spending organising your key information for your answers.
2. **Choose to start with a good question.** In other words, start with one where you are confident that you’re going to get lots of marks. But beware! Remember your timetable. The big danger is that you’ll spend too long on this good question – after all, it’s going to be one you know a lot about. Look again very carefully at the question, and decide what you really *need* to include in your answer. You can always add in some more peripheral detail later if you have spare time left.