

# ANSWER WRITING GUIDE BOOK

## UPSC CSE

A Comprehensive Guide to Master  
Mains Answer Writing



# UPSC CIVIL SERVICES MAINS ANSWER WRITING STRATEGY



## PART I -- FUNDAMENTALS

### 1.1 What the Examiner Is Looking For

UPSC Mains tests how precisely you communicate what you know within the time available. An examiner reads hundreds of scripts per day and spends under two minutes per answer. Three things are assessed: Relevance (did you answer what was asked?), Structure (can the argument be grasped in 60 seconds?), and Content Quality (facts accurate, analysis multidimensional, examples current). Marking splits approximately 60% content and 40% presentation.

#### Topper's Tip

If a well-informed examiner cannot understand the core of your answer within 60 seconds, the structural presentation has failed regardless of content quality. Design your answer for the scanner, not the close reader.

### 1.2 Time Management

- Each GS paper has 20 questions (250 marks) in 3 hours -- roughly 9 minutes per question.

Type	Words	Time	Structure
10-mark	~150 words	7-8 min	Intro 2-3 lines   Body 6-7 points   Conclusion 2 lines
15-mark	~200-250 words	10-12 min	Intro 3 lines   Body 12-13 points   Conclusion 2-3 lines

## PART II -- DIRECTIVE WORDS

The directive word determines your structure, tone, and depth. Always underline it before writing a single word. Two families: Descriptive (what, where, who, when -- no analysis required) and Critical (analysis, evaluation, and judgment required).

Directive	Meaning	Answer Approach	Conclusion Tone
<b>DISCUSS</b>	Debate both sides with evidence	Intro, multiple perspectives, weigh evidence, conclude	Reasoned position -- not a fence-sit
<b>EXAMINE</b>	Investigate; establish key facts and issues	Define scope, factual investigation of each aspect, fair judgment	Factual; emphasise what is established to be true
<b>CRITICALLY EXAMINE</b>	Like Examine but explicitly assess limitations and failures	Positive/factual dimension, then limitations/criticisms, overall verdict	Must discuss shortcomings even if question sounds positive



<b>ANALYSE</b>	Deconstruct into parts; show inter-linkages	Define, break into components, examine each, show linkages	Go deeper than surface facts; use flowcharts for linkages
<b>CRITICALLY ANALYSE</b>	Like Analyse plus explicit evaluation	Components, critique evidence, weigh alternatives, verdict	Qualified stand: 'largely', 'partially', 'in limited scope'
<b>EVALUATE</b>	Assess value or effectiveness against criteria	State criteria, apply to topic, evidence for and against, verdict	Clear verdict -- not a summary
<b>ELUCIDATE</b>	Make meaning clear; explain cause-effect linkages	Define, explain mechanism, real-life case studies, conclude	Bring out the linkage with evidence; example-driven
<b>ILLUSTRATE</b>	Demonstrate through examples or diagrams	Brief intro, rely primarily on specific examples/cases	Examples must be specific; general statements do not substitute
<b>COMMENT</b>	Informed opinion with brief analysis	Brief background, your stance with reasoning, acknowledge other views	Opinion-based but evidence-supported
<b>EXPLAIN</b>	Clarify in detail; break down components	Thorough description of all aspects, causes, processes with examples	Descriptive; clarity over analysis
<b>JUSTIFY</b>	Prove that something is right or valid	State claim, logical and evidential support, acknowledge counterpoint	Persuasive but reasoned; do not ignore the counterpoint
<b>ASSESS / TO WHAT EXTENT</b>	Evaluate how far a claim is valid	Contextualise, evidence supporting, evidence limiting, qualified verdict	'To a large extent', 'only partially' -- calibrated language
<b>TRACE</b>	Describe progression or evolution of stages	Key stages chronologically, significance of each, overall impact	Historical; a timeline diagram adds value here
<b>OUTLINE</b>	Specify key aspects concisely	Most important elements in structured form, brief elaboration only	Concise; avoid sub-arguments and excessive detail

### Critical vs. Non-Critical

When the directive is 'Examine', your primary task is factual establishment with fair judgment. When it is 'Critically Examine', you must explicitly discuss limitations and failures -- even if the question appears positive. Confuse these and the entire structure of your answer will be wrong from the first paragraph.

