CSE ONE · RESOURCES FOR ASPIRANTS

# The Aspirant's Handbook

The same advice our mentors use, written for you. Find your stage, study in ways that stick, write better answers, prepare for the interview, look after yourself, build a healthy routine, and get the most from a mentor.

## Where are you right now?

Pick the card that sounds like you. Each has three things to do this month.

JUST STARTING

### Build the map before the library

1. Read the full syllabus and the last 5 years' Prelims papers.
2. Pick two GS subjects to begin; one core book each, plus NCERTs.
3. Start a daily newspaper habit: 45 minutes, notes by syllabus topic.

Your attempt counts the day you sit Prelims. Don't spend one casually. Check your age window and attempts.

PREPARING FOR PRELIMS

### Revise more than you read

1. No new books in the last 4 months. Revise what you have.
2. Two full tests a week; review each the same day (tab 2).
3. Sit one past CSAT paper now to find out where you stand. Below 66? Book a CSAT specialist.

CLEARED PRELIMS

### Write, every day

1. Fill your Mains form (DAF-I) carefully: it shapes your interview.
2. Five timed answers a day; one full paper a week.
3. Practise both qualifying language papers once each.

CLEARED MAINS

### Know your DAF inside out

1. Write 5–10 likely questions for every line of your DAF.
2. Take 3–5 spaced mock interviews, not 15.
3. Keep 1–2 hours a day for Prelims revision, just in case.

STUCK AFTER ATTEMPTS

### Audit before you decide

1. Get your marksheet and see exactly where you stopped.
2. Name what will be different next time, specifically.
3. Write a rule now: "If I score below ___, I'll move to ___ by ___."

READY TO PIVOT

### Your preparation still counts

1. List exams that reuse it: state PSCs, RBI Grade B, SEBI, NABARD, CAPF AC.
2. Check each one's age limit in its current notification.
3. Turn your preparation into CV lines: writing, analysis, discipline.

## The exam in one picture

**5,76,793**
sat Prelims in 2025

**14,161**
reached Mains

**2,736**
reached the interview

**958**
were recommended: about 1 in 602 who sat the exam

Not clearing is the most common outcome, even for very capable people. Plan for a long game, and keep a Plan B in view.

## Study in ways that stick

Research on learning is clear: testing yourself and spacing out revision beat rereading and highlighting.

**Recall, then check**

Close the book. Write what you remember on a blank page. Then open it and mark what you missed.

**Revise on a schedule**

Day 1, day 7, day 30, day 90. Each time, start by recalling from memory.

**One source per subject**

Plus NCERTs. Read it three times rather than three books once.

**One-page notes**

Headings, key facts, one diagram. If it won't fit on a page, it's not revision-ready.

## Current affairs without drowning

1. **One newspaper** — 45–60 minutes a day
2. **Tag it** — Which syllabus topic does this belong to?
3. **Three lines** — What, why it matters, one fact
4. **Monthly merge** — Combine notes by topic

**Dhara: current affairs already mapped to the syllabus →**

## Turn every test into a fix list

| WHY I GOT IT WRONG | WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK |
|---|---|
| Didn't know it | Add the topic to this week's plan; make a one-page note. |
| Knew it, got confused | Recall that note tomorrow and again in a week. |
| Misread the question | Underline "not", "only", "correct", "incorrect" every time. |
| Risky guess | Guess only after removing at least one option. A blind guess among four gains nothing on average. |

## Better Mains answers

WORDS
**150 / 250**
for 10- and 15-mark questions

TIME
**7 / 11 min**
per answer, to finish all 20

RULE
**20 / 20**
A short answer beats a blank one

## The first two minutes

1. **Underline**
   The question word and every part asked
2. **Headings**
   3–5 in the margin
3. **One value-add**
   A fact, case, judgment or diagram
4. **Write**
   Intro 2 lines, body in points, conclusion 2 lines

## What the question word wants

| WORD | DO THIS |
|---|---|
| **Discuss** | Cover several angles, both sides, a brief view |
| **Critically examine** | Strengths, then limits, then a balanced verdict |
| **Analyse** | Break into parts and show how they connect |
| **Evaluate** | Judge against criteria, with evidence for and against |
| **Comment** | Your reasoned view, with a counterpoint |

## Self-check every answer

- [ ] Did I answer every part, in the way the question word asked?
- [ ] Can someone see my structure in 5 seconds?
- [ ] Did I cover at least three dimensions?
- [ ] Is there one fact, example or diagram that a general answer wouldn't have?
- [ ] Did I finish within the words and time, with a conclusion?

## The interview, from your side

275 marks, about 30 minutes, a board of around five. UPSC calls it a natural conversation, not a cross-examination. They're meeting the person who wrote your DAF.

**Prepare your DAF**

For every line (name, district, degree, job, hobbies, service choices), write 5–10 questions you could be asked, and practise answering them aloud.

**Opinion questions**

Acknowledge it's complex, give both sides in a line each, then your balanced view and a practical way forward. About a minute.

**Don't know?**

Say so: "I'm sorry, I don't know, but I'll read about it." Honesty is one of the things being assessed.

**Under pressure?**

Often they're checking your calm, not your facts. Slow down and stay courteous.

