

The Secret Ingredient to Last 30 days of Prelims + Winning the ENDGAME

Charles Dickens famously wrote – It was the *best* of times; it was the *worst* of times. The run-up to the Prelims perhaps can be best described as above.[1]

Being 30 days away from Prelims is like being at the edge of a cliff. You are afraid of the fall, and yet you have to take the jump. The good news is – there is no *cliff*. It's in your mind that you need to win this battle, before you win the real endgame. And here are a few things that can be of help.

#1 Stop Asking the BIG Questions

Right now, if your mind is asking the big questions –

- is it really worth it?
- is it worth the pain – giving up on the job I quit,
- the EOL I took,
- the person I sacrificed for this,
- or simply the foundation course that I missed[2].

And even if you have not sacrificed anything for it, probably stop thinking about what you will do after getting IAS a year from now [3]. No **daydreaming**, no asking absurd questions or questions whose answers are not in the format of a) b) c) d)

MCQs are all the questions you need to ask and answer. No questions on what the meaning of life is.

You know what I mean. Right now, we need is action. And effort. Least of *overthinking*. So, stop thinking. Start doing. Stop worrying about things that won't happen or matter in the first place.

In short, stop those voices in your head.

#2 Track what you do. Daily.

The Summers are supposed to have long *long* days. But when you start studying and have a busy schedule, you will soon realise you are short of time. Now you know why people say, “If I had **30 hours instead of 24 a day**, I would conquer the world (or equivalent of it – in our own little worlds – like achieve X or Y thing)”. It's easy to lose track of time, and unless you do something about it, you will be in the same position today, as you were yesterday. So here is the way to track time –

Have a To Do list. Maintain a list of things you would do for the day.

This list should be two things – *classy* & *fabulous*

- Granular, and
- Doable

By Granular I mean *do not maintain a checklist as below*

To Do List

- Spectrum History

- Go Cheng Leong
- Laxmikant Parliament Chapter
- Envision IAS Test paper
- Revise Simulator Test Papers
- Previous Years Paper 2015-2025

This is NOT a granular list. A granular list always consists of tasks that are doable in one sitting, cannot be further broken into simpler tasks and are achievable. They are tangible, can be ticked off, have a point of completion, and the completion time is such that you do not lose interest in it. Here is an example

- Spectrum History – **1939-1947 – Doable**
- Go Cheng Leong – **Coral Reefs Chapter + River System – Doable**
- Laxmikant Parliament Chapter – 50 Pages or List of Topics – **Doable**
- Envision IAS Test paper – 25 Questions – Doable
- Revise Simulator Test 0 Paper – Doable
- Previous Years Paper 2022 – One Paper – Doable
- Culture Past 10 Years Questions – Again Doable.

Tick off this checklist as and when you finish this, and count these as your little achievements. That's all the celebration and success you can have right now.

#3 The Priority List

In the last days, the one thing that is **most** important is your *priority* list.

You achieve what you prioritise.

So, in the last moment, do not be bogged down by random study material floating on the Internet. Here is the order of priority list you need to have

#Priority List No #1 – Basic Books. The by-now-ugly-looking-worn-torn-and-underlined books of History, Polity, Geography (yes that NECRT – 2 of them), Environment are your priority No. 1. They are like your parents. Even if they are old, they have to be your priority, no matter who else you have in your life. In fact, these basic books will always rescue you in the *end*.

#Priority List No #2 – Previous Years Papers. Yes. I can tell you that you can clear this exam with just #1 and #2. Nothing else is needed. Just keep these two together. Keep looking at the question papers and spend at least 40 minutes to one hour on the previous years' papers every day. If you are good enough to tell that Neyawn this question was asked by UPSC in 2021, you are good enough to clear the Prelims. You have to be *that* good. Here are a few pointers on them too

- First, solve these questions backward. By this I mean that you must solve the last years' paper. i.e. 2024, then 2023, then 2022, then 2021 and hence onwards.
- Second, go as far back as you can. At least solve questions upto 2010 and go back to 30 years paper if you can. Questions from certain sections such as History, Culture and Science & Tech are repeated to some extent every year and those 5 missing questions – which separate you from Mains can be covered from here.
- Third, if you do not have the patience to solve previous years papers, just look at them, while having food, or while walking in your room. Just turn the pages. They should be imprinted on

your mind. They also help you know what all the areas you have been missing and help you plan accordingly. Even better, they help you get the focal points right – the areas to focus on, in the ocean of the vast syllabus that UPSC is.

