

GROUP MENTALITY

YOUR WORDS should reflect willingness to lead and take responsibilities. Group interest should be given priority over self-interest. Use expressions such as "as you rightly said". When you want to differ, open with expressions such as "While agreeing with you to some extent, I may add", or "May I show another side of the picture so as to benefit all of us in arriving at the right conclusions?"

- ∂ Do not try to be somebody else by aping great speakers. Try to be yourself. Do not speak for the sake of speaking; your words should have substance. Never blow your own trumpet.
- ∂ Do remember that one of the important aspects of your personality that is under careful scrutiny is the kind of team player you are. You may assume that your behaviour is in tune with good teamwork. But your words, expressions, and body language might send a different message. This flaw has to be corrected beforehand with the help of discerning friends.
- ∂ Dress neatly for the occasion and assume a pleasing body language.
- ∂ While the examiner gives the topic for discussion, note down the exact words of the topic. Forgetting or ignoring even one word may substantially change the emphasis. For example, "the necessity for compulsory family planning as State policy" is quite different from "the necessity for family planning as State policy". While discussing the former, points such as fundamental rights may have to be invoked.
- ∂ Focus on the precise aspects of the subject. There is no point in beating about the bush. If you have any doubt about the exact nature of the topic given, do not hesitate to get a clarification from the examiner.
- ∂ In the beginning, you may ask the examiner whether you can take notes during the discussion. Even if there is permission, do not make exhaustive notes. You may note down the exact words of the topic, and the points you intend to raise later in the discussion when you get a chance to do so.
- ∂ No amount of theoretical analysis can be a substitute for actual participation in a group exercise. Mock sessions will help you get feedback, and correct yourself wherever required. If someone feels that he does not need any rehearsal, he may probably regret later. Remember, there would be candidates who come after extensive preparation for fine-tuning their performance.

The examiner checks:

- Content
- Communication - listening skills, precision in conveying ideas, language
- Group behaviour
- Leadership skills

He tries to know

- Whether you have the necessary qualities required for a specific job
- How you respond to a differing view
- How you promote backbenchers
- How well you find ways for solving problems
- How well you would resolve complex issues
- How well you communicate your ideas
- How well you would take responsibilities
- Your push/initiative/drive/confidence

If you happen to emerge as a natural leader, do try to develop group synergy, and give an acceptable conclusion at the close.

Advanced strategies

Sometimes you may be in an unenviable position, since all your points have already been touched by the previous speakers, leaving little to you for original contribution. As a goal-oriented participant, you do not want to parrot what others have already discussed.

What then is your option? There are indeed fine strategies to tide over such a predicament. Let us illustrate three different strategies, in respect of the topic, "Too much of freedom of the people is the bane of Indian democracy".

Keyword approach: Too much of freedom of the people is the bane of Indian democracy. You can start off by giving the definitions of the keywords: 'too much', 'freedom', 'people' and 'democracy'. You could say that there is no uniformly accepted norm for defining 'too much'. What is too much for one person may be inadequate for another. You may then illustrate it by examples. So also, dwell upon the other marked words, 'freedom', 'people', and 'democracy', one by one. You would thereby present a lot of interesting views on the topic.

Viewpoint of affected parties: In this case, you may analyse the use and misuse of freedom by various segments of the people such as politicians, trade union leaders, students and unorganised citizens who bear the brunt of the blatant misuse of freedom by powerful vested interests.

Analysis: Analyse the proposition from different angles such as social, economic, political, cultural and legal. All the angles may not be relevant in every case.

Types of discussions

Not all discussions are alike. They can be classified depending upon the content and style.

Topic-based: Knowledge-based (e.g. WTO, Article 356 of the Indian Constitution, inter-State disputes of river water); Abstract (e.g. Ethics form the foundation of the progress of any country) and Case-based

In the group discussion that forms part of the Service Selection Board interview for the selection of defence service officers, a complex practical problem based on a difficult situation may be highlighted with the help of pictures or models, and the group asked to discuss the issue and arrive at a workable solution to the problem.

Some typical topics

- ✓ Honesty is not the best policy for an ordinary citizen in India.
- ✓ The provision for capital punishment should be removed from the Indian penal code.
- ✓ In view of the high level of illiteracy in India, adult franchise should be confined to the literates.
- ✓ Article 356 of the Constitution should be scrapped.
- ✓ No steps can control global terrorism.
- ✓ If you were the Prime Minister.
- ✓ Euthanasia should be made legal.
- ✓ Job reservation is not to be extended indefinitely.
- ✓ "Big dams are the temples of modern India," said Jawaharlal Nehru. He was not right.
- ✓ The U.S.A. should not have bombed Afghanistan.
- ✓ Arranged marriages are a curse in India.
- ✓ Overexposure of female anatomy in advertisements should be banned.
- ✓ Prohibition should be implemented throughout the country.
- ✓ India should encourage labour intensive rural industries and not high-tech industries.
- ✓ Law and order in our country should be made a Central subject, relieving the States of this responsibility.
- ✓ Cricket is a criminal waste of time.

THE VITAL PHASE

IF YOU want to perform well in a group discussion, you should prepare well for the event. Candidates who are proficient in their academic subjects may not necessarily be able to do well in an exercise of this nature, unless they have prepared well for this specific test. Since the skills for facing an interview or making a public speech are a part of group discussions too, there are common elements in the preparation as well.

- Develop an active interest in news events.
- Carefully read news reports and listen to radio/TV bulletins/discussions for gathering facts/views. Don't swallow all news or views. Scan analytical articles in dailies and newsmagazines of quality.
- Read editorials, in-depth articles and newsmagazines thoroughly and note down significant views, observations, and quotes.
- Gather accurate information on topics of general interest. (Keep regular notes on current affairs.)
- Pay special attention to divergent views on controversial subjects.
- Melt them in the crucible of your mind, process them and extract inferences and conclusions that would form the basis of your balanced views and convictions
- Prepare well on popular/controversial issues.
- Develop language skills. (Learn to avoid grammatical errors. Note down good expressions and captivating quotes in a personal diary.)
- Enrich your vocabulary through constant effort.
- Perform drills in spoken English, touching serious subjects, in small groups of friends. Practise the right pronunciation.
- Observe the techniques adopted by good speakers.
- Keep in mind that how we tell is as important as what we tell.
- Master the techniques for using effective expressions to convey the maximum substance in the minimum of words. (E.g. Catch 22, Hobson's choice, Tip of the iceberg).

Dos and Don'ts

- ❖ **'Relevant points in the most appropriate phrases'** is the mantra for success. Cadences in voice, pauses for emphasis, appropriate body language and non-verbal expressions for support are important.
- ❖ Speak patiently, complete every sentence and do not swallow the last word in any sentence. Do not stop sentences midway and start fresh ones, this will irritate the listeners.
- ❖ It is not necessary that you always speak in full sentences; a phrase or even a single word properly uttered in the right tone can create great impact.
- ❖ Don't talk in a loud pitch, or in a taxingly low volume.
- ❖ The examiner sitting away should also hear you well. Don't be too fast and sacrifice clarity.
- ❖ Rhetorical questions may be used if you can do it well. (These are questions that are to not be answered by anyone.

Example: At this pace of tumbling values, where will India be after half a century?)

Language and facts

Language should be simple, but powerful. Avoid high-sounding words/bombast. Arrange facts and make arguments cogent, logical and reasonable. Don't give the impression that you are confused. As far as possible, use concrete words; avoid abstractions. Illustrate through striking examples.

It is a good thing if you can show initiative by starting the discussion. But there is no point in trying to be the first speaker unless you have good points to begin with.

You should never take extreme positions on controversial issues. Try to be impartial and objective. The golden mean is the best. You may agree or disagree; but voice arguments based on facts. How well you marshal facts and argue is significant. You should have a treasury of facts garnered during your systematic preparation. Avoid mannerisms such as "Well", "As you know", "I mean", "sort of", "basically", "er er", and "Is it not?"

You should not carelessly say something and then go for correcting it. (E.g. The anticipated cost of the project is Rs. 500 crores; I mean Rs. 500 lakhs).

Be on your guard

You may modify your views accepting an argument, but not change colour like a chameleon. Do not try to monopolise the discussion, silencing others even if they have no valid points. Such an effort will create a negative impact. If a natural leader emerges, do not attempt to browbeat him, so as to silence him. Look at the participants by turn. Appreciate the good points raised by others. Valuable views expressed by others should not be ignored. However, you should not blindly repeat such views. Careful listening throughout the session is an integral part of group discussion. Never misquote a person.

Take opposition with a smile. Do not strongly retort if someone attacks you. Keep in mind that an understatement is more effective than an outright retort or open shouting. Don't explode on blunders from others. A worse gaffe may come from you later. Do not get disheartened, if a person discredits one of your views. Be broadminded in your approach. Remember that the same words make different impact on different people, depending upon their backgrounds and their frame of mind.

Encourage others

Encourage silent members. For example, if a participant remains silent for a long time, you may ask a question such as "What do you think about this view, No. 6?"

If someone asks you to speak, do grab the opportunity. Even while you are opposing someone, continue to be pleasant. Resort to humour, only if you can handle it well. Never give the impression that you are a clown. Never block others, when they want to say something. Never lose your poise. Do not be unduly emotional. Never allow any bad or provocative word to slip from your mouth. When a negative thought is to be stressed go for a milder word instead of a hard and irritating one. For example say persuasive not manipulative, or retarded not idiotic. Never air a view that can be interpreted as an insult to a person or a group.

Body language

Keep your body language under check. Do not give room for someone to say that you are arrogant. Do not express crude/raw views.

If you have several points, do not make all of them in one stretch. You would get further chances to express some of them. Even if someone else mentions some of those points, you can come back to them offering different perspectives.

If someone tries to obstruct your speech, you may continue by saying politely "just a moment", "kindly allow me to complete this one point", "excuse me" or something similar.

Even while you are refuting a point raised by one of the participants, do not go on staring at his face. Instead, you should address the group - your eyes should travel around.

Talk your way to success

Job-seekers invariably try to find placement in the best possible organisation. Employers likewise aim at securing the best available talent. Until a few years ago, the norms adopted for the selection of candidates for jobs were mostly anchored on board/university examination marks, selection test scores, and performance in an interview.

These norms are often inadequate for identifying the best talent. So other testing methods such as group discussion, presentation, psychometric test, aptitude appraisal, in-tray exercise, and outdoor tasks are also used. Depending on the nature of the job, the ideal combination of the methods would be employed.

Popular tool

Among these, group discussion has emerged as a popular tool in many selection exercises. It plays a significant role in certain areas such as the recruitment of executives in corporate houses, selection of candidates for admission to

business schools, and Services Selection Board interviews for enrolment of commissioned officers in the defence forces.

Many of the candidates seeking selection often say that they have a GD to face, knowing precious little about what lies ahead in that exercise. (I am reminded of an instance when a youngster who had cleared the written part of a selection process asked for tips on performing in the 'general' discussion.)

No regular academic institution normally gives training in this competitive activity. Candidates are forced to rely only on their common sense and presence of mind. When competition is severe, even a small difference in the quality of performance during group discussion may tilt the balance in our favour or against us.

We should remember that there might be a few candidates who come after training and rehearsals during group discussions. It may not be easy to outsmart them, if we do not have a clear picture of the content and style of the inescapable trial. We should know sound techniques and strategies for success.

In one way, group discussion is convenient compared to an interview. In an interview, a young candidate faces questions before a senior and experienced person or a panel comprising several such persons, with a view to evaluating him.

Interaction

The situation is to a certain extent artificial. In sharp contrast with this, in a group discussion, every candidate gets an opportunity to interact freely with his peer group, without any inhibition. The communication would, therefore, be more natural than in an interview.

