



# New Zealand Fire Brigades' Institute

## Examination Preparation and Technique

Despite the large volume of material available which advises candidates on the sitting of examinations, many students who have assimilated the necessary knowledge fail to gain a pass mark through simple logistical mistakes in the examination room.

Some, of course, are made extremely nervous by the stress of the examination itself and this can have an unfortunate effect on performance. It is rather akin to getting tongue-tied at an interview – you could kick yourself afterwards, but the damage has already been done. Others just do not follow the instructions or else misjudge the time available to them.

There is another group who fail – those who do not understand the amount of preparation they must undertake to pass the Institute's examinations.

So, to pass an examination you need both knowledge and technique. As a bonus, you should also have confidence.

### **Preparation for the Examination**

All of us have different ideal studying patterns. Some work best last thing at night, others do better first thing in the morning. Candidate A will gain the most from long periods of study because of the time it takes to get his brain properly into gear. Candidate B will be far more effective working in short bursts. What method suits one will not suit the other.

Whichever method you eventually decide suits you (and it will soon become obvious) be consistent. You cannot tinker with studying; it has to be a wholehearted commitment despite the distractions of everyday life which will inevitably intrude from time to time.

The first step must be to obtain a syllabus of the examination and marry it up with any recommended reading. Ideally this will be done about 18 months before the anticipated examination date as this will give you time to get attuned to what you are undertaking and to prepare a study plan of say 12 months duration which includes a period for revision at the end. You may need less time or perhaps more, although starting too far in advance of the examination date might prove to be counter-productive if staleness sets in.

Your study plan should allocate subjects to the various weeks (allowing time out for holidays etc) and should allow for:

- 1 The coverage of each subject at least twice
- 2 A two week period of general revision
- 3 A final week of intensive revision when essential facts and formulae are memorised.

Only in this way will the size of the task before you start to register and it will also bring home the fact that an unscheduled slackening off of activity in one week will have to be paid for in the next.

If you are being assisted in your studies by correspondence courses or college instruction the work schedule will, to some extent, be planned for you.

### **In the Examination Room**

Always plan to get to the Examination Centre at least 30 minutes before the examination is due to start. You need to unwind from your journey and also pass the time of day with your colleagues – some of whom you may not have seen since the same time last year! It also gives you the chance to check your writing implements etc. Although the Invigilator will help you out with pens etc if you get really stuck, it is far better to have your own plus reserves – you will be far more comfortable with familiar objects. At the very least you need two pens, one lead pencil and sharpener, three coloured pencils, a ruler and a protractor.

The other advantage of planning to arrive early is that it gives you some allowance for a hitch in your travel arrangements. It is a shame to waste a year's studying through a last minute puncture.

You will be allocated a place at which to sit and the appropriate question paper will be placed before you with only the cover sheet showing. This is when the Invigilator will give you important instructions about time, number of questions and how to use your answer paper. You must tear your mind away from all the technical information running through your head and listen to him. What he/she has to say is important and most of it will be repeated in writing on the cover sheet. In particular make a note of the maximum number of questions you must answer and from which sections. If it says six it means six and not seven. The markers are quite ruthless and will simply cross out your last answer or answers in your answer paper if they exceed the stated number (even, alas, if it or they were your best answers).

Now is the time to note the duration of your examination, deduct ten minutes (for final checking of your answers) and then divide the remainder by the number of questions you hope to answer. It is sound advice not to exceed the resultant time per question when you start writing. Most of the marks you score in any question generally result from your first fifteen minutes of writing and spending more time on a favourite question may only get you one or two extra marks at the expense of many more if you fail to complete the paper. The chances are that a later answer can be appropriately answered in under the time and you can then come back to an unfinished script. If you think that is going to happen, leave room at the end of your incomplete answer to come back to it before starting the next question.

Start each question on a separate page.

### **Answering the Questions**

You are allowed ten minutes reading time. As a first step it is quite natural to skim through the question paper and gauge whether or not your study plan has been the right one. Often you will be pleasantly surprised. You cannot write in the answer book during the reading time.

Make sure you put your examination number on the cover of the answer book, on every page and on any additional pages you may use.

Know how many questions you have to answer (sometimes from a specific section) make your selection and jot down your batting order i.e. the order in which you intend to answer them. In the Institute's examinations you are always allowed to answer the paper in your own preferred order as long as you make clear to the examiner what you are doing. The golden rule here is to answer the ones you think the easiest or of which you have the most knowledge first. This not only gives you the best chance of good marks but also boosts your confidence.

By far the most common plea from any examiner is, "PLEASE READ THE QUESTION". It is such a simple request and so obvious that it shouldn't need to be said. Nevertheless many candidates each year lose valuable marks by spending a lot of time answering questions which are not put and vice versa. A lot of effort goes into the phrasing of a question and every word has its importance.