#4 Revision is the key

I was on a telephonic call with one of my students last week. He had cracked IIT, then CAT, then Indian Forest Service and Indian Police Service. He got IAS later. A good enough Rank 10. After all this, he gave me a lot of undeserved credit for his success.

I was calling him to seek some help on the use of a Software and some productivity hack. The one thing that struck me in the conversation was when he said – Sir, actually I used to take the print of my evernote notes and read it multiple times, as I have very poor memory and forget things quickly if I read them only once.

Now, a lot of people who have the forgetfulness problem think that it is a problem. And it affects them uniquely. And that it has something to do with how their brains work. And that they are bad at memorising stuff. And also, that they are otherwise hard working.

Out of 100 strong candidates, I meet (by which I mean those who have studied hard, scored well in GS by hard work or reached Interview), I hardly find one person with a photographic memory. Nearly everyone says – Sir I have a poor memory. I have to read things multiple times or I forget.

Surprisingly, the people who do not score well in MCQs have one common problem – I have poor memory, I forget things easily. *I am otherwise hard working.*[4]

Little do they realise that forgetting things is *normal*.

Revision is a *standard* step taken by nearly everyone to clear competitive examinations.

Remembering things by just reading them once is abnormal and *superhuman*. So do not make a big deal out of being *born* a Homo Sapiens. On the planet Earth, Homo Sapiens can't remember things by just reading them once.

If you don't like this arrangement, you can try changing your species or the planet you live in or *both*.

But for this planet, and this species, STFU and *revise*.

And this is nearly the secret ingredient (but wait for the surprise later).

Look, the questions in Prelims are designed such so that if you have not read, drank and digested things (which takes a second third and fifth revision), and even have an iota of doubt over it, you are bound to make it wrong.

So, all you people who have “high error rate” – multiple revision is the key. The more you revise, the better you get.

And no one likes revising. Reading the same old stuff again and again. But if I learned something from the successful people around me – in the three decades+ of my yet lived life is – success is something that is achieved by doing the same things over and over again.

And your ability to succeed (in life, If I may add) depends on doing things that you do not like.

Nearly everyone reading this would love to read a new book, but how many would be willing to revise the same old book?

#5 Do not get stuck at some point. Have no Ego Problems

At this point, you also have to make sure that you do not get stuck at something and while away hours or days chasing it. If you are unable to do something important, find out an easier way how to do it. If you are unable to do something less important, leave it at that. Move on. Do not waste away an entire day on a problem you cannot solve. Seek professional help instead or ask a friend or a mentor. It is a cheaper way that saves you time and money and energy. Out of the three, only money is renewable. The other two not.

#6 Time you work

Remember, work expands to fill up the time you have. So, unless you time your work, it will take all the time you have. You could revise the 1857 Revolt in either 15 minutes (you should know by now the story and only need to revise the names) , or two hours. The choice is yours. Time your work

In the last few days, instead of saying, “I will study the Chapter on Fundamental Rights” – which again can take between 2 hours to 2 days – say to yourself – “I will study the FR chapter for 90 minutes or 120 minutes or from 10am – 1pm” – and when it strikes 1, or the time limit you have given to yourself for studying it – you must leave that chapter.

It has two benefits:

Firstly, you do not waste time being stuck with something over a long period of time.

Secondly, since you know that you have less time for doing it, it is likely that you will utilise your time in a much better manner.