Of course, there is another side to the picture. Some may speak without any hesitation when they are in a small group of three or four, but would be conquered by nervousness while facing a larger group. But one of the prime objectives of group discussion is to assess the required skills for effectively interacting in a large group as well.

Through a well-conducted group discussion, the examiners can identify:

- ⇒ **Personal traits** such as courtesy, liveliness, geniality, politeness, honesty, loyalty, boldness, and cheerfulness
- ⇒ **Leadership qualities** such as confidence, clarity of thought, reasoning capability, willingness to shoulder responsibilities, analytical approach, capacity to judge others, and prioritising
- ⇒ **Language skills:** correctness, clarity of expression, phrases, brevity, and familiarity with popular sayings
- ⇒ Impartiality and balanced approach
- ⇒ Respect for the opposition
- ⇒ Patience to take criticism with a smile
- ⇒ Poise
- ⇒ Balanced reaction to situations
- ⇒ Ability to take quick and right decisions
- ⇒ Innovativeness

Manner of testing

There would be 8-12 participants seated round a table, each sporting a large number on the chest and on the back for identification. (Candidates should address one another only by the respective numbers and not by names.)

The examiner announces the topic for discussion. Usually it would be a topic of popular interest, and not one that requires deep specialised knowledge. Often a controversial subject that offers plenty of scope for being approached from different angles would be offered.

There is no chairman or moderator. It is a leaderless group often comprising participants who are virtually strangers. Rules are flexible. The important rule is that there are not many rules. But the examiner specifies bare conditions. Group discussion is neither a debate nor a public address. But there are elements of both in this test. There is no specific order in which the candidates should speak, even though they wear chest numbers. Nor is there any fixed time or duration allotted to individual participants.

The examiner goes back leaving the group to itself for discussion. Sometimes there may be a team of observers/examiners for assessment. They will not interfere in the discussion, but only watch and evaluate the performance of the candidates.

Leading the discussion

There may be a short period of silence after the examiner goes back. Some of the participants would then start murmuring or whispering to their neighbours. One of the candidates would then rise and make a statement on some aspect of the topic, thereby setting the ball rolling.

Others would respond, or make their own independent observations. The discussion would gradually gain momentum producing light, heat, or both. Usually a leader would naturally emerge, although none was nominated to that position.

THE PERSONALITY FACTOR

EVERYBODY HAS an identifiable pattern of personality that helps others to predict to a reasonable extent his/her reactions to various situations. Personality is influenced by the factors such as genetics, upbringing and experience. In other words, heredity and environment play key roles. You may say that a person is affable, assertive, bold, caring, cooperative, domineering, enthusiastic, gentle, hesitant, inconsistent, just, kind, loyal, moderate, naughty, outspoken, persuasive, quizzical, relaxed, sensitive, shy, tolerant, uncompromising, warm, zealous, etc. Several qualities do aggregate in a person.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires have been intelligently devised to assess personal qualities through one's responses to a series of questions. It may be noted that here are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers in this exercise. Further, no tight time limit is prescribed for furnishing answers. An expert can construct a personality profile from a series of answers given by a particular candidate.

For example, a large number of well-constructed questions like those given below can bring out your nature.

* I prefer to talk to one person and not to a group - [True/False]

* When someone relates a story, I have an inclination to check its veracity - [True/False]

Honesty matters

While answering the questions, the best policy is honesty. If you try to make a clever guess of the requirements of the employer and then try to cook up answers artificially, you are not likely to succeed in the effort involving a large number of questions.

Remember what Mark Twain said, "If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything." Jerome K. Jerome's words are also relevant in this context: "It is always the best policy to tell the truth, unless, of course, you are an exceptionally good liar."

Further, even if you succeed in hoodwinking the examiner, you fail ultimately since you are attempting to secure a job that does not suit you. The test gives you an opportunity to discover the real you.

Do not be under the impression that any one type of personality is better than another. Each personality suits a set of jobs. After all, the questionnaire offers you reliable guidance as to what occupation would give you job satisfaction. If you are really not good at mixing well with others, why should you go for a public relations job?

Different styles

You may be asked to write about your dream job and its characteristics in terms of environment, responsibilities, professional prospects, challenges, opportunity for service, and remuneration.

It is not just one type of questionnaire that is being used in all situations. There are different styles such as 16 PF and OPQ (16 Personality Factor Questionnaire / Occupational Personality Questionnaire).

The 16 PF has 16 personality scales:

- ✓ Warmth
- ✓ Reasoning - general intelligence
- ✓ Emotional stability
- ✓ Dominance
- ✓ Liveliness
- ✓ Rule-consciousness
- ✓ Social boldness
- ✓ Sensitivity
- ✓ Vigilance
- ✓ Abstractedness
- ✓ Privatness
- ✓ Apprehension
- ✓ Openness to change
- ✓ Self-reliance
- ✓ Perfectionism
- ✓ Tension

Whatever might be the type of the questionnaire, it should fulfil two attributes - validity and reliability.

Emotional quotient

Intelligence plays a significant role in achieving career success. Intelligence quotient (IQ) is a popular term. But there is another term EQ that is supposed to be of greater significance in achieving success in any walk of life. EQ stands for emotional quotient, which is an index of emotional intelligence. IQ is inborn. It indicates a person's ability for effective memorising, efficiency for learning, capacity for logical thinking, and skill for quickly solving problems. There is a multiple intelligence theory that enunciates that there are different kinds of intelligences such as:

- ✓ Logical-mathematical intelligence
- ✓ Linguistic intelligence
- ✓ Spatial intelligence
- ✓ Bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence
- ✓ Musical intelligence
- ✓ Interpersonal intelligence
- ✓ Intra-personal intelligence
- ✓ Naturalistic intelligence

"Any occupation or task will involve a combination of these intelligences. Every individual has a differently balanced portfolio of abilities, which require careful nurture and attention to develop talents to the full potential." However you cannot enhance your IQ.

EQ that shows the ability for understanding your own as well as others' emotions is the aggregate of one's emotional competencies. It can be improved by conscious effort. Such improvement will help you in managing emotions, motivating yourself, and efficiently handling relationships. EQ is measurable. Further, high EQ helps you develop healthy soft skills and manage yourself to be responsible for your own happiness. It gives you a competitive edge. Qualities such as empathy, optimism, self-awareness and social arts (communication, leadership, negotiation, social analysis) have a key role in achieving success.

The key soft skills are:

- ❖ Curiosity, Logic & Creativity
- ❖ Leadership Cooperation & Collaboration
- ❖ Organisational Awareness
- ❖ Customer Service Orientation
- ❖ Organisational Skills
- ❖ Communications Skills

Hard skills such as technical competencies can be easily identified. But it is difficult to quantify soft skills. True intelligence is in fact the right combination of IQ and EQ. Your responses to a wide variety of situations can be used to measure your EQ.

Look at a few questions

* I worry regularly in some circumstances - [True/False]

* For some things I have done in the past, I feel guilty - [True/False]

Imagine you're an insurance salesman calling prospective clients. Fifteen people in a row have hung up on you, and you're getting discouraged. What do you do?

* Call it a day and hope you have better luck tomorrow.

* Assess qualities in yourself that may be undermining your ability to make a sale.

* Try something new in the next call, and keep plugging away.

* Consider another line of work. It is in our own interest that we make a deliberate effort to improve our EQ, so as to enhance our employability.

TRY TO BE YOURSELF

Here are a few tips on how to judge situations correctly in the course of an interview and come out with just the right response.

Be honest

Confess ignorance if such is the case. No attempt to deceive the board by pretending to know something you do not know will ever succeed. The interviewers will naturally be endowed with more knowledge and experience in the relevant area. Once your deception is exposed, your credibility is lost.

The board may not show any further sympathy to you. This can lead to your rejection. Keep in mind that there is no person who knows everything. Ignorance is no crime, but deception is certainly one.

Even as a matter of policy, honesty is the best. This holds good in interviews as well. It is another matter if you guide the board to an area where you are strong. That is no deception, but only a healthy interview technique.

Time is precious

The interview board, that understands the candidate's anxiety, often asks some simple question such as "How did you come to Mumbai?" or "How was your journey?" in the opening stages of an interview. This has the sole objective of reducing the candidate's mental tension, if any, and making him/her feel relaxed.

Answers to such questions must be as brief as possible. The precious time allotted to us to prove our mettle for the job through significant questions and answers should not be wasted by discussing trivia.

Do not take sides

For interviews at higher levels, questions that require answers on controversial issues may be raised.

Never give the impression that you are a bigot. There is no harm in your favouring a side, if you have sound arguments to substantiate your conviction. However, do not ignore the valid points on the other side.

They should also be indicated, and your opinions and inferences presented, keeping a balance. This is appreciated when much can be said on both sides. The board would focus its attention not on which side you support, but how logically you establish your position based on reasonable arguments.

Do not jump the gun

Some candidates often try to be over-smart by beginning their answer even before the interviewer has completed the question.

You should not fall into this trap. For one thing, no one likes being interrupted. Further, the interviewer may have in his mind a question that is beyond what you have guessed. Perhaps he wants to make a statement, and seek your reaction if you should like to oppose it.

Wait patiently till the question is complete and reflect at least for a couple of seconds before you answer. Remember that your response need not be as instantaneous as the return stroke of a tennis player facing a serve.

Be specific

On specific questions of fact in a subject area, never prefix phrases such as "I think", "probably", "maybe", "I suppose", etc. For example if a candidate is asked - "What is the capital of Bhutan?" he should not say "I think it is Thimphu". It is not a matter of opinion. The right way to answer is by just saying - "Thimphu".

Do not let your guard down

During lengthy interviews, candidates may fall a prey to some kind of risky delusion. Although during the initial stages the candidates are nervous, after sometime they begin to feel at home.

They run the risk of letting their guard down and begin to regard the board members as friends or equals. Some candidates may start talking in a lighter vein or crack jokes. Candidates may feel free to open up and present all their personal details.

This propensity certainly damages a candidate's prospects for selection. At every stage, candidates should bear in mind that the interviewers are the job-givers and they are the job-seekers.

Even though some members may speak in a very friendly tone as equals, the candidate has to regard them as his/her superiors at the time of the interview.

Do not blow your trumpet

We should present a true picture of ourselves in the matter of knowledge and skills.

Any attempt to present a different façade is bound to fail before a discerning board of interviewers. Blowing your trumpet or trying to indicate your links with VIPs may have a negative effect. If we indicate our qualifications and experience as required, the rest of the job lies with the board.

Do not get provoked

Attempts would be made to provoke you.

Bear in mind that the board is testing your mental equilibrium and maturity.

For example, a candidate seeking selection as a marketing professional may be tested for his reactions before a difficult and demanding customer who may speak ill of the product which is being promoted.

The member may play the role of the customer using rude or insulting language. The professional, who should know that the customer is the king, should behave with equanimity. If you do so, you pass the trial.

Maintain your composure

At every stage of the interview, you should hold firmly to your self-confidence.

Remember you are undergoing a crucial test that may turn your life one way or the other.

A slight setback should not drive you to desperation.

It is quite possible that you could not answer a couple of questions.

But that is not the end of the road.

There will be further questions that you can answer.

No candidate would normally answer all the questions with total precision. Still they would be selected for the job.

This thought should come to our mind, when you fail to give the right answer to a question.

Do not acknowledge acquaintances

There is the remote possibility that a member of the interview board may have some connection with you, your parents or your family.

In the interview room, you should not try to discuss this. Act normally, as with any other board member.

OFF TO A FLYING START

Students of professional courses look forward to campus selection since it eliminates the hassles of preparing and sending job applications to different organisations, interviews at various venues and so on. Moreover, the assurance of a good start in one's career even before the completion of their course motivates students to excel in their studies.

