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Managerial level, strategic level and TOPCIMA papers

The addition of reading time for papers P1 to P10 is intended to reduce the time pressure on students. But this extra 20 minutes must be managed properly, too.

As many of you know, CIMA is introducing 20 minutes of reading time before all exams at managerial level and above from this month's sitting. This is a breakthrough for students. For years they've been told that time management is the key to success and for years they've come back afterwards saying: "I'd have passed that one if I hadn't run out of time." On the face of it, therefore, this excuse is now gone forever.

During the reading time, writing answers is forbidden. Indeed, if you are caught doing this, you may well be told to leave the exam hall, so don't even be tempted. You will be allowed to annotate the question booklet with a pencil or highlighter, but not to use a calculator. So, is it 20 minutes to relax and ensure that you pass, or is it 20 minutes to get in such a panic that your chances are lessened? My advice is to break the time down into five-minute chunks.

First five minutes

Read the requirements of the optional questions. Choose which ones you are going to attempt. This choice should be based upon your knowledge, the wording of the requirement and the split of the marks across these requirements.

Once you have made your choice, note down next to the requirements the relevant key elements of the syllabus. By doing this you ensure that you won't need to worry any more about certain sections of the question booklet.

Second five minutes

Go to the main compulsory question. This can carry up to 50 marks, so it's important that you're clear about its requirements.

Make notes in pencil next to the requirements to remind yourself of the relevant parts of the syllabus and what you think the key elements to your answer will be. You'll still need to make a full plan in your answer booklet to cover all the key points you want to make, but this "brain download" will make it easier to generate ideas. You cannot use your calculator, but, if there are numerical elements to the requirements, you can note down what calculations you will be able to perform.

Third five minutes

Read the scenario in the main compulsory question. Annotate it so that you can see clearly which elements relate to which requirements. This means that, if you need to refer back to the

scenario later, you should be able to go straight back to the relevant section without having to read the whole thing again.

Read the most relevant information slowly and skim through the less relevant material. Don't expect the answer to be in the scenario – it's only a guide to help you.

Last five minutes

If you have multiple-choice questions, now is the time to go through them. Don't dwell on those that look easy; spend time on the tougher ones. Decide whether or not an extra minute or two will get you to the right answer. If not, then leave that question and focus on those that you can do. If you don't have multiple-choice questions, you're probably taking a strategic level paper – in which case you'll have done well to complete the processes I have recommended by this time.

When your 20 minutes is up, you will be told that the exam time has started and you can now write your answers in the booklets provided.

So why is CIMA offering this extra time? As I mentioned before, for many years students have complained about the time pressure they are put under in the exams. This move would appear to address this issue and ensure that the exam markers can clearly see the candidates' abilities in relation to the subject area. It should result in an improvement in pass rates across all papers, which is good for everyone. But this doesn't mean that you can afford to become complacent about time management in your exams. I cannot stress enough how quickly the 20 minutes will fly by. If you aren't disciplined in your approach, you will find yourself panicking and not thinking clearly. Panic is probably the most detrimental emotional state to get yourself into in an exam, so you must not let this happen.

Overall, I am very excited about these changes. As a tutor who has seen many students' lives turned upside down not because they didn't know the subject, but because they simply couldn't manage their time effectively, I think this is a positive move by CIMA. I look forward to the era when candidates can complete their exams in the time allowed and really show what they can do. *FM*

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