



CIMA Case Study Examinations

# Answer planning: Does it really matter?

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# Answer planning matters

The most common complaint from the CIMA Case Study (CS) examiners across all three levels is that students have **‘failed to answer the question that was asked’**.

There is a whole range of ways to not answer a question, for example:

- Students determined to prove how much they’ve learned, regurgitating learned material and ignoring the question
- Answering only part of the question, even though the examiner may have required several things to be done to get full marks, perhaps due to running short of time
- Answering the question they hoped for rather than the one that is required!
- Not answering at the verb level — ‘discuss’, ‘advise’, ‘evaluate’. Etc.

There is a one-size-fits-all solution that can address all of these challenges — answer planning.

When we read the question requirement, the buzzwords in it should trigger an influx of thoughts in our heads. These thoughts are just mental associations of syllabus topics you studied previously, your experiences or just some random ideas that have some sort of association with the buzzwords in the question requirement.

However, the ‘radiant-thinking’ brain does not generate these thoughts in a coherent order or one that is strictly ‘relevant’ to the question the examiner set. For instance, read the question below and pause for a moment to check what crossed your mind immediately after you finished reading it — ‘Discuss how the conflict between Joe and other managers at GS could be resolved.’ [MCS: Aug 2020 variant 1 – section 2c]. You will probably see that if you start producing an answer straight after reading the question requirement, you face the risk of not answering all parts of the question the examiner set precisely and within the allowed time.

CIMA Case Study examinations are computer-based, hence answers must be typed in as opposed to using pen and paper. Therefore, it’s important to know where you can plan your answer. As most of the students do, you may answer-plan in your head. On average, the human brain can generate 35–48 thoughts per minute. However, neurological science has demonstrated that the human brain is incapable of focusing on two things at once, hence thoughts generated rapidly keep fading off to leave space for ‘new’ thoughts. So, answer-planning in your head is not going to be a great help. The alternative is to ‘think on paper’, which allows you to explore your thoughts, ideas, and insights regarding a particular topic. Some students use the ‘clean-wipe’ pad and the marker pen provided during the examination for answer planning; however, this isn’t very time-efficient because you cannot copy/paste from it into the electronic ‘answer sheet’ on the computer screen. The next-best alternative seems to be to use the on-screen ‘scratch pad’ to plan your answer but you will still have to copy and paste it on the electronic ‘answer sheet’. Having considered all these options, the best place to answer plan is the on-screen ‘answer sheet’ itself.

## Step No. 1: Read the task (question) carefully.

The obvious first step in answer-planning is to **read the question** requirement together with the incidental (unseen) information provided for the task. How many times should you read the question requirement? The answer is simple – read as many times as it takes for you to understand it!

## Step No. 2: Investigate the background of the task (question).

The second step is to understand the background to the requirement and exact examiner-expectations in the task set. The questions below might be helpful in this quick **background investigation** and the acronym 'FORMAT' will help you to remember them.

- **F**ormat of the answer (e.g., report, discussion paper, briefing note, etc.)
- **O**bjective (or the purpose) of the task (e.g., recommendation to the board)
- **R**ecipient of your work (e.g., line manager or a colleague without finance background)
- **M**y role as simulated in the exam (e.g., finance manager in the MCS examination)
- **A**ction or the verb (e.g., discuss how the conflict ...)
- **T**ime allowed (and marks) for the task

Let me illustrate this with a question from the August 2020 MCS examination (variant 1 – section 3)

'Please send me some notes so that I can respond to Ted.

I would like you to explain:

Firstly, how the five performance measures operate within the structure of Alpaca and their relevance to his role if GS becomes part of the Alpaca South division. [Sub-task (a) = 60%]

and

Secondly, how any risks arising from the three issues he identified could be managed. [Sub-task (b) = 40%]

The examiner requires that you answer in the 'notes' **format**, hence you may start the answer with a broad heading such as "Notes: Performance Measures and Management of Risks" to cover both the sub-tasks.

The immediate **recipient** of your notes will be the line manager (Liz Petrov); however, Liz needs these notes (the **objective**) to respond to Ted Drummond, who is both new to his organisation (GS) and has not worked in a divisionalised structure before. This background information will inform you as to the depth of explanation you will have to include in your answer. This is how the examiner gives you 'hints' about the extent to which you should demonstrate your technical understanding of the syllabus topic(s) in your answer.

Management Case Study (MCS) examination candidates are expected to simulate the role of a finance manager (**my role**) with the overall responsibility for monitoring and implementing of strategy and the job focus is on the medium term. Therefore, in effect, the broader **action** expected in the MCS examination from candidates is to 'advise' their line manager by providing the information asked for. This is particularly important when the question requirement is in 'conversational language' (e.g., 'I need your opinion on ...', 'What do the tables tell us about ...'). Complete understanding of the role simulation, core activities and assessment outcomes (as in the examination blueprint) will really help you to interpret and understand what the examiner expects in your answer. Sometimes, the action required is explicit through the verb(s) in the task.

## Step No. 3: Structure planning

The above background analysis may be done in your head, but you will have to incorporate it into your 'thinking on paper'. You will do this on the on-screen 'answer sheet' when you get on to the third step – **structure planning**, which in essence is to sketch each requirement of the task as a series of headings for the answer, along with indicative time and marks allocation for each requirement. I will illustrate this using the same question above.

This is a 45-minute task. You will see the clock on the top, right-hand corner of the computer screen start to tick away backward from 45:00. A total of 25 marks are allocated for this task, and are split between sub-tasks (a) and (b) as 60% and 40%, respectively. This means, you are expected to spend 60% of the **time** allowed (27 minutes) on the sub-task (a) to earn 15 marks. And, the balance 18 minutes (40% of 45 minutes) is to be spent on the sub-task (b) to earn 10 marks.