Placement cells in several reputed engineering and management institutions help students in achieving success in the campus recruitment process. However, students should plan and play their roles wisely to get the best results.

While the students are saved from the bother of a tiresome hunt for employment after graduation, campus selection helps companies in identifying easily young talent that match their requirements.

Should students make any special preparations for handling the campus selection process effectively? The answer is an emphatic 'yes'. The preparation depends to a large extent on the recruitment process of the company. Although every company arrives with the intention of spotting the best talent, the definition of talent varies. Each management may have its own priorities of skills, knowledge or competence that is expected from the candidates. Depending on these, the company evolves its own selection process. The students' preparations would have to be in tune with the relevant selection process of the company concerned. But there are certain common elements that would help candidates to prepare for a campus interview. Let us briefly examine the important aspects

Preparing a good C.V.

This should highlight our skill, knowledge and capabilities that would satisfy the demands of the job we are interested in.

Information about the company

Specific knowledge of the company that includes the following features would be of immense value: history of the company, products and services and their merits, fields of activity, headquarters and location of other units, paid up capital, number and classification of employees, principal competitors and their products, research and development, pattern of growth, outstanding achievements, salary structure and opportunities offered for professional advancement.

Details about the prospective job

These details could be gathered from sources such as business journals, finance pages of good daily newspapers, job advertisements, share notifications, company brochures, and most importantly Websites. Any opportunity to discuss the organisation with its employees should be gainfully utilised.

Written tests

If the company usually conducts written tests with objective questions, one should master the techniques to answer them.

There would be a time limit that is deliberately introduced in the test, with a view to spotting the best talent among the candidates.

Further, we should try to find out the areas of knowledge that are usually checked and evaluated by the company concerned.

Some firms may focus on academic subjects of the relevant standard based on the minimum entry qualification that is mandatory for the job.

Engineering firms and IT organisations that conduct campus recruitments in technical institutions sometimes opt for questions from Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry at the Class 12 level.

Some tests include sections on verbal skills (vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms and so on), quantitative aptitude (school arithmetic), reading, comprehension and psychometric analysis (personality, attitudes, composure and consistency).

There may be exercises to test the candidate's aptitude, ability to understand data and awareness of computers.

The scheme may be different for business schools; the emphasis would be on analytical skills, problem solving, decision-making and case studies.

Some employers may check the candidate's general awareness or general intelligence through graded quizzes.

The philosophy behind this approach is that the university or board has already evaluated the technical or professional knowledge of the candidate.

If an intelligent person with the required educational qualification is selected, he could be given in-house training to enable him to discharge efficiently the duties assigned to him. Interested candidates may gather information from senior students on the kind of tests administered by different companies that arrive on the campus.

We should, however, be prepared to tackle the tests even if there is a change in style.

There would be interviews or group discussions to assess the personality of the candidate.

Interviews

We should practise to master the strategy to succeed in interviews and group discussions.

Mock sessions guided by experienced trainers would help to correct errors in style and mannerisms.

The interview may lay more emphasis on personality traits than on academic subjects. However, for design jobs or others of a purely technical nature, the subject areas may be given priority.

Sometimes, the interview may focus on the candidate's academic subjects.

The interviewer would try to evaluate the candidate's analytical skills or other communication skills.

In such instances, if the candidate gets stuck in a topic, he may even be allowed to choose a favourite topic, for further interaction.

Those who are overconfident may delude themselves into believing that they need no special training for clearing tests, interviews or group discussions.

Their hopes of performing well at the appropriate time without any kind of prior training is likely to be proved wrong.

Any human activity has room for improvement and the race for campus selection is no exception.

It is wise to strengthen our competitive skills through planning and guided practice, for achieving success in campus recruitments.

Personal characteristics Personality traits that are often checked are the following:

- Poise.
- Clarity of expression.
- Cleanliness.
- Comprehension.
- Confidence.
- Style of dressing.
- Temperament.
- Getting along with others.
- Initiative.
- Intellectual curiosity.
- Interest in challenges.
- Ability to maintain confidentiality.
- Leadership qualities.
- Listening with patience.
- Meeting people.
- Patience.
- Pleasantness.
- Courtesy.
- Prioritising.
- Problem-solving ability.
- Pronunciation.
- Reasoning.
- Respect of opponents.
- Response to new ideas.
- Selection of appropriate ideas.
- Teamwork.
- Tolerance.
- Wealth of ideas.
- Willingness to accept responsibility.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF COMMUNICATION

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

– George Bernard Shaw

One of the significant elements of success in the modern world is skill in effective communication. Those with remarkable academic achievement often fail to reach positions they otherwise deserve for want of adequate flair for communication. Some may be carried away by the notion that a rich vocabulary, correct grammar, and right pronunciation can make you a great communicator. But there is much more to it than what meets our casual eye. Let us look at the basics.

We would say that communication is the activity of conveying information. In more precise terms, it is the process of transmitting and receiving information through a common system of symbols, signs, behaviour, speech, writing, or signals. Remember the humorous quote, "When all other means of communication fail, try words."

Exchanging info

A process of exchanging information and ideas is involved in any communication. The vital point is that the recipient should understand what the sender intends. In a wider perspective, it is a generic process of translating information from one domain to one or more other domains through a medium. A domain can be the mental world of a person, the statistical domain of an analyst, the computational domain of a software program or the economic domain of a market. As a part of the usual language learning in schools and colleges, you are exposed to fine points of reading, writing and speaking.

How many of you have thought that listening is an integral ingredient of good communication? For this central aspect, you hardly got any special hints from your schoolmasters. What is the quality of training you received in non-verbal communication, including body language? Skill in selecting the most appropriate words or expressions to convey your thoughts need not result in effective communication. It would be to your advantage if you apply your mind to the diverse features of communication, and try to develop better skills in each one of them.

Important aspects

There are three aspects in any communication – content, form, and destination. A good communicator should apply his/her mind carefully to all the three, if the process of communication has to be effective.

In any form of communication, there is always a gap between what the sender wanted to convey and what the receiver actually gathers. You have a certain idea in your mind. You couch it in certain words based on your definition to represent it accurately. Your process of forming the words to express your idea may be called encoding. Your ideas take shape in a specific form.

Sometimes instead of words, the form may be that of a picture, chart, sound, or some other medium. The idea carried in the medium is looked at by the receiver. He understands the idea based on the meaning he attaches to the words or other elements of the medium. This is the process of decoding.

There may be a gap between your idea and what is represented in the medium, and again, another gap between the content of the medium and the idea grasped by the receiver. This precisely is the reason why people often have to say that they did not mean what has been reported.

Effective communication

Effective communication can be achieved if a deliberate attempt is made to reduce the gap, by careful use of the medium, with special care of the type and background of the receiver of our message.

The meaning as given in the dictionary may not hold good in all contexts. For example, when a grandfather addresses his three-year old child "You silly thief!" the usual meaning of the words has little relevance. Before entering into important discussions, we may have to define the terms we intend to use. As an instance, after an hour of heated debate on the existence of God, one of the participants said that by 'God' he meant 'Truth'.

Had the definition been made beforehand, no debate would have taken place. A person attaches a particular meaning for a word, depending on his/her background and experience. You know that in the world of politics, words such as democracy, secularism, socialism, and freedom mean different things to different people. Your own perceptions or obsession should not turn out to be a barrier in communication. What is beautiful to me may be ugly to you and vice-versa.

So if I start with the presumption that what appears to be beautiful to me is beautiful to you as well, it may end up in breakdown of communication. Building fine rapport with the listener is the essence of good communication.

THE STRUGGLE FOR EXCELLENCE

"Leadership is an action, not a position."

Thinking out of the box is essential for maintaining quality in a competitive environment. This naturally calls for innovation and constant struggle. Technology leaves no area of work untouched. One has to be alert and active in imbibing the most useful aspects of any new technology. Reliance on appropriate technology is the key to success.

Yet another aspect of managerial excellence is the effort to infuse healthy work ethics into the system. Remember that the results of thoughtful efforts in management have a profound impact on human endeavour in different walks of life. Market economy is shaped by the aggregate thrust of managerial decisions in different domains.

Team building

Several crucial attributes determine the success of a manager. An important one is the ability for building teams. A team leader should develop healthy relationship with others and support them in times of need. A sound strategy is to generate a feeling that when the team succeeds, the laurels are shared; but when a fault occurs, the blame is taken by the leader.

Respecting the views of others will bring in new ideas from the members of the team. It is not rare that an employee occupying a lower rung in the hierarchy comes forward with an innovative idea. Such instances have to be encouraged.

Feelings will have to be respected. Tolerance to differing views is a sign of generosity of spirit. Morale should be kept high. Each one should be allowed to work in an area where he or she is likely to excel. The role of each member has to be defined and communicated. The tasks assigned should be achievable.

Due recognition should be given when a person makes a significant effort. Identifying the need of training and organising it in time will enhance the effectiveness of work. Healthy criticism and constructive feedback should be encouraged at every level. Others should be kept informed of the plans, targets and achievements. If a conflict or resistance develops between individuals or individuals and the organisation, the causes have to be identified and resolution achieved in the shortest time. If the working rhythm is lost, restoring it is hard. This situation should be averted.

Even while working on lengthy projects, one has to maintain the focus on goals. Attention to detail is important. Problems have to be tackled without delay. Also, managers should take advantage of opportunities as they come up.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries," - Shakespeare.

Good managers may have to influence others, both inside and outside the organisation. Principles of public relations should be learnt and applied appropriately. A positive approach while dealing with others goes a long way in establishing contacts and maintaining them.

Decision-making is another vital area. People often insist that you take the right decisions. With the preoccupation for arriving at the right decisions, certain managers may go on delaying the process of deciding, under the presumption that further studies and analysis of the problem on hand will take them to the dream decision. But this will only delay matters in most cases, leading to additional problems and consequent ineffective functioning of the system. Quick decision is as important as right decision in most cases.

Appreciation of excellence should propel every manager to do things better. If you live in a shell of conservatism and refuse to accept new trends, your organisation may be left behind in the race. Changes should be welcomed as opportunities for improvement.

Raising the expectation levels will motivate the members of the team. Each one should get an opportunity to give his best to the organisation. Continuing efforts to overcome barriers to excellence are essential for meeting dream goals through consummate skills. Remaining calm in moments of trial and anchoring oneself on self-confidence will help in

early resolution of problems. Learning from one's own errors and those committed by others will help avoid pitfalls in future.

Large chunks of work may have to be broken down into small units, to take up individual tasks separately. Even while working in one department, eyes should be open to perceive what happens in other departments of the organisation, for getting a holistic picture and appreciating one's own roles. A wise man will never miss the wood for the trees. In the communication front, clarity in instruction is important. Leaders should listen to the views of others. Managers should be endowed with fine presentation skills.

Ethics and morale

The morale of the employees has to be kept high by adopting only ethical styles of working. Compliance to rules and regulation and professional codes is, perhaps, the first step to work ethics. Fairness in decision-making and impartiality while dealing with conflicts will win esteem from subordinates. It is not sufficient if the manager is fair and impartial, but others should get convinced that he or she is unbiased and has an equitable approach.

Ability to resist personal pressures to deviate from the path of fairness, drawing strength from one's own courage of convictions, is a sign of managerial wisdom. Good managers should have nerves of steel to face ethical dilemmas with equanimity.

PRESENTING YOURSELF ELECTRONICALLY

SOME TIME ago we had discussed in this column the strategies for the preparation of a winning curriculum vitae (CV), which is in a way the first interview with the employer. Curriculum vitae, meaning 'progress of life,' is more or less the same as what is called "bio-data" or "resume." It makes the first impression about you in the employer's mind. The first impression is the best impression, goes the adage.

With the progressive application of information technology in day-to-day life, there are changes in the styles of job hunt, including the mode of submission of CVs to a prospective employer.