## PART III -- ANATOMY OF AN ANSWER

### 3.1 Universal Structure

Section	10-mark	15-mark	Function
<b>Introduction</b>	2-3 sentences	3-4 sentences	Contextualise; signal approach; never restate the question
<b>Body</b>	6-7 points / 2-3 paras	12-13 points / 3-4 paras	Address all dimensions; subheadings for multi-part questions
<b>Conclusion</b>	2 sentences	2-3 sentences	Synthesise; forward-looking statement; no new facts

### 3.2 Introduction -- Seven Entry Points

Never open with 'Since time immemorial' or 'In today's fast-paced world'. The introduction must not exceed 10-15% of the word limit.

Type	When to Use	Example Opening
<b>Definition-based</b>	Polity, Economy, Ethics -- conceptual questions	Judicial activism refers to the tendency of courts to go beyond their adjudicatory role -- a trend that has intensified in India since the 1980s.
<b>Statistical / Data</b>	Economy, Environment, Society, Geography	With India's forest cover at 21.76%, well below the National Forest Policy target of 33%, the tension between development and conservation is structural.
<b>Constitutional / Legal</b>	GS-2 Polity and Governance	Article 21, interpreted through a living-tree approach, has expanded to encompass bail jurisprudence, environmental rights, and the right to livelihood.
<b>Context-setting</b>	Current affairs-linked questions	The PM Internship Scheme, launched to provide one crore internships over five years, is a structural attempt to bridge the skill gap afflicting India's demographic dividend.
<b>Quote / Observation</b>	Ethics, Society, Governance	Kautilya's Arthashastra holds that the happiness of the king lies in the happiness of his subjects -- a standard that must frame any evaluation of welfare governance.
<b>Contradiction / Paradox</b>	Critically Examine, Critically Analyse	India possesses 4% of global freshwater yet bears 18% of global population -- a paradox that frames the tension this question demands we examine.
<b>Historical / Comparative</b>	GS-1 History, Society, Culture	The Brahmo Samaj of 1828 was as much a political project of self-definition as a religious reform movement -- a distinction that shapes how we assess its legacy.

### 3.3 Body -- Dimensional Coverage

Select the dimensions the directive demands. Never answer with only one dimension however deeply.

- **Historical/Background** -- relevant only when the question has historical depth
- **Structural/Institutional** -- how does the system or mechanism work?
- **Positive/Achievement** -- what has worked or what are the strengths?
- **Challenge/Criticism** -- what has not worked or is contested?
- **Way Forward / Recommendation** -- what should be done?

### 3.4 Understanding and Answering the Actual Demand of the Question

Every question has a specific demand embedded in its directive word, scope, and framing. Before writing a single line of the body, pause and ask: What exactly is this question asking me to do? Identify three things: (1) the directive — what kind of thinking is required (describe, analyse, evaluate, etc.); (2) the subject — the precise concept, event, institution, or policy being asked about; and (3) the hidden dimension — any implicit angle such as ‘in the Indian context’, ‘in recent times’, or ‘from a governance perspective’ that narrows or shapes the answer.

A common failure is answering a related but different question — writing a general note when the question demanded a specific evaluation, or giving causes when consequences were asked for. The fix is a 30-second discipline: underline the directive, circle the subject, and complete this sentence mentally before writing: “This question is asking me to...” Every paragraph in the body must be traceable back to that sentence.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Synthesise rather than summarise. Offer a forward-looking statement (policy recommendation, constitutional mandate, or normative vision). Match the conclusion tone to the directive: Evaluate demands a verdict; Discuss demands a synthesis; Explain requires a brief way-forward. Introduce no new facts.

## PART IV -- SUBJECT-WISE STRATEGY

Paper	Topic	Key Approach	Value Additions / Data
GS-1	History	Do not narrate -- analyse. Explain why it happened, what it revealed about Indian society, and why it matters today. Connect past to present.	Timeline or stage-diagram for movements; legislation years underlined; thinkers cited only where they directly enrich the argument
	Culture	Situate within its historical period and regional tradition. Analyse cultural or political significance -- do not merely describe appearance.	Stylistic comparison chart; regional variation notes; temple architecture typologies
	Society	Anchor introduction with NFHS-5, Census, or NCRB data. Structure: phenomenon, causes (structural and proximate), impact, policy framework, way forward.	NFHS-5 figures, Census 2011/2024, NSSO data; Srinivas on sanskritization, Ambedkar on caste -- only where directly relevant