Look at each sub-task carefully to see whether they can be split further into sub-headings. Look for 'and', commas

and full stops in the requirement. For instance, in the sub-task (a) you will see '... and ...' – this means that you may be expected (not always) to provide two parts in your answer. You may either provide these 'two different things' under separate sub-headings or you must ensure to cover these 'two different things' under one sub-heading. Please see the alternative structure plans for sub-task (1) in the table below.

You may use 'bold' and 'underline' formatting tools in the electronic 'answer sheet'. Structure planning provides a structured layout that allows you to allocate your time in proportion to the allocated marks and, most importantly, answer 'all' requirements in the task. This largely answers the frequently asked question, 'How many points should I make in my answer'?

It's worth remembering that marks will be equally split amongst the sub-requirements in each sub-task hence you will have to split the time equally, too.

### Notes: Performance Measures and Management of Risks

To: Liz Petrov

From: Finance Manager

[do NOT write your personal name here]

#### (a) Performance Measures (15) – 27 minutes

##### Explanation of five performance measures (8)

Operating profit margin

Occupancy rate

Staff turnover

ROCE

Overall guest rating on Visitadvisor

##### Explanation of relevance of five performance measures to Ted (7)

Operating profit margin

Occupancy rate

Staff turnover

ROCE

Overall guest rating on Visitadvisor

#### (b) Managing Risks (10) – 18 minutes

Risk 1: increase in staff turnover (4)

Risk 2: bars and restaurants must close by 23:00 (3)

Risk 3: visitor tax (3)

### Notes: Performance Measures and Management of Risks

To: Liz Petrov

From: Finance Manager

[do NOT write your personal name here]

#### (a) Explanation of five performance measures and their relevance to Ted (15) – 27 minutes

Operating profit margin

Occupancy rate

Staff turnover

ROCE

Overall guest rating on Visitadvisor

#### (b) Managing Risks (10) – 18 minutes

Risk 1: increase in staff turnover (4)

Risk 2: bars and restaurants must close by 23:00 (3)

Risk 3: visitor tax (3)

## Step No. 4: Content planning

The fourth step is **content planning**. This involves adding in the main points (a word or two) for each sub-heading. At this stage, read the question requirement again to ensure that the points you have added remain relevant so

that you are answering the exact question the examiner set. You can quickly type the triggers or pointers under each sub-heading, as you see in the below table.

### *(a) Explanation of five performance measures and their relevance to Ted (15) – 27 minutes*

#### Operating profit margin

*Explain [this measure]*

*Can Ted influence or control?*

*Relevance to Ted*

#### Occupancy rate

### *(b) Managing Risks (10) – 18 minutes*

#### Risk 1: increase in staff turnover (4)

*Explain [this risk]*

*[Your] advice – explain and justify*

#### Risk 2: bars and restaurants must close by 23:00 (3)

By now, you may be thinking that answer planning itself will take the entire 45 minutes! However, once you develop the mindset and become familiar with the process, you will be able to complete these four steps fairly quickly. Use this method for all your question practice and mock exams. You can use past Case Study examinations materials for practice and becoming familiar with answer planning even before you have access to the pre-seen of the examination you are booked into.

Do be careful though not to get too engrossed in answer planning. What the marker will be reading is your complete answer, which is the muscled-up version of your answer plan. As a rough guide, spend no more than a third of the time allocated for the task (in this question 15 minutes); you should be able to produce an answer with a passing score comfortably in the remaining two-thirds (here, 30 minutes) of the time available.

"It is important to take time to plan your answer so that you are able to apply your knowledge to the specifics of the case. I suggest that for certain tasks you plan your answers in the answer screen itself."

– Examiner



## Step No. 5: Produce the answer.

Now, you have got an answer plan with guideposts. The next step is to type the answer in one go! Remember, CIMA CS examination tasks will be practical and applied, not theoretical or academic. To be successful, you will have to perform the core activities in the same way, and to the same standards, that would be valid and valued in the workplace. The below checklist depicted by the acronym 'PEARL' may help you convert your answer plan into a complete answer with a passing score.

- Have I stated each **point** clearly and completely?
- Have I **explained** (or **examined**) my points in adequate depth?
- Have I simulated the role through my **analysis** and building **arguments**?
- Have I **related** my points appropriately, applying and referencing to the scenario?
- Have I **linked-back** to the requirement through integration of my knowledge and/or points?  
(You may do this in a short conclusion to the answer.)

It must be stressed that the nature of the case study examination tasks means that a range of responses will be valid. The marker reads your answer for a given task in full. This is to ensure that the marker adopts a holistic approach to marking, which means your answer to each task is read and judged on its merits.

Therefore, if you thought answer-planning is a waste of time, now you know that it's a destructive myth. In summary, answer-planning:

- Aids time planning and management
- Guides on question deconstruction and interpretation
- Allows you to articulate answer in line with verbs
- Checks you answering each sub-task in the required amount of depth
- Ensures you've not misread a question
- Allows you to prioritise your points
- Allows you to systematically sense check and logic check the strength and validity of each point
- Provides structure — gives you the words to use for your subheadings
- Systematic coping mechanism for questions which appear challenging at first glance
- Ensures you've got enough points at the outset (and if not, you can take the points you've got, add depth to them and match to the allocated marks!)

Answer-planning matters and use the five-step plan of attack in articulating and producing winning answers for your CIMA CS examinations.



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