Very often you do not print your CV on paper and send it. Instead you transmit it by e-mail or post it on the website of the employer. Further, even if you send a hard copy of the CV, it may be scanned to the employer's computer. The scanner reads and records the information in a way that is different from how the human eye performs these functions. All these make the style of preparing a CV for the computerised systems a different exercise.

Basic features

The spirit and basic characteristics of a good CV, however, are the same, except perhaps in the matter of key words, font styles, and layout.

Any CV should indicate your personal data - name, address, contact information (such as postal address, telephone number, e-mail address if any), age, qualifications, experience, special skills, personal interests, USP, etc.

It has to be neat, easy to read at a glance, elegant, well organised, impressive and brief, yet informative. It should stand out in quality of content and in appearance. No first draft prepared even by an expert would satisfy all these. So you have to correct, revise, amend, and improve it thoughtfully so that it achieves the objective you have in mind.

E-resumes

Since more and more employers migrate to the IT-enabled style of recruiting, you have to adapt yourself to the new environment in the matter of designing resumes as well. You have to prepare what are called electronic resumes or e-resumes. As a first step in job recruitment employers often gather resumes and store them in their computer databases. When they need a new hand, they would make a computer search for candidates in the databases. Therefore it is important that you include significant key words in your CV.

E-mail resumes are basically plain text documents. In the hard copy style of resumes, we make formatting enhancements with the help of different fonts, attractive spacing, etc. Such embellishments are not very relevant in e-resumes, and are therefore stripped off. Hard copies if sent are in many cases read by a scanner.

E-resumes are amenable to easy transmission, storage, distribution, tracking, searching, and retrieval. Several employers and job data banks use this facility.

Trial transmission

Before sending a CV by e-mail to an employer, send it to your own e-mail address as a trial, receive it, and check how it looks, make changes wherever necessary, confirm that everything is fine, and then transmit the modified version to the employer.

A scannable CV, as the name implies is to be subjected to scanning. This is done with the help of an OCR system. (An OCR or Optical Character Recognition system transforms paper documents into editable computer files. Computers should be able to manipulate the data that have been fed into them.). The OCR system creates a text file in ASCII (Pronounced "as-key": American Standard Code for Information Interchange), and then artificial intelligence reads the text and extracts the information it requires. Remember that a scannable CV is essentially a text-focused document vis-a-vis a design-focused document. If OCR should read your material properly, the following points have to be borne in mind while preparing the CV.

- ❖ Use only plain fonts such as Ariel or Times New Roman. Ten to 14 points would be fine. Avoid all "designer" fonts.
- ❖ It is unprofessional to write the whole CV in capital letters.
- ❖ The types should be of high quality - crisp, dark, and neat on clean white paper.
- ❖ For emphasis, use capital or bold letters. Avoid underlining, italics, boxes, bullet points, and graphics. Emphasise a word or words using bold or full capitalisation. You may use asterisks (*) instead of bullets. A plus (+) sign may be used in the beginning of each paragraph, if you feel so.
- ❖ Since symbols such as percentage and ampersand (% and &) may not be read properly by a scanner, spell them in the text.
- ❖ Put your name at the top of each page.
- ❖ Remove unnecessary spaces and gaps.
- ❖ Do not use the landscape layout. Use the portrait style.
- ❖ Justify the document on the left.
- ❖ There should be no visual distractions that may confuse the scanner.
- ❖ Avoid columnar structure (many columns as in a newspaper) that may end getting mixed-up after scanning.
- ❖ If you put two telephone numbers (land and mobile), write them on different lines.
- ❖ Use terms, abbreviations or acronyms that are popular in your chosen discipline.
- ❖ Use sub-headings that are easily understood. Put them in capital letters.
- ❖ Use action verbs when noting responsibilities and skills (example designed, erected, commissioned, organised, wrote, composed, prepared, mobilised, immunised, and conducted.)
- ❖ Provide a summary that includes the keywords.
- ❖ Do not fold the paper, if you send it.
- ❖ If your CV runs to two pages, put your name and 'page two' at the top of the second page. Do not staple the sheets; use a clip instead.
- ❖ Use a good printer.
- ❖ Do not fax the resume, unless you are specifically asked to do so. Faxing may degrade the text to some extent, leading to problems in effective scanning.
- ❖ You may prepare two copies - one in the usual format for others to read, and one for the OCR system. Your plain CV can easily be converted into an electronic CV.
- ❖ Never give a fancy e-mail id. If you are already working in an organisation, do not use an e-mail id that incorporates a company name. Doing so would imply that you are misusing a company facility. Also, do not give your company phone number .

If you are submitting your CV on the website of the employer, the advantages of HTML, including the possibility uploading of your photograph, may be made use of. Do not attempt multimedia.

Keywords

An important aspect of an e-mail resume is the use of appropriate keywords.

When an employer makes a computer search for a suitable hand, your document will emerge, if you have thoughtfully included the significant keywords. For example, an engineer may put these keywords: "B.Tech. Electrical Engineer Design Testing Power Transformers Alternators Management 10 Years." In fact, he can use these words also for his job search through the Internet.

There are several websites that provide hints and samples of electronic resumes. There is no harm in viewing them. However, while applying for jobs in Indian companies, do not follow the directions blindly.

GET YOUR ACT RIGHT

In general, there are two types of interviews (a more elaborate classification is possible, though):

Totally professional such as an appointment without a written test (as the selection of a Chartered Accountant or a Ph.D. viva voce examination) and personality test after a written examination, such as in the Civil Services Examination for the selection of officers for the IFS, IAS, IPS, etc.

In the first category, we should expect a large complement of knowledge-based professional questions. If the candidate has a good experience, the questions would focus on his work and experience, rather than purely academic aspects of his knowledge.

However, if the interview comes after the assessment of the candidates' knowledge of subjects through a written test, the focus of the interview would be on the comprehensive assessment of personality.

Even if knowledge-based questions are asked, they may not be textbook-oriented, but higher intellectual inputs as in analysis, synthesis, assessment, insight, application, comparison, comments, views and opinions.

Key factors

Remember that there is no magic formula for success in an interview. Good preparation, judicious application of common sense and self-confidence are the key factors that will help us in an interview.

Preparation

Preparation for an interview is often compared to learning the art of cooking. If you ask how much time a housewife requires for preparing a dinner for fifteen guests, she may say three hours. She can do this task in three hours on the strength of her training and experience stretching over a period of years.

In other words, she cooks the dinner efficiently based on her long-term planning.

Her short-term preparation involves the cleaning and slicing of vegetables and meat, boiling, frying, mixing, freezing, arranging the table, setting the crockery and cutlery, washing, etc.

She, therefore, needs long-term planning and short-term preparation.

Similarly appearing for an interview involves long-term and short-term preparation.

Long-term planning

When we go for an interview for a job in a company, we should have information relating to various aspects of that organisation. We should also know the responsibilities of the job we are targeting. A systematic research would help us gather this information.

However, such knowledge by itself cannot lead us to success in the interview. We should be conversant with the strategies for successful presentation before the interview board. This needs long-term planning and study.

Language Skills

An important element in long-term planning is the development of language skills. You cannot achieve this overnight. Good spoken English is different from stylish written English. The right choice of words, pronunciation, accent, stress, intonation, a pleasant way of expression and style of greeting have to be mastered. Some may doubt whether pronunciation is vital in the interview for a technical job.

We should realise that in a competitive situation, every element that goes into creating an impression is important. Other things being equal, a person who makes a good impression through his dress and mode of expression may steal a march over his competitor who does not care for such niceties.

Right pronunciation: Right pronunciation may not be what we hear from friends. For example, check the pronunciation of the words status, radar, fixed, indict and debris. English Pronouncing Dictionary by Daniel Jones (Cambridge University Press) is an authoritative reference volume.

Perfect grammar: We should not deviate from basic grammar. Do not hesitate to study a standard book on common errors.

Simple but correct: Speaking good English does not mean speaking editorial language. Simple and unambiguous language comprising short sentences is the key. Never try to impress the board by going in for cumbersome words or a pedantic style.

An easy way for learning the right pronunciation is by listening to news and quality discussions on radio and good TV channels. This would be of immense help in learning the right pronunciation of proper names such as the names of Presidents and Prime Ministers of various countries. In order to create a good impression before the interview board through delightful presentation, we have to make a conscious effort on the language front.

General Knowledge

There could be questions of general nature even in interviews for technical jobs. The objective of asking such questions is not the assessment of the candidate's precise knowledge in these areas, but confirmation of his intellectual curiosity and interest in what happens around him, which is an indicator of his total personality.

UPSC dictum: Look at what the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) states in relation to the interview held in connection with the selection of doctors in the Union Government through the Combined Medical Services Examination.

"The interview for the personality test will be intended to serve as a supplement to the written examination for testing the general knowledge and ability of candidates in the fields of their academic study and also in the nature of a personality test to assess the candidate's intellectual curiosity, critical powers of assimilation, balance of judgment, and alertness of mind, ability for social cohesion, integrity of character, initiative, and capability for leadership."

Widening knowledge: If we have to excel in these facets of the interview, we should make a conscious effort to widen our knowledge, as a part of our long-range preparation. We have to keep track of news items that come in both the print and electronic media constantly and write personal notes in a diary. We should invariably focus our attention on names of important people, dates, and numbers.

Digesting news: Instead of merely reading the news items that appear in the media, we should process the materials in the crucible of the mind and arrive at our own inferences, views, and conclusions. In the interviews for higher-level jobs, the analytical skills of the candidates would be evaluated by scrutinising their views.

Editorials in quality dailies, analytical articles in the leader pages and news magazines, and discussions by experts on television channels will help us in formulating and crystallising our views. We must take note of geography, history, culture, traditions, art forms, advances in science and technology, legislation, prominent people, important developments in the national and international scene, controversies, etc.

Pleasing style

Let us go back to the housewife's dinner. Even if she cooks the best dinner, all her efforts would come to nought if it were not served systematically in a pleasing style. An interview is no different.

We have to master the skills, strategies, and techniques for the most effective presentation. This shall be discussed in the coming days.

OF STRESS AND STRAINS

THESE ARE some typical doubts candidates have while attending interviews:

We could not answer a question. The panel then went on to other questions. After a while, the right response to the question we had failed to answer came to my mind. But we did not have the courage to say so at that stage. Did we go wrong in such an omission?

Certainly not. Even if you have all the courage in the world, you should not reopen a question you had left out earlier. The interview had traversed quite some distance; it was then focusing on something else.

No candidate usually answers all the questions correctly. There would be some omissions. An important point is that if you go on brooding over a question you had missed earlier, your mind will be burdened with a sense of loss that would impede further logical thought. This may prove a handicap. However, if a member happens to mention the unanswered question later, you may answer it at that time, without attempting an apology for the earlier lapse.

Perception

A member of the interview board asked me the meaning of my name. We could not answer the question. Was it not an unreasonable question? What has the meaning of your name to do with my job as an engineer?

Your doubt emanates from a distorted perception on interviews. The objective of a job interview is not just to confirm certain aspects of the knowledge or skill of the candidate. Any organisation worth its name looks for candidates with desirable personality characteristics. A person who has never even thought about his name surely gives an indication that he is devoid of observation skills and an analytical outlook. You should keep your eyes and ears open.

You should show an active interest in things relating to your name, your town, your State, and your country. What picture would a person from Kerala offer to a board in Delhi, if he knows nothing about Kathakali?

Expectations

I am a software engineer who attended an interview for a job change. I answered all the questions to the point. However, the panel appeared to be dissatisfied about the way I responded. What more had they expected from me?

One drawback of many techies is that they do not communicate effectively. Perhaps you must have noted that your juniors often ask for clarifications whenever you tell them something. Either you assume that the listener has too much of prior knowledge, or you do not have adequate vocabulary for explaining matters with clarity.