	<b>Geography</b>	Explain the physical mechanism before socio-economic impact. Diagrams are expected and rewarded -- include one for nearly every geography answer.	Sketch map for rivers, drainage, soil, cyclone tracks; monsoon mechanism diagram; IMD, NWDA, IPCC data
<b>GS-2</b>	<b>Polity</b>	Anchor intro in Article number, case name, and year. Structure: constitutional mandate, institutional mechanism, performance, challenges, way forward.	Article numbers and case names underlined; Sarkaria/Venkatachalaiah Committee; flowchart for federal or legislative structure
	<b>Governance</b>	Always distinguish Constitutional bodies, Statutory bodies, and Executive bodies. Use CAG, Parliamentary Standing Committee, and NITI Aayog assessments.	CAG reports, Economic Survey, Second ARC recommendations; scheme names and committee names underlined
	<b>IR</b>	Use strategic vocabulary: multi-alignment, civilisational ties, economic complementarity, security architecture. Avoid normative or emotional language.	India's specific stakes (trade, energy, diaspora, connectivity); recent bilateral agreements; MEA Annual Report data
<b>GS-3</b>	<b>Economy</b>	Lead with Economic Survey or RBI data. Structure: concept or mechanism, India context, performance data, challenges, recommendations.	Economic Survey, RBI Annual Report, Budget; GDP, GFD, inflation figures; flowchart for economic cycles or monetary policy transmission
	<b>Environment</b>	Open with India's vulnerability ranking or emission data. Identify the gap between policy commitment and implementation.	State of Forest Report, IPCC AR6, NDC commitments; carbon cycle or disaster management cycle diagram
	<b>Agriculture</b>	Anchor in specific scheme performance metrics -- not generic statements about farmer welfare.	CACP recommendations, NSSO Agricultural Survey, PM-KISAN, PMFBY, e-NAM data
	<b>S and T</b>	Explain the technology briefly, then pivot to India's current status and policy framework. Avoid generic optimism.	DRDO, ISRO, DST scheme names; specific mission data; National S and T Policy references
<b>GS-4</b>	<b>Theory Qs</b>	Define the concept, explain its philosophical foundation, apply to governance context, note competing values. Ground every claim in a thinker's framework.	Kant, Aristotle, Rawls, Gandhi, Ambedkar; Second ARC Report; Nolan Committee Principles



	<b>Case Studies</b>	Stakeholders, Ethical issues at stake, Options, Pros and cons of each option, Recommended action, Justification. Identify all stakeholders including indirect ones.	Stakeholder map or 2x2 ethical matrix; CVC Annual Report; constitutional or legal obligations cited where relevant
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### Topper's Tip on GS-4

Answers demonstrating emotional intelligence, genuine empathy for all stakeholders, and practical wisdom in balancing competing values score higher than theoretically sophisticated but administratively naive answers. The examiner is assessing fitness to serve, not philosophical knowledge.

## PART V -- DIAGRAMS, DATA, AND MARKING LOGIC

### 5.1 Diagram Decision Matrix

Include a diagram only when it conveys something prose cannot. A well-executed diagram substitutes 30 to 40 words. A messy or unlabelled diagram reduces the score.

Type	Use When	Examples
<b>Flowchart / Process</b>	Mechanism or sequence with multiple stages	Legislative process, carbon cycle, disaster management cycle, monetary policy transmission
<b>Sketch Map</b>	Spatial distribution or regional patterns in geography	Monsoon pattern, river drainage, soil types, cyclone tracks, Indo-Pacific routes
<b>Cause-Effect Tree</b>	Root causes of social, economic, or environmental problems	Urban flooding, farmer distress, regional disparity drivers
<b>Org / Hierarchy Chart</b>	Institutional structure of constitutional or statutory bodies	Federal structure, GST Council, Election Commission, UPSC composition
<b>Timeline</b>	Historical progression or policy evolution	National Movement phases, evolution of environmental law, forest rights history
<b>Cyclic Diagram</b>	Self-reinforcing systems or ecological cycles	Poverty cycle, debt trap, demographic transition model
<b>2x2 Matrix</b>	GS-4 ethical dilemmas or policy trade-offs	Stakeholder matrix, ethical options comparison, risk vs. impact analysis
<b>Venn Diagram</b>	Overlapping concepts or institutional jurisdictions	Concurrent vs. State vs. Union List; Indian vs. Western secularism

- **Label everything** -- every box, arrow, and region needs a text label. Unlabelled means incomplete.
- **One diagram per answer** -- maximum two. Never use diagrams to compensate for thin content.
- **Maximum 1 minute per diagram** -- place it immediately after the relevant paragraph, not at the end.