Read the question quickly at first so as to get the gist of it. Then re-read it slowly and make sure you know exactly what is being looked for.

For example, if asked for the *uses* of stone in building construction, do not make a long list of the types available and their properties. You will get no marks. If asked to state which types of extinguishers are most suited to a particular risk do not waste your time and the examiners by explaining their method of operation.

Every care is taken to try to ensure that the questions set are unambiguous and capable of only one possible interpretation. If you are in serious doubt about a correct interpretation point this out to the examiner at the top of your written answer and then go on to answer the version you believe to be the right one.

Your first reading of the question is likely to trigger reactions in your brain and hopefully facts will be falling over each other to be expressed. Take the opportunity to commit these to rough paper as they occur in case you forget them again. Some students at this stage like to lay out the shape of their answer in draft. Others prefer to let the answer develop as they go along. If you make any rough notes on the answer paper itself be sure to score them through at the end. Any calculations however should be left for the examiner to see.

There will be certain key words in the question which dictate your method of presentation. The most common of these are:

Define	Compare	Discuss
State	Report	Summarise
Describe	Explain	Briefly
List	Draw and Label	

These words all have a specific meaning. Take a dictionary now and be sure you know exactly what these meanings are.

Use the opportunity to list wherever you can. It makes for easier writing for you as well as easier marking for the examiner. Remember particularly that "compare" generally means comparing disadvantages as well as advantages and that "report" indicates that the examiner will be allocating marks specifically for the way you present the facts and draw conclusions.

When asked to "discuss" definitely do not list. It is implicit that your opinion on a complicated issue is being sought not just a display of facts.

Some questions will specifically ask for diagrams or sketches. Others may not but even so you may judge that your answer may benefit from some visual presentation of this type. Diagrams, well drawn and properly annotated, invariably bring additional marks unless it is obvious that they are totally superfluous to the information being sought. But remember:

- 1 Do not cramp your diagrams
- 2 Do not overdo the use of coloured pencils. It is rare that the use of more than three colours will enhance your explanation and you run the risk of making your work look like a Christmas tree
- 3 Use a ruler for a straight line and a protractor or compass for curves

#### 4 Label carefully; don't ruin a good diagram by ugly thick arrows

Even in purely written or calculation type answers presentation is important. You do not gain or lose marks for handwriting but obviously the examiner can extract the greatest number of marks from a script he/she can read and which is well laid out. As for calculations, avoid listing a string of figures. Only a small proportion of the marks for this type of question are allocated for the right arithmetical answer; the remainder hinge around formulae, presentation, logical order and explanation of units. If these interim stages are missing and you also get the answer wrong you are of course doubly penalised.

Length of answer is important. The Institute generally marks an answer out of a possible 20. Three or four line answers no matter how pertinent cannot be expected to achieve anything other than low marks. Questions are not just tests of knowledge but also of expression and the full 20 minutes or so is absolutely necessary for providing an appropriately detailed script. However be equally careful about going to the opposite extreme. It is simply not true that the more one writes the better chance there is of passing. Examiners are very astute at spotting "padding" and having given you a mark for a fact expressed at the beginning of an answer will not fall into the trap of allocating another one when the same fact, suitably disguised, reappears towards the end.

Also keep clear of generalities. Phrases such as "should be of an appropriate standard" are particularly obnoxious and receive NO MARKS. You must give an indication of what that standard should be.

Finally do not attempt to bend the question, and hence your answer, into what you would like it to be instead of what it is. You will receive nothing for a right answer to a wrong question. This habit is particularly apparent in management papers where a student has thoroughly prepared themselves on say functional leadership or critical path analysis and is determined to show the examiners this despite the fact that the question is about organisation charts or similar.

### **The End of the Examination**

Unless you have got into really deep water you should have time at the end to check back on your answers. You may be able to add a last minute thought that did not occur at the time or you may spot something that is incomplete or, in the case of calculations, totally nonsensical. You invariably gain several marks from this ten minutes of checking and these may be vital to you.

If you do find your self rushed towards the end because you have unwittingly spent too much time on early answers, try very hard to answer the set number of questions no matter how briefly. Examiners will give credit for an outline answer in note form if you do not have time to write it out fully – that is better than no marks at all.

Do not be put off by people walking out of the examination room early. We all work at different speeds but generally speaking, it is a mistake to make an early exit. Very few scripts would fail to benefit from some alteration where time permits and to finish well in advance of the set time is normally an indication that your answers have not been as detailed as they should be.

Stress and pressure are inevitable in the examination for all but the coolest of us. That is not necessarily a bad thing as, in the main, most of us respond well to such pressure and the added adrenaline helps to produce our best work. It is said that you should walk out of an examination room at the end of a complete session feeling like a wet rag and desiring nothing else but a long restful weekend. You will have deserved it.

**Good Luck!**