In many cases, the panel may put a question as an opening to a conversation. Perhaps the panel may ask an open-ended question for you to open up, but you fail to elaborate on the point you intend to convey. Your answers may be too brief. Whereas it is not desirable to attempt tiresome and tedious explanations, you should not lose the opportunity to convince the board of the value you can bring to the company.

It may be noted that those who are not willing to communicate cannot be good team players. You can keep this in mind while you face another interview.

Stress interviews

We have heard about stress interviews and group interviews. What are these? How do they differ from an ordinary interview?

You are indicating two different things. A stress interview aims at testing the candidate's behaviour, while he is being deliberately put under severe tension. This evaluates his ability to work efficiently in an atmosphere in which he is tensed up.

There are different techniques for stress interviews. Posing a number of questions one after the other in the 'rapid fire' style, thereby denying breathing time, putting a question before the answer to the previous one is finished, making irritating or offensive remarks while the candidate is answering questions, and upsetting his mental balance by asking irrelevant personal questions or by hurling insults or by raising baseless allegations are some of the usual methods.

If you can keep in mind that all these are in fact harmless tests to unearth your real temperament, you can undergo this exercise with a smile and respond well. The most vital thing is that you should never lose your mental equilibrium. You will be evaluated by the panel knowing fully well that you are under severe tension artificially created for the trial.

Stress interview is not very common. You may come across this in the interview for the selection of marketing professionals in large organisations, certain jobs in the defence forces, and for admission to a few business schools. Even though no prior information is given that there would be stress creation in the interview process, you will be able to smell it when the panel switches to the modes indicated above.

Group interview

A group interview is something totally different. It is rare. A group of five or six candidates is seated before the interview panel and questions are put to the group. The answer has to be given by the candidate who is selected at random by the panel.

Some questions that are not answered by a candidate may be passed to the others.

Occasionally, a question may be thrown openly to the group for anyone to answer. It is a rather difficult trial for the candidates, unless the lamp-buzzer system identifying the person, who volunteers first to answer as in quiz programmes, is provided.

The competition is severe in this exercise. You should not give an impression that you are infringing the freedom of others in the heat of the competition.

LEARNING TO ANTICIPATE QUESTIONS

Here are some final pointers on how to tackle interview questions.

You are happily placed. Why do you want to change your job?

* My qualifications, and the skills I have been able to develop as part of my previous job, can be effectively applied in your expanding organisation, leading to my professional growth. My present company treats me well; but it has some constraints in terms of career growth. That is the prime reason why I thought about a change.

(You may modify the answer appropriately. Some of the points that can be mentioned are opportunities for professional advancement, job security, joining a prestigious organisation, healthy work environment, professional challenges and encouragement for research. Never say you are shifting only for a higher salary.)

Why do you want to change your current job?

* There is an expert suggestion that we keep the mnemonic CLAMPS (C: Challenge, L: Location, A: Advancement, M: Money, P: Prestige, S: Security) in mind, to come up with an appropriate answer.

You have to take a crucial decision. But there is no specific rule or practice or precedent. How would you proceed?

* I would analyse the situation, taking into account all the related factors including the consequences of different decisions. I will adopt the decision I feel is the best under the given circumstances. If possible, I will discuss the case with my superiors or dependable subordinates before arriving at my decision. As you are certainly aware, the function of an executive is not only following precedents, but setting good precedents as well.

Any questions?

* Never try to grill the board with a series of reverse questions. You may ask one or two genuine questions that have something to do with your job or with the organisation. You may also ask for clarification on some aspect of your service that remains a grey area.

Some of the possible questions are indicated below. You may have to choose such questions, or frame new ones, taking into account the circumstances:

- * When could I expect to hear from you?
- * When will I be expected to join?
- * Could I expect the letter of appointment in a fortnight?
- * What is the next step?
- * What would be my responsibilities during the first month?
- * To whom would I report?
- * Will I have to travel a lot?
- * Will there be opportunities for professional training?
- * What is the current availability of housing/accommodation in our company?
- * Do we have to keep foreign markets in mind?

Be prepared for these questions:

The questions we have listed are only indicative and not exhaustive. But once you are prepared to face such diverse questions, no question is likely to upset you in the interview room. A few more questions are given below for your reflection.

- ⇒ How will your father/mother/closest friend/greatest enemy rate you?
- ⇒ How would you describe yourself?
- ⇒ Where do you think you will be after 5/10/15 years?
- ⇒ What has given you the maximum satisfaction in your life?
- ⇒ What do you know about this company?
- ⇒ Can you work overtime?
- ⇒ How do you spend your spare time?
- ⇒ What kind of books do you read? Why?
- ⇒ What kind of films do you enjoy most? Why?
- ⇒ What motivates you most?
- ⇒ Explain how you could motivate a defiant patient to accept your directions?
- ⇒ What would you do if the generator caught fire/if the client threatened to prosecute you for breaking the code of ethics in the profession/if the patient left the hospital without a formal discharge/a passenger attempted to outrage your modesty/if students started shouting in the classroom obstructing your work ... or something similar that has relevance in your line.

Summary:

In certain personality tests you may be asked to write a report/summary of the interview. You should be prepared to face this situation, where you have to note down the questions and your answers along with brief comments.

Special tips:

- * If you are one among very few candidates for the interview, do confirm your participation through a telephone call or letter. Also, after the interview, send a thank you / follow up letter.
- * Keep your journey tickets if the company would reimburse your fare.
- * Never forget to take a copy of your application and the curriculum vitae (CV) you sent, and the latest CV if there has been any substantial change in between. Arrange your documents in a folder in the same sequence as noted in the CV. Keep them loose, so that you can pull out any one of them when required.
- * Keep a couple of your photographs in your file.
- * Keep all the documents in a neat docket.
- * Do not harp on the expected perks, or ask questions like how good is the canteen?
- * Never use sarcasm or irony in your answers.
- * If you happen to realise that you made an error in answering, do not hesitate to say "Sorry".
- * Try to present yourself as part of the solution and not as part of the problem.
- * Do not forget to take back your records/certificates if you had handed them over for reference.
- * End the interview on a positive note that echoes your enthusiasm, and thank the board for the opportunity. Exit gracefully. Never look back when you are at the door.

Practice, practice, and more practice:

Theoretical knowledge alone cannot help you to perform well in any interview. Attend as many mock interviews as possible, and learn from the errors committed by you. Correction of mannerisms is possible through this exercise. The rehearsals will certainly boost your confidence and pave the way to success.

A QUESTION OF ANSWERS

A popular question is 'Tell us something about yourself?' Candidates, who have not prepared for this question may waste precious time narrating details of your early life and proceeding further in the chronological order. They may not get time to focus on their academic achievements or professional accomplishments.

Don't waste time

Instead of wasting time, you should seize the opportunity to convince the interview board that you are the best suited for the job. If we have a clear picture of the duties and responsibilities of the job, it is a golden opportunity to highlight our knowledge and skills that will match the demands. You should not exaggerate.

Let the members of the interview board draw their own inferences.

Strategy

Certain difficult situations may pose a real challenge, unless we have prepared a strategy to tackle them.

One such instance is an interview conducted by a board consisting of four or five members. If the fourth member raises a question while you are answering a question raised by another member, what will you do? Will you ignore one and continue to answer the other? You are in an unenviable situation; you cannot ignore either of them.

The best option is to tell the fourth member, "I am coming to you, Sir," and complete the answer to the second member's question, and then answer the second question. After all, we are not answering the individual members, but the interview board.

Take the case of a candidate with B.Tech. Electronics who gets the question, "Why did you go for electronics?"

Should he answer that this branch of engineering guarantees an early job with a high salary? It is better to say, "Right from my childhood, I was curious about electronic gadgets and their working. Later, I was fascinated by the professional challenges in this discipline. Of course, there is a good demand for competent electronics engineers."

Strengths

Very often certain candidates are at a loss to give good answers to the questions: What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? The former question is relatively easy to handle. We may indicate activities such as computation, innovative design, socialising, tending the sick, preparing reports, or drawing sketches. It is preferable that the interest mentioned has a relevance to the job. Do not be too general like, "I am honest" or "I am hardworking."

Weaknesses

But what about weaknesses? It is a tricky question. Would you say that you are lazy, selfish or jealous? Certainly not.

The trick is to mention a characteristic that may sound like a weakness, but is in the ultimate analysis a source of strength. How can this be done? Look at two examples.

"If I am given an assignment, I may be a bit late in completing it since I tend to be a perfectionist." Here the candidate is trying to say that it is his desire for perfection that might make him shoot his deadline.

The board is likely to infer that here is a man who tries to do his job well.

Another answer can be, "If a colleague of mine tries to evade his work and asks me to help him, I cannot say no."

The ability to say 'no' is often seen as a desirable quality in a good manager. But here the candidate is indirectly saying that he is a team player. Any good organisation desires cooperation among its workers. Never say that you have no weakness whatsoever. If you claim to be a person without any weaknesses, you are obviously being dishonest.

In an interview for managers, there are some other aspects that may be mentioned as weaknesses.

Intolerance of inefficiency, impatience at lack of promptness in others, and single-minded approach when meeting deadlines are some other examples.

Another possibility is mentioning a weakness that has no relevance to the job under consideration.

MIND YOUR MANNERS

Here are some tips regarding your dress and body language, which will help you make a good impression while appearing for an interview:

It is better to avoid wearing a new dress for the first time, since one may become self-conscious. Wear it at least once and check out if you are comfortable in it.

In order to give your best, be natural in your manner and deportment.

Do not consider wearing something, which you think, did not bring you luck on a previous occasion. The mind should not be distracted by such sentiments during interview time.

Things to remember

Make ready the file containing all documents such as the call letter, certificates, mark lists, photograph, and resume the previous day.

It is wise to set aside the pen you might be carrying and your watch ready to be picked up in the morning.

Do not take too many things, say for instance an umbrella or unnecessary bags, as you go into the room for your interview. A file or a handbag should suffice.

Continuous eye contact is essential. A person who does not maintain eye contact while speaking may seem to be trying to hide something

Women should take care not to deposit their handbags on the table. Keep them on the floor nearby instead.

Confidence

While waiting for an interview along with several candidates, we may be sitting in a queue.

The countdown begins as you wait for your turn. As you get closer to the room tension mounts and this is the time for auto suggestion that will boost your confidence.

Keep telling yourself: "I have done long-range and short-range preparation very well. I do possess all the skills and knowledge that the other candidates have. The interview board is there to help me. There is no need to become nervous. I am confident. I will win. I will win. I will surely win."

When your name is called, knock gently on the door or half-door, as the case may be. Generally there is an usher to guide you in. Remember

Do not shout, "May I come in, Sir?" as you enter.

Don'ts

Never try to peep into the room at any stage.

Take your seat when you are asked to do so. Thank the chairman either by word or look. There is no need to extend your hand for a shake.

However, if the chairman of the board extends his hand, accept it. But do not allow your nervousness to make the grip vice-like.

Also meet the eyes of the person. It is poor manners to look elsewhere. Bear in mind that it is a way of communication. There is a good deal of non-verbal communication.

Body language

- Our body language should not convey arrogance. Posture is important. Do not look too relaxed, slouch or sit at the edge of the chair.
- Do not allow your hand to stray to your nose, ear and so on for it betrays nervousness. Twisting the shirt buttons, smoothing your hair, adjusting the sari, and playing with the pen or paperweight all fall in this category.
- The candidate should exercise discretion in using the space between him and the interviewer.
- There is no need to gesticulate like stage actors. Move your hands naturally. Do not rest your elbows on the table
- Don't thump on the table to emphasise a point. You can do it with a proper choice of words and expressions and right modulation of voice.
- Continuous eye contact is essential. A person who does not maintain eye contact while speaking may seem to be trying to hide something.