## 5.2 Data Usage Rule

Use one well-placed data point per dimension. Listing five statistics without analytical commentary signals padding, not reasoning. 'India has a large rural population' is worth less than 'As per Census 2011, 68.8% of India's population is rural -- a figure that shapes the entire rural governance architecture.'

## 5.3 Approximate Marking Logic

Criterion	10-mark	15-mark
Understanding the question correctly (directive and scope)	1-2	2
Factual accuracy and relevance of content	3-4	5-6
Analytical depth and multidimensional coverage	2-3	4-5
Structure and presentation	1-2	2
Value additions (data, diagram, way forward, examples)	0.5-1	1-2

# PART VI -- PRESENTATION, MISTAKES, AND PRACTICE SYSTEM

## 6.1 Physical Presentation

- **Underlining:** Mark key terms, Article numbers, case names, committee names, and scheme names. Maximum 2-3 underlined phrases per paragraph.
- **Paragraph breaks:** Insert visible gaps between paragraphs. Run-on text with no white space is difficult to grade.
- **Handwriting:** Clarity outweighs neatness. Legible and moderately neat beats ornate and hard to read.

## 6.2 Common Mistakes and Their Fixes

Mistake	What to Do Instead
Opening with 'Since time immemorial' or 'In today's fast-paced world'	Open with a definition, data point, constitutional provision, or specific contextual statement
Writing everything you know without reading the directive	Underline the directive first. Spend 30 seconds planning the structure. Then write.
Body covers only positive aspects with no challenge or criticism	Cover at least two dimensions: what works and what does not, or multiple institutional angles
Concluding with 'Thus, as discussed above, we can see that...'	Offer a synthesis statement and a forward-looking recommendation in 2-3 sentences
All bullet points with no analytical prose	Use prose for argument development if it requires. Do not force everything into bullet points.
Leaving questions unattempted to write longer answers for others	Attempt all 20. A short but complete 80-word attempt can secure 2-3 marks. Zero gets zero.
Diagrams used as space-fillers	Draw only when it conveys something text cannot.

### 6.3 Practice System

1. Write one timed answer daily from the topic you are studying. Never separate content study from writing practice.
2. A 250-word answer must be completed within 8 minutes. Build this as a physical habit before the exam.
3. Get at least two answers evaluated externally per week. Self-evaluation has severe blind spots.
4. Maintain a mistakes register. Record specific failures after evaluation. Review every Sunday.
5. Practice diagram-making for three GS topics per week. A well-drawn flowchart takes 2 minutes and can earn 0.5 to 1 extra mark per answer -- up to 20 additional marks across a full paper.
6. Simulate full 3-hour GS paper attempts from Month 3. Writing all 20 questions in sequence trains pacing and decision-making under fatigue.

### 6.4 Exam Hall Protocol -- First 10 Minutes

1. Read all 20 questions carefully (3 minutes).
2. Underline the directive word and core demand in each question (2 minutes).
3. Decide sequence -- strongest questions first (1 minute).
4. Begin writing -- introduction first, then a 3-point mental outline before the body.
5. Check time every 4 to 5 questions. If behind by 5 or more minutes, shorten body sections rather than the conclusion.

#### Final Note

Answer writing is a skill that compounds. The first 20 answers will be poor. After 100 evaluated and iterated answers, the structure becomes intuitive -- directive understood, body organised, conclusion closed without consciously thinking about it. That intuition is what separates the top percentile from the rest. Start writing today.

## PART VII -- ESSAY STRATEGY

### 7.1 Nature of the Essay Paper

The Essay paper carries 250 marks and demands two essays of approximately 1000–1200 words each, to be completed in 3 hours. Unlike GS answers, there is no model structure — the examiner rewards original thought, coherent argumentation, and a well-sustained central thesis. Section A typically contains abstract/philosophical topics; Section B contains socio-economic or governance-linked topics. Choose one from each section.

### 7.2 Topic Selection

Choose topics where you can sustain an original argument for 1000+ words, not merely describe. Avoid topics that are too narrow (limited dimensions to explore) or too broad (argument becomes unfocused). Prefer topics where you can connect philosophy, governance, and lived experience. Spend the first 8–10 minutes on topic selection and outlining — this investment prevents mid-essay drift.