This should not be too difficult to believe since a scarcity of something is never a criterion for people achieving their goals – and plenty of something also does not mean that the person having it will be able to utilise it fully. Chances are, persons who have plenty, often end up squandering it. People who have less, make wiser use of things. [5]

#7 The Secret Ingredient to Prelims

In the last few days, as the days get hotter, long and worse, I have one last thing to tell you.

You are the secret ingredient.

Just this.

It's always you. In the past few years, I have mentored a few hundred candidates to succeed in the Civil Services Examination, but here is the thing – People like the story of someone external helping them.

A lot of times, you stand there taking calls, meeting people and sacrificing a 2AM sleep because you know that some people believe in you more than they believe in themselves. So, I do my job. (Like I cry in the washroom, when a student I was really hoping to make into Top 100 doesn't

make it, or when someone I have worked with, screws up their Prelims for some stupid reasons, like saving money on Ola Cab on day of exam and could not find auto later and arrived at the exam centre late. A lot of my colleagues and family members do not understand why I would cry for someone's result, but then I am a lot emotionally invested in my work, and in my universe, that is as big a deal as someone [watching his movies getting flopped](#).)

I met one of my good students a few weeks back. She had some Rank in 200s, had opted for IRS, would get it and was happy about it. I had seen her the year round, every SFG test with a swollen face (the perils of waking up early), every class for Mains. Then I saw a pamphlet advertisement of her giving away some giving Topper Talks. I met her and said stop giving Topper talks and start preparing for an under 50 Rank. You are my good candidate. She said – Sir, I don't want IAS, I am happy with IRS which I will probably get. But now after seeing so many people from Forum who till last year did not clear Prelims – all the people sitting around in the class itself – getting Top Ranks in the final list – I think even I can get under 50 Rank, and I know I can do it.

That's self-belief. Something that she did not have in her previous attempts. She may have semi-trusted me, but she now trusts herself fully. And that is all she needs.

The truth is you, are not even aware of things you are capable of achieving. The people who will pass in this exam will make it to the IAS. The people who will fail could be Supreme Court Judges and even the Prime Minister. We do not know it yet.

You will never have as much enthusiasm, energy and passion as you have today. Right at this moment. You will never have as much hair on your head as you have today.

It's *always* you. So, focus on the good around you. And make things work for you. Even if the past has not been so good.

People come in two varieties: those who look out of the windshield. And those who stare in the rearview mirror. Be the windshield type: Focus on the future, not the past, because that's the only part that can *still* be changed.

And when you shall have changed your future, remember to buy me coffee. I am *that* ambitious.

Until next time,



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[1] Dickens wrote this in the context of the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

[2] For those of you taking this exam again, despite clearing the exam before, to get a service of their choice.

[3] Visualisation is daydreaming with a purpose.

[4] If we remembered things by just reading them once, there would be no need for hard work. *Hard work* is reading the same thing again and again until you know it by heart. That itself is hard work. Period. So don't claim that you are hard working, if you can't revise.

[5] And right now, you have less time, so you know what I mean.

[#] ENGAGE title of this Blog Post Inspired by [this dude](#) and after a post by [this dude](#)

* This article has been originally published on ForumIAS Blog. You can read this article here: <https://forumias.com/blog/the-secret-ingredient-to-last-30-days-of-prelims-winning-the-endgame/>

ANSWER KEY

1	C	21	C	41	B	61	B
2	D	22	C	42	B	62	C
3	C	23	B	43	C	63	C
4	B	24	A	44	C	64	D
5	A	25	D	45	A	65	A
6	B	26	B	46	B	66	B
7	B	27	D	47	B	67	C
8	B	28	C	48	A	68	D
9	A	29	C	49	D	69	D
10	C	30	D	50	A	70	A
11	C	31	B	51	D	71	B
12	C	32	D	52	C	72	B
13	C	33	C	53	B	73	C
14	D	34	D	54	C	74	C
15	A	35	C	55	B	75	D
16	B	36	A	56	B	76	B
17	B	37	C	57	A	77	C
18	B	38	B	58	A	78	A
19	B	39	A	59	A	79	D
20	C	40	C	60	B	80	C