- Even though the question may come from one of the members, the reply should be addressed to the entire panel. It is not a one-to-one dialogue.
- Some of the `don'ts' indicated above are referred to as mannerisms. Some of them may be the characteristics of a person, and some others may surface when a person is tense or deeply anxious. Mock interviews and a conscious effort will help one overcome these problems.
- It is a good idea to hold such mock sessions in schools, colleges, or clubs. Once the mannerisms in an individual are identified, he should make a conscious attempt to eliminate them.

Language

How we speak is as important as what we say. Speak with clarity in lucid language. Pronunciation should be correct. Be audible. Never try to raise your voice or reduce it to a whisper.

Talking will affect clarity just as slow delivery will bore the listener.

Your replies should be couched in the right words. Don't keep saying `ha', `hoo', `eh', `hmm' or make exaggerated gestures.

We should not do anything that may irritate the interviewer. Take care not to do something that may irritate the interviewer.

For instance, not paying attention to the question asked, answering a question that has not been asked, attempting to provide superfluous information, and attending the interview without adequate preparation are sure to annoy the person seated across.

No interviewer would tolerate a candidate answering his questions in an indifferent manner.

Never stretch an answer unnecessarily or keep repeating. If you feel that some point needs repetition, rephrase the statement.

MAKING AN IMPRESSION

A casual or indifferent style is not desirable. As we enter the interview room, the members should feel that we are taking the test seriously.

We had earlier in these columns drawn a parallel between preparing a dinner and an interview. Even if a dinner has been prepared with meticulous care and attention, the entire effort would come to nought if the courses are not properly organised or the dishes not served systematically.

Similarly, all our pains of preparation would be rendered a waste, unless we give our best shot before the board.

Efficient and effective

Our presentation should be both efficient and effective. `Efficient' connotes doing something well. `Effective' implies producing a successful result. Remember that either of these cannot be achieved without a disciplined approach, no matter how well you have prepared.

We should mentally gear up for systematic, often hard work. If you want the rainbow, you have to put up with the clouds.

How can you achieve success at this stage? There is no simple answer to this question. We should consider all the possibilities of right steps and their benign results, as well as errors that may put us in trouble.

These lines written by the Indian-born English poet and Nobel laureate, Rudyard Kipling, is relevant in the context of interviews as well:

"I keep six honest serving men, they taught me all I knew;

Their names are What and Why and When, And Where and How and Who... "

In other words, we should ask questions and find the best answers to them.

Vital aspects

The most vital aspects that deserve our attention are indicated below.

We should be at the interview venue at least half-an-hour before the scheduled time.

A candidate who is not punctual even for his job interview, paints a hopeless picture of himself. If the venue is in an unfamiliar city, do reach there the previous day and get to know the route/local railway station/bus number or other relevant information.

Traffic jams in big cities should be no excuse for our delay in reporting for the interview. Avoid a last minute rush. If the venue is the same as the institution where we hope to join, spending a few minutes on the premises may provide us with some useful information about the institutional style. We may meet other candidates for the interview. Although it may be good to listen to them, do not be misguided by whatever they say.

Bear in mind that many people are not careful in gathering specific details, or in expressing them with precision.

Never try to present before the interview board something that you heard from a stranger's mouth. Either tell the precise details you gathered from authentic sources, or confess ignorance in a straightforward manner.

Dress code

"Apparel oft proclaims the man," said William Shakespeare.

It is no exaggeration that the first impression is often made by the dress, the facial expression, and the first few words you speak. We should remember that there is no second chance to make a first impression.

We have to dress appropriately for the occasion, keeping in mind the place, weather, and time.

By dressing well, we are showing respect to the board and indirectly telling them that we are taking the interview seriously.

Dazzling costumes, large checks and gaudy colours in general should be avoided. Imagine for a moment what impression a candidate who wears dark goggles and a dark dress would create. Conventional dressing in light colour shirts and dark trousers is fine.

Wearing a tie or a suit should not be your first experience in life, since you will feel uncomfortable in such a situation. If you are not used to such a costume, never hesitate to practise before wearing it to the interview. Comb your hair well. Button your shirt properly. Shave your face in the morning, unless you sport a regular beard.

Women should avoid very tight clothing, plunging necklines or other revealing clothes, heavy ornaments and strong perfumes. If you are wearing salwar-kameez, do take care to secure the dupatta with pins. Long hair should be secured well.

I would relate an actual incident where a few engineering graduates fresh from college attended an interview one after the other, each one wearing a loose shirt over the trousers and rubber chappals. Each pulled the chair before the board, and sat down without being asked to do so.

The interview board became curious about their style and asked one of them why they behaved in this unceremonious fashion on a formal occasion. Surprisingly, they never meant any offence or disrespect; none had ever advised them the right etiquette for such occasions.

Even the parents assumed that their children would do the right thing at the right time. The majority of the teachers who hardly go beyond the boundaries of the textbooks also had perhaps made similar assumptions.

The net result was that the aspirants did not get what they rightly deserved in terms of jobs, not because of their technical incompetence or poor domain expertise, but because of lack of interview-facing skills.

It is all very well that some parents treat their children as their own equals, but they should train the children how to behave with elder people, showing respect. Lack of such training may lead to misunderstanding at the time of the interview, since the members may read into their behaviour, something that the candidates never meant.

Take it seriously

A casual or indifferent style is not desirable.

As we enter the interview room, the members should feel that we are taking the test seriously. We cannot change the shape of our face, but can change our expression. A pleasant look and a pleasing smile will certainly help to make a good first impression. Neatness of the body and dress is important. Fingernails should be trimmed and free from dirt.

Depending on the hour, greet the board "Good Morning", "Good Afternoon" or "Good Evening".

TACKLE TRICKY QUESTIONS

Candidates should spend some time framing the answers to questions that might be asked by the interview board.

We could try to guess some of the questions that might be asked during an interview and plan the answers to these. Not that we should parrot some prepared replies, but we should not be at a loss if the board poses inconvenient questions.

For instance, consider the case of an engineering graduate appearing before a selection board for bank officers. The interviewer is likely to suggest that the candidate might possibly be wasting the time, money, and effort he had put in for his technical education if he were to become a bank officer.

Possible answers

How well could the candidate politely counter the argument? A candidate who had applied his mind to such a query could respond like this:

"My engineering education has helped me to develop certain qualities such as appreciation of accuracy and precision, scientific approach, analytical skills, keen observation, computational speed, deriving conclusions from a series of observed facts, logical scrutiny, problem-solving skills, and teamwork. All these could be applied in the discharge of my duties as a manager in the bank. The time and money spent on engineering education never goes waste, irrespective of the position a person holds. On the other hand, I feel that it enriches one's personality.

"Further, I feel that neither the Government nor society has the capacity to offer specific jobs in the area of specialisation to all the engineering graduates in this country. This social reality has to be appreciated in the present context. So I feel that my association with your organisation as a manager would help me to utilise my professional training."

This kind of a reply does not sound like the response of a depressed or unemployed youth with a defeatist mind, but a bright and pragmatic response from a youngster with a positive frame of mind, trying to make the best of the available opportunities.

About yourself

"Tell us something about yourself" is a usual question. If handled well, it could help us a lot. In a way, it is one of the best questions from the candidate's point of view. Never try to narrate in detail your childhood, schooling or hobbies. This would be a waste of time. Focus on your objective to convince the interviewer how relevant your education, training, or experience is, and how they would suit the job. You could indicate in a few select words, your co-curricular activities, useful hobbies, interests, part-time work, reading preferences and aptitude, provided they have some relation to the job in question. Remember, you are trying to prove your suitability for the job. Since the time allotted to a candidate would be limited, you should ensure its most effective utilisation. Never try to make false claims about

your abilities or attainment, at any stage of the interview. The members of the interview board would see through such tricks.

Plan and practise

As a part of short-time preparation, plan and prepare the answers to questions of this sort. Even if the board puts an expected question, do not jump forward with the answer, but try to speak calmly, so that it sounds natural.

Technical jobs

In interviews for selection of technical personnel, there would be questions on practical aspects, to be answered based on theoretical knowledge or from practical experience. Skills for application of known principles or innovative dexterity may be judged by the interviewer.

Teaching

In the selection of teachers at any level, usually two different aspects would be checked : knowledge of the subject and communication skills.

Of course, it is important that the teacher is thorough with the subject content. But a person who knows most is not necessarily the best teacher. Conveying ideas to the pupils in a simple language and in an interesting style, without sacrificing precision or clarity is an essential attribute of a good teacher. This aspect will normally be tested during the interview. Perhaps the board may ask the candidate to make an exposition of a topic of the candidate's choice in two or three minutes, simulating a classroom environment. A teacher should be able to motivate the pupils. It is essential that for an interview for the selection of teachers, the candidates should revise all the relevant subjects well.

You should update your knowledge in your subject, before appearing for any interview. This is particularly significant in areas such as technology and science where new trends are usual.

In subjects like biotechnology, electronics, computer science and information technology, candidates must be aware of the rapid obsolescence of information. You should never dish out outdated information before an informed board of selectors.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Candidates must be aware of the job profile and the work culture of the organisation.

During an interview, the primary aim is to prove that our skills and

abilities match the demands of the job. For achieving this objective, we should have a sound knowledge of the organisation as well the job. Naturally, the first step is to gather information on the organisation and the specific job.

Collection of data

We could adopt a multi-pronged approach for collection of data. Good finance magazines, brochures, advertisements, job notifications, and home magazines could be useful sources. If possible, it is also a good idea to discuss about the company with one of its employees, as it could throw some light on the style and work culture of the organisation. However, before drawing conclusions on the basis of the views expressed by one employee, we should apply our common sense to ensure that we get a complete picture of the company and not a distorted version.

Website

The website of the organisation could give us a great deal of information. Organisations of repute keep their sites updated. Focus on features such as its history, units, centres, paid-up share capital, number of employees, products, their merits, competitors, outstanding achievements, future plans for development, and names of top managers.

A candidate who knows the tradition, history, and achievements of the company would create a good impression.

In respect of manufacturing or service industries, it is vital that we gather information on the goods and services provided by the company, as well as by its competitors. For example, if we are aiming at a marketing job in a television monitor manufacturing unit, we should necessarily be conversant with the popular brands in the market, their features, selling prices, terms of business, and relative merits and demerits.

Job profile

The candidate should be aware of the salient features of the job. Each job has its own characteristics and requirements.

Although the personality of the candidate is important, he would have to meet the 'job demands' of his potential employer. What are these demands? For this, we would have to study in detail the responsibilities of the job.

Different jobs need employees with different abilities and skills.

We should perform a 'job analysis' to identify the requirements of our 'target job'. Often, large organisations give an indication of the responsibilities involved in their notification.

A careful study of this aspect would help us in convincing the interview board how our academic qualifications, and professional experience dovetail with the job demands.

We should plan as to how we would do this, through hints in our answers.

Candidates aiming at managerial posts would have to think of strategies to tackle the competitors of the company.

The overall policies of the company should be kept in mind, while answering questions that border on practice and approach.

Discussions

If we are aiming for a job that is generally done by many people in one or more organisations, we could discuss the job profile and requirements of the job with someone who is already working in the same area. This would help us gather information on the daily routine, expected skills, difficulties, trends, potential for professional advancement, and so on. This will guide us in assessing the employers' expectations.

On the other hand, if you were being considered as a replacement for an official who has left the organisation, you would have to convince the management how well you could fit into the job.

Your research on the organisation and the position aspired for, demonstrates your initiative and commitment, which will weigh in your favour at the time of the interview and selection. But you should avoid the pitfall of assuming that you are thorough with the style of functioning of the company.