### 7.3 Structure of an Essay

An essay is not a GS answer. Do not use bullet points or headings. Write in flowing paragraphs. The recommended structure is: Introduction (the hook and thesis statement), Body (3–5 well-developed paragraphs each advancing the argument), and Conclusion (synthesis that returns to and resolves the

thesis). Every paragraph must serve the thesis — if a paragraph could be removed without weakening the argument, it should be removed or reworked.

#### 7.4 Introduction and Thesis

The introduction must do two things: hook the reader and state the thesis. Open with a striking quote, paradox, anecdote, or provocative question. The final sentence of the introduction must be the thesis — a clear, debatable, specific claim that the rest of the essay will substantiate. Avoid vague openings like “This essay will discuss...”. The thesis is the single most important sentence in the essay; it determines the direction and coherence of everything that follows.

#### 7.5 Body Development

Each body paragraph should carry one idea that advances the thesis. Use the PEEL structure within each paragraph: Point (topic sentence), Evidence (data, case, quote, example), Explanation (why this evidence supports the thesis), and Link (connect back to the central argument). Cover multiple dimensions — historical, philosophical, social, economic, governance — but subordinate every dimension to the thesis. Do not write a general survey; sustain an argument.

#### 7.6 Time Management for Essay

Allocate 90 minutes per essay. Within each slot: 10 minutes for topic selection, brainstorming, and outlining; 70 minutes for writing; 10 minutes for review and any additions. Do not skip the outline stage — candidates who begin writing immediately almost always produce structurally weak essays. A five-point outline written in 8 minutes saves 20 minutes of mid-essay course correction.

#### 7.7 Language, Style, and Value Addition

Prefer simple, precise sentences over ornate prose. Vocabulary should be elevated but never obscure. Use quotes from thinkers (Gandhi, Ambedkar, Tagore, Rawls, Aristotle) only when they directly sharpen the argument — not as decoration. Ground abstract claims in concrete Indian examples: a policy, a scheme, a Supreme Court judgment, or a specific event. The essay is the one place in Mains where your voice and perspective are actively rewarded; do not write a neutral survey.

#### 7.8 Common Essay Mistakes

Writing a GS-style bullet answer instead of a prose essay. Having no clear thesis and drifting from point to point without a connecting argument. Using too many quotes as a substitute for original thought. Covering too many dimensions shallowly rather than fewer dimensions deeply. Weak conclusion that merely restates the introduction rather than resolving the thesis with insight.

## PART VIII -- HOW TO SELF-EVALUATE YOUR ANSWERS

#### 8.1 Compare Methodically

Compare your answers with model answers and toppers’ copies. Evaluate each element: introduction, main body, and conclusion. Assess presentation — headings, flowcharts, diagrams, keyword usage, balance, and clarity. Appreciate what you did well, not just what needs improvement. Incorporate learnings into your next set of answers immediately.

#### 8.2 Use the Evaluation Grid

Use the following grid to score each answer objectively after every practice session:



Parameter	Self-Check Question
<b>Demand Fulfilment</b>	Did I answer exactly what was asked?
<b>Structure</b>	Clear introduction, body, conclusion?
<b>Content Quality</b>	Relevant, multidimensional, analytical?
<b>Examples &amp; Value Addition</b>	Committees, reports, data, cases used?
<b>Presentation</b>	Headings, spacing, flowcharts, underlining?
<b>Conclusion</b>	Balanced and forward-looking?
<b>Give Your Opinion</b>	Where the directive demands it (Comment, Justify, Evaluate), have I stated a clear personal stance supported by reasoning? Opinion must be argued, not asserted.
<b>Time Management</b>	Completed within time and word limit?

### 8.3 Evidence Density

A high-scoring answer contains supporting evidence every few points. Do not let any three consecutive points go without a data figure, committee name, scheme name, case name, or specific example.

### 8.4 Presentation Evaluation

Check that your answer is: easy to scan quickly; broken into headings and subheadings; balanced in paragraph and point format; supported with diagrams or flowcharts where useful; and properly underlined for keywords only.

### 8.5 Maintain an Error Log

After every test, log your mistakes in the table below. Track recurring mistakes: misreading the demand, weak introductions, lack of examples, poor structure, time mismanagement, and generic content.

Question	Mistake	Reason	Correction



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