## The day

- [ ] Carry the e-summon letter, photo ID, and every original and copy it lists
- [ ] Try on your outfit days before: formal, comfortable, plain
- [ ] No new reading the night before; sleep at your normal time
- [ ] Expect to wait for hours; carry water, a snack and your DAF

**If you feel unsafe right now**

Call Tele-MANAS, Government of India: **14416** or 1-800-891-4416. Free, 24×7, about 20 languages. Emergency: **112**. Please also tell someone you trust today.

## Look after yourself

**7–8 h**
sleep. Memory is consolidated while you sleep.

**20–30 min**
movement a day. A walk counts.

**½ day**
off every week. Rest is part of the plan.

**1 person**
to talk to each week who isn't preparing.

## Tools for hard days

**If–then plans**
"If it's 7 am, then I sit at my desk and open the polity notes." A clear cue makes starting much easier.

**Your minimum day**
Decide now what a bad day looks like: newspaper plus one answer. On bad days, do just that.

**The friend question**
"What would I say to a friend with these marks?" Then say it to yourself.

**Slow breathing**
In for 4, out for 6, for two minutes. Try it before mock tests, not just on exam day.

## After a bad result

1

### Days 1–3

Rest, eat, be with people. Stay off result forums. No big decisions.

2

### Days 4–10

Wake time, walk, 2–3 hours of light work. Write what went wrong, without blame.

3

### Days 11–14

Look at your marks with a mentor and decide.

If low mood, poor sleep or hopelessness lasts more than two or three weeks, talk to a doctor or call Tele-MANAS. Asking for help is a strength.

## Health is physical, mental and social

The WHO defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". A long preparation needs all three.

PHYSICAL

### Sleep and move

7+ hours of sleep; 150–300 minutes of moderate activity a week; strength exercises 2 days a week.

MENTAL

### Rest and kindness

Half a day off weekly; self-compassion after setbacks; limits on forums and topper videos.

SOCIAL

### Stay connected

Two real calls home a week; one friend outside UPSC; one shared meal a day.

## Use Focus to run the routine

1. **Syllabus** — Track every microtheme: Not started, Learning, Revised, Mastered.
2. **Focus timer** — 25, 50 or 90-minute blocks, a break nudge at the end.
3. **Study log** — Timer time is logged for you.
4. **Weekly target** — Hours per week, not per day.
5. **Health nudges** — Optional water-and-walk reminders.

LEARN

**Syllabus map and notes**

Every topic with the official wording and what it covers.

DHARA

**Current affairs, mapped**

What changed, a Prelims fact and a Mains angle for each development.

EVALUATE

**Feedback on answers**

Free AI feedback on Mains answers, ethics cases and DAF briefs.

Open Focus, free →

## Quick calculators

**Age & attempts**

Your eligibility window and attempts left.

**Prelims marks**

Your score after negative marking, GS and CSAT.

**Revision dates**

Day 1, 7, 30 and 90 for what you studied today.

## Read more on the blog

WELLBEING

**Health is part of the plan**

The WHO definition, sleep, movement, loneliness, and a week you can keep for years.

STUDY TOOLS

**Focused blocks and syllabus tracking**

The Pomodoro idea, what research says about breaks, and how to set it up in Focus.

MINDSET

**Strategies for the tough stretches**

If–then plans, reframing nerves, writing worries down, self-compassion and more.

MINDSET

**Biases and the science of persevering**

Planning fallacy, survivorship bias, sunk costs, and the ideas that keep people going.

## Getting the most from a mentor

BEFORE

### Bring evidence

Your marks, a recent test, 2–3 answer copies, your timetable. Write the one question you most want answered.

DURING

### Be honest

About hours, money, health and how you feel. Mentors can only help with what they know.

AFTER

### Act within 48 hours

Start one of the three actions straight away. Message your mentor if something blocks you.

## Which mentor do you need?

| IF YOU WANT HELP WITH... | CHOOSE |
|---|---|
| A plan, a repeat-or-exit decision, a Plan B | Counsellor |
| GS, Prelims, answer writing | Generalist |
| CSAT (Paper II): maths, reasoning, comprehension | CSAT specialist |
| Your optional subject | Optional expert |
| DAF and mock interviews | Interview coach |
| Setbacks, burnout, pressure, motivation | Motivation & wellbeing mentor |

### A good mentor

- ✓ Listens before advising
- ✓ Uses your numbers, not general tips
- ✓ Gives you three clear actions
- ✓ Respects your decisions

### Warning signs, anywhere

- ✕ Promises selection or a rank
- ✕ Asks you to pay them directly
- ✕ Compares you with toppers to shame you
- ✕ Makes you feel judged for your background

**Find a verified mentor →**


**Sources** (checked 14 November 2026)

1. CSE 2025 numbers: UPSC final result, 6 March 2026 (result highlights).
2. Mains word limits and marks: PW Only IAS. Interview: the CSE notification, as quoted by TalkDrill.
3. Study methods: Dunlosky et al. (2013), via Evidence Based Education.
4. Tele-MANAS: IIT Kanpur counselling service.
5. Health: WHO Constitution; WHO physical activity fact sheet; AASM/SRS sleep consensus.


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