USP

If you could identify an outstanding feature of yours that suit the requirements of the firm, it would help you in securing placement.

For this, you should have put in persistent effort in some specific area, or should be favoured by some rare experience that is significant from the viewpoint of the company. Some experts call this '**USP**' - **unique selling proposition**. Your assessment about your suitability for the job may not be accepted by others, unless you succeed in convincing them.

It may not be possible for any organisation to utilise the services of a candidate without some training to meet the particular job demands, since there is nothing like a made-to-order candidate. But you should persuade the board that you would need only the minimum of training.

Act with confidence

Some may ask whether an interview for a few minutes can help identify the qualities and skills of a candidate. The answer is an emphatic 'yes'.

Even the best candidate who has made the finest of preparations for an interview is nervous during the crucial moments.

Sir Winston Churchill, who was one of the greatest communicators of the 20th century, once confessed that he did experience nervousness before interviews. Katherine Hepburn, world-famous Hollywood star, could never face an interview without nervousness. If this is the story of such stalwarts, what about ordinary people like us?

It is only natural then that we are jittery when our speech and movements are under the scrutiny of discerning experts.

A blessing

A bit of tension and nervousness is a blessing, since it would prompt us to take the interview seriously and thereby forcing us to prepare well. We would try to prove our capabilities, gain acceptance and live up to the claims in our curriculum vitae before the interview board.

Our performance will improve, if we approach the interview with a positive frame of mind. The interview has become an indispensable hurdle in securing any good job. If we prepare well, we can easily make it an enjoyable experience.

Negative views

There may be some people around you, who may tell you that interviews are a farce arranged by the employer and that candidates have already been selected.

Turn a deaf ear to such negative views. Any good organisation requires the service of competent employees. No board worth its name can reject a very competent candidate or select a worthless one.

The interview is only a mechanism for identifying the best talent to meet the challenges of the organisation. Let us not behave like a thoughtless general who runs away from the battle scene even before the first bullet is fired. Get ready and face the test.

Dispel tension

Many candidates who excel in the written tests, approach the interview with a sense of anxiety and fear. It must be remembered that when we are anxious and worried, we may fail in making the best presentation. Boundless anxiety will impede logical thinking and prompt retrieval of information from our memory.

We should dispel unwanted tension from the mind and apply simple common sense.

We should face the interview with confidence and try to give our best shot. We must tell ourselves repeatedly that we do have the skills and abilities, which other candidates may possess, and that we are well prepared to face the interview.

Spotting talent

The intention of an interview board is not to frighten any candidate, but to identify the most suitable candidate who meets the job demands.

The board will, therefore, help to bring out the best in the candidates. Just as the candidates desire selection, the board wants to spot the best talent.

We must consider the members of the interview board not as opponents, but as sympathetic seniors.

Some may ask whether an interview for a few minutes can help identify the qualities and skills of a candidate.

The answer is an emphatic 'yes'. It can effectively judge qualities such as balance of mind, clarity of expression, comprehension, confidence, diction, pronunciation and other language skills, love for meeting people, pleasantness/getting along with others/thinking well of others, polite speech, prioritising, willingness to take responsibility, problem-solving ability, reasoning, and knack for keeping secrets. Such judgment will go a long way in the selection of the most suitable candidate for any given job.

Assessing ability

An interviewer can assess the depth of knowledge of the candidate in a given subject through a few properly planned questions.

Ability for quick comprehension and talent for problem-solving can be evaluated objectively through graded questions.

Originality and innovative skills can also be judged.

No interview is a farce, but a valuable management tool for the effective recruitment of personnel.

The emergence of globalisation and the presence of several multinationals have spawned international styles and approaches in the conduct of job interviews in our country.

There are new approaches and types of questions. If we delude ourselves into believing that we can face any interview effectively without special preparation, we may be in for disappointment.

Overconfidence

Of course, we should have confidence, but not overconfidence. Appropriate learning, preparation, and training should support our confidence.

Never be under the impression that wearing a charming suit, or sticking a never-ending smile on your lips can take you to success. The interview board will have discerning members experienced in the art of assessing persons.

Be prudent

Our responses during the interview should be wise; we cannot just leave everything to our natural instinct.

This needs some clarification. One's assessment of his/her movements or behaviour is never objective. All of us, in a way, wear masks.

There is a lot of difference between our persona and our personality.

My persona represents my character that I show to others; this would be different from my real character.

It is rather impossible to wear the mask of another person for a long time before the interview board.

Our reactions and responses in this two-way communication experiment should, therefore be, cautious and prudent.

The interviewer attempts something more than getting a few answers from the candidates. As an illustration, see what the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) states about the interview in the Civil Services Examination:

The candidate will be asked questions on matters of general interest.

The object of the interview is to assess the personal suitability of the candidate for a career in public service by a board of competent and unbiased observers. The test is intended to judge the mental calibre of a candidate.

In broad terms, this is really an assessment of not only his intellectual qualities but also social traits and his interest in current affairs. Some of the qualities to be judged are mental alertness, critical powers of assimilation, clear and logical exposition, balance of judgement, variety and depth of interest, ability for social cohesion and leadership, intellectual and moral integrity.

The technique of the interview is not that of a strict cross-examination but of a natural, though directed and purposive conversation, which is intended to reveal the mental qualities of the candidate.

The interview is not intended to test either specialised knowledge or general knowledge of the candidates that has been already tested through their written papers.

Candidates are expected to have taken an intelligent interest not only in their special subjects of academic study but also in the events which are happening around them both within and outside their own State or country as well as in modern currents of thought and in new discoveries which should rouse the curiosity of well-educated youth.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE READING

Our earlier series in these columns 'Read Faster, Read Better' that had discussed diverse aspects of effective reading evoked a lot of readers' interest, presumably because reading is after all the primary process in any learning activity. Our focus had been on both learning to read and reading to learn. There are indeed further vistas to be explored in this vital segment of the learning process.

Let us try to know some of the interesting strategies to engage us in effective reading even when the progress seems to be tough. Suppose you come home after a tiresome day, and try to read something that has necessarily to be read and learnt. You may go through the motions of reading such as sitting under a lamp with the book wide open before you, and your eyes wandering over the printed pages. Perhaps your mind is also wandering. After a half hour of this exercise, if you try to recall what you have read, perhaps you may draw a blank.

You painfully realise that you learnt nothing during the period. A similar experience awaits you if you try to read something seriously after a tiff or noisy argument with a close friend. Your mind may be preoccupied. The real process of reading with the brain never takes place. Consequently, you never learn anything on such occasions. There are some methods to tide over such difficult situations, although the effort may not be as successful as when you read in a calm atmosphere with a clear mind. Substantial contribution to 'muscle reading', a method that can help us in such difficult situations, has been made by the noted educationist Dave Ellis.

What essentially is the strategy involved? What are the steps to successful reading even when the ambience is not congenial for efficient reading? The atmosphere may not be friendly, not only because of the imbalance of your mind. It is possible that the lesson is too tough to be grasped through the normal course of reading and analysis. The idea may be complex. To borrow an Indian idiom, it may be in the *nalikera pakam* - the idea is difficult to reach as the sweet milk inside a coconut; you have to go through the hard processes of removing the layers of husk and shell. The real success in learning is converting the material to *draksha pakam*, which reminds us of sweet grapes that can be devoured straightaway. Your intention should be to reduce your effort and struggle, raise your energy level, neutralize your lack of concentration, and extract more out of your reading.

It has to be mentioned that muscle reading is not confined to reading under hostile circumstances. The style can be gainfully adopted for normal reading as well; but the steps may appear to be too unwieldy in normal situations.

You have to divide the process of reading into different stages. Some of these are 'before reading', some others 'while reading', and yet others 'after reading'. This may appear to be cumbersome in the beginning, but with practice it will become a habit. Also some of the stages can be skipped if the passage is easy or the environment is not too hostile to permit easy reading for learning.

Before reading

Preview: You should not make a sudden jump into the text and start reading straightaway. A quick preview is essential. Some call it reconnaissance. If it is a new book, you can look at the blurb, chapter headings, and have a glance of some of the chapter summaries. Look at the pictures, charts, graphs, and diagrams, if any. Flip through the pages of the text. See whether there is something that arouses your curiosity, or something that would help you

greatly now or later. Before you go into the body of the book, it is a nice idea to go through the preface or introduction. Think about what you gained from the preview.

Outline: Realise the structure of what you are going to read. If necessary, write out words indicating the significant areas, or make a mind map. Chapter headings and topic headings will help you in this endeavour.

Question: Ask what you try to derive from the book or passage? How will it help you? The preview must have led you to some questions. Raising questions will enliven your reading. It is some sort of a creative activity and not just passive gazing at the paper. You would be liberated from your mental fatigue when you find answers to the questions raised by you. In other words this exercise will make you more energetic.

While reading

Read: With the background of the preview and the outline, you feel more interested in reading than otherwise. Reflect on what you already know, so that you can easily link the new knowledge with what is in your mind. If the concentration wanes, you should ask your mind, "Come back!" Stay focused. Read aloud for a change, if you feel drowsy. Take small breaks if necessary.

Do not lie down or adopt a reclining posture while reading. Sit erect, firmly on the seat. Make mental pictures. If the material appears to be tough, try mock teaching - to an imaginary group of students seated in a classroom.

Make Markings: Underline the important points and make ticks or other marks, as required. Note down what is significant in the margin. These are all positive actions, different from reading that may otherwise degenerate into a totally passive motion. Read with a pen or pencil in hand.

Answer: Look for answers to the questions originally raised. Perhaps you can write them out, adding to the first outline / mind map you had created.

After Reading

Recite: Try to talk to yourself what you have already read. If there is another person who is interested in listening to you, speak to him on the topic. Talking to your own image in a mirror would be interesting. You may be prompted by your marking in the text.

Review: You have to review what you read and learnt, at least before the next day. You can look at your marking and noting, and go to the main text if necessary. Such review helps to convert what is in your short-term memory to your long-term memory. Real learning involves committing the lessons to your long-term memory.

Further Review: Your memory is short. What you learnt today may not come to your mind after a month. So it is essential that you review the lessons periodically. This may not take a long time. A quick check and confirmation that you have the lessons in your mind is only what is necessary. If there is a gap, it can conveniently be filled for your own advantage. It is an interesting pastime to go through your marking in the margins and the matter you have underlined in the text. If you fail in recollecting in full, any part of the lesson, necessary corrective steps should be resorted to forthwith.

We have narrated a series of steps for muscle reading. It is essentially a process of discovering the hidden objects in the lesson and assimilating them, even if the environment is not congenial for proper reading for study. Try to perform the experiment of muscle reading with one of your textbooks, or a subject book by a different author, and find out how effective is the process. The method of muscle reading may be used whenever you find that the going is not smooth. It will offer a rewarding experience.

OF SKIMMING, SCANNING AND SACCADES

Reading, some say, is an attitude. "The world may be full of fourth-rate writers but it's also full of fourth-rate readers," said Stan Barstow, a British writer.

A firm desire to improve our reading and a confident approach are the essential ingredients of success in this endeavour. You should love reading and never take it as an ordeal or drudgery. Even when you are reading for pleasure, you can read fast. It need not necessarily be slow. In the given time you can obviously cover a larger area if you move fast.

There is the myth that if you do not understand a passage, it can be learnt by another reading. The right approach is to start questioning the content and analyse it in your mind. You may have to view it from a different angle. If it is a textbook on a subject of study, perhaps you may have to read a different author on the same subject.

Two processes

Skimming and scanning are two processes that aid speed-reading substantially. Skimming aims at getting the gist of a passage or an overall picture of the contents; it is some sort of a general overview. While skimming, you would be reading vertically rather than horizontally. Scanning, on the other hand, involves looking for a specific piece of information in a long document. It helps one to find a quick answer to a specific question from a long passage or even from a book. You may look for key words or headings that stand out.

Reading the entire text carefully to identify just one point is a sheer wastage of time. Experienced bureaucrats, who have to read several orders from the Government, often read only the last paragraphs containing the operative portion, leaving out the early paragraphs narrating the background and reasoning behind the orders. It is a form of selective scanning.

Start early

The first step of serious learning in the school is reading. 'If the first button of a man's coat is wrongly put, all the rest are bound to be crooked.' Every student should begin well in the art of reading, and progressively develop appropriate skills, including a rapid style.

The right style of reading on any occasion depends on your purpose of reading. When you are trying to learn the nuances of grammar by reading a school textbook, or going through the steps in a mathematical derivation in a science subject, there is no question of applying the techniques for speed-reading. Every word or even letter or symbol has profound significance.

But reading a story for pleasure is a different proposition altogether. Even there if you are looking for higher levels of aesthetic pleasure, you may have to focus on the phrases, some of which may be inimitable as when they come from great masters of the craft.

Certain methods have been evolved for calculating 'reading efficiency.' One style is measuring the speed of reading in 'words per minute' and multiplying it with the 'comprehension score' as judged by the percentage of the correct answers in a test based on the material. A detailed study of the methods is beyond our scope.

Fixation and saccade

In order to appreciate the techniques of rapid reading, you have to know some of the processes involved. Whenever you read, your eyes move laterally in jerks and get fixed in a position for a fraction of a second before moving towards the next position.

The eyes stopping on a word is known as a fixation. The sharp lateral movement of the eye as it switches from one fixation point to the next is called a saccade. In other words, movements and pauses represent saccades and fixations.

If you have not made any deliberate attempt at speed-reading, there may be six to eight fixations per line.

However, through training we may reduce the number to four. A child learning a language may fix his/her eyes perhaps on every letter, before proceeding further. He/she reads the text letter by letter. Gradually he/she will start reading word by word, and later on start reading groups of words.

As he/she gets more and more familiar with words and usage, the number of saccades decrease. The duration of each fixation comes down as you become more and more proficient in the language.

Whereas a slow reader would read one word per fixation, an average speed-reader would read three to five words. Our familiarity with the contents of the subject is also significant. Those gifted with quick comprehension will require only very short fixations.

Span of recognition

Yet another element is the span of recognition. This indicates the number of letters a reader sees at one fixation. Mature readers would have a wide span of recognition, but this has some practical limitations. It cannot be increased beyond a limit.

The wider the span, the fewer the fixations. You may test your normal span of recognition by focusing your attention on a spot at the centre of a printed line and checking the number of words you can read without moving your eyes sideways. A span of four to five centimetres is normal.

GOING BEYOND THE LETTERS IN PRINT

Effective reading has two important aspects — speed and comprehension. There is no point in reading fast without comprehending the text. The writer's message has to be appreciated, evaluated critically and applied when required. Often, we read just for enjoyment, as when reading a novel. Even there, following the thread of the story is important. A good reader may look for more than the story — style of narration, development of plot, appeal of characters, artistic aspects, creative talent of the novelist and so on also matter for him.

Remember that reading is a complex process involving mental activities demanding concentration; relaxing while reading is inadvisable. It is, sometimes, advised not to read with the eyes but with the brain. Often, we read with our heart — for instance, when we come across a moving story, or a touching poem.

Any good reading effort has two essential components — the sensory process involving visual skills and the mental process involving comprehension and interpretation. Tony Buzan, an authority on this subject, says that reading comprises seven parts: recognition, assimilation, intra-integration (linking of parts), extra-integration (linking with prior knowledge), retention, recall and communication.

You may have heard that poet John Milton's young daughters used to read Greek and Latin to their blind father. What really happened was that the daughters went through the motions, with their eyes moving through the lines and their mouth pronouncing the words. But it was Milton who understood the words. The daughters never 'read' in the right sense of the word.

What is comprehension?

In simple terms, it is the ability to understand. But from the point of view of a student learning his lessons properly, it implies specific skills, some of which are indicated below:

Acquiring word meanings

Selecting the right meaning of words to suit the context

Understanding units of increasing size — word, phrase, clause, sentence, paragraphs and full text

Associating meaning of words with graphics or numbers

Reading in thought units

Selecting and following main ideas

Following directions

Explaining in one's own words what has been read

Drawing inferences

Appreciating the writer's organisation (of the text)

Identifying writer's motives

Identifying subtle language devices, such as symbolism or figure of speech

Evaluating what is read, including recognition of writer's tone and mood

Retaining ideas

Recalling ideas at times of need

Applying ideas and integrating them with past experience

Answering questions on the content

When Isaac Asimov, a great scientist and novelist, said, "I am not a speed reader. I am a speed understander," he was stressing the need for comprehension. This process of building bridges between the known and the new is vital in reading to learn. "Reading without reflecting is like eating without digesting," said Edmund Burke, British statesman and political philosopher. There is no point in focussing on reading speed, sacrificing comprehension.

Guy Thomas Buswell (1891-1994), a great pioneer in the psychology of reading, once wrote: "The most mature process of silent reading consists in the fusion of groups of words into units of meaning, which, in turn, flow into and become part of a larger stream of thought constituting the total substance of the material being read. This process of mature silent reading is characterised psychologically by a complete absence of attention to words as such and by an absorption in the meaning unfolded." Critical reading is yet another aspect that deserves our attention. It is critical thinking as applied to reading. It reflects the reader's questioning attitude, open mind and desire to arrive at the truth.

If we do not think about what we read, we fail in comprehension.

READ FASTER, READ BETTER

"Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man."

- Sir Francis Bacon

We had, in the series on learning, indicated certain styles for effective reading. They are in fact styles of reading for effective learning. We live in an era in which large volumes of information engulf us. Letters, e-mail messages, magazine articles, and books are only some of the forms in which it appears. Endless extra reading material creates an unmanageable situation. Most of us find it hard to read all of it, for want of time. It would, therefore, help us greatly if we can read faster. This is applicable not only to students, but to all kinds of people in different walks of life. Some call the process rapid reading, which implies not just reading faster, but focusing on what we require from the text.

Professionals and officials may have to read several documents or reports and act on them. When there is a deluge of information appearing in various forms, how can they do justice to it? The only answer is that they should develop skills of rapid reading. Good students cannot limit their reading to the prescribed textbooks. They have to read the newspaper, magazines, journals, and books of a general nature for developing their language skills as well as general awareness, as a part of self-improvement. Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body. Keep in mind the adage - a library is a hospital for the mind. "Show me the books he loves and I shall know the man far better than through mortal friends," is another thinker's remark.

It is true that the onslaught of the electronic media has to some extent reduced our time for reading. However, reading continues to be a sound index of personality. What else is proclaimed by a renowned advertisement of a frontline firm, "Send us a man who reads"?

Sometimes we forget the significance of reading because it has become common like breathing in our daily life. Imagine for a moment that you are prevented from breathing for a few seconds. You realise how important it is for you. The case of reading is similar. If you lose the freedom to read, you will feel another kind of painful suffocation.

Reading is often a blessing that can put us into contact with the minds of great men who have recorded their experiences and thoughts for the benefit of others.

Reading speed

When I say that you should increase your reading speed, the first step is to find out what your present reading speed is. How can you measure it?

Select a passage of running matter nearly 600 to 700 words. There should not be any sketch or calculation; it can be a plain text on a light topic of interesting nature.

Take a stopwatch, a piece of paper, and a pen. Choose a quiet place for your reading without any distraction. Start reading at your usual pace. Simultaneously start the stopwatch. Read till the end without any interruption. Note the time when you come to the end of the passage. Estimate the time in minutes. The total number of words divided by the time in minutes would give your reading speed in words per minute. For example, if you took three minutes and 42 seconds for reading a passage of 629 words, your reading speed is $629/3.7$, which is 170 words per minute. Check your comprehension of the contents through self-assessment. See whether you can recall not only the main idea, but a reasonable quantum of details.

Around 185 to 250 words per minute are average values. Even if you fall within these limits, you should try to improve reading by eliminating barriers and adopting healthy styles.

There are people who claim speeds of several thousands of words per minute. It is interesting to know that our eye can recognise an image even though we view it for as small a duration as one five-hundredth of a second.

This indicates that there is enormous possibility of increasing our reading speed, through the training of our eyes. After you improve your reading style in a few weeks, you may again find out your reading speed using a similar passage and assess your progress. This experiment can be repeated as often as you want.

TO CRAM OR NOT TO CRAM

Forcing too many things into a container is called cramming. In a like manner, studying hastily for an impending examination is also a process of cramming. All of us would have done this occasionally, in respect of a particular topic.

Is it a healthy practice? Well, from a pragmatic point of view, we may justify or rationalise it. However, we should admit that cramming is no form of sound learning. It results in the rapid loss of newly learned information. Some say that cramming is one of the worst possible study methods.

If the examination is too close to permit systematic preparation, you may perhaps resort to this practice, with a vow that you will cover the ground properly after the examination. You might have heard some teachers confessing that they learnt certain topics well, only when they attempted to teach them to their pupils. A teacher who has crammed a lesson cannot of course teach it in the classroom. He/she has to analyse and assimilate the contents and spirit of the lesson before teaching.

Not just teaching, any kind of application of the lesson is not possible if you have only crammed it, even if you have done it intensively. Cramming has the limited objective of helping one to answer questions in an examination and score marks. You might say that cramming is helpful in emergencies, but it is not advisable for good learning. Cramming is useful only as a last resort. The right step is to plan and schedule your studies well ahead of the examinations and avert the need for cramming. Systematically spaced study, and not eleventh hour hurry, is the effective way to learn. A seasoned expert once indicated the right attitude for a student desirous of good learning style thus:

"I cannot afford to wait in the class to be taught. I want to prepare myself ahead of the teacher. I am going to question, summarise and visualise during the teacher's lesson. I am going to learn. I am going to sort information into stuff I already know and stuff that is new. I want to link the new with what I already know. I am not waiting for the teacher to explain this to me. This is my life and it's important for me not to be passive. I am going to watch myself as I learn and when I do not get it, I am not letting it pass. I will jump right in and find out what I do not understand. If I

cannot understand, I am not going to blame the teacher; I would request my teacher to help, so that I do get it. I take responsibility for my own life and learning."

This indeed is a far cry from cramming. Having said that, let us look at some strategies for cramming if you are pressed to go that way once in a while.

For effective cramming, you may have a quick look at the lessons, check some of the previous question papers for identifying the examiners' favourite areas, omit portions that are not 'useful,' and skim the text for main points. Your mind searches for what is important from the point of view of scoring marks in the examination. You have no time for recall or reflection or review that are essential parts of a sound learning process.

Some teachers also try to cram lessons during the fag end of the academic year, when they face shortage of time for covering the lessons properly; they would be distributing examination tablets - a process that goes against the principles of good teaching. A first-rate teacher is indeed a fine facilitator who helps the pupils to learn properly; he/she is not to cram 'knowledge' in the pupils. When all is said and done, you may be forced to cram at some time or another during your academic career, for beating deadlines. In such an event, you should do that wisely.

Skim over the total material available, identify the most important areas, and follow a practical method to commit the essential things to memory in the shortest possible time.

Focus on chapter summaries, and review questions given in the book. Make brief quick notes. Anticipate probable questions and get ready to face them. Appropriate use of mnemonics would come to our aid at such crucial moments. Because of the limited time available, the drill has to be fast. You need not go for detailed reference for clearing doubts, as you are not learning in the right sense of the word. You may blindly follow what appears in the textbook, free from your usual questioning attitude. However, even during last minute cramming you have to maintain a positive attitude - a feeling that you would do well in the examination using the material crammed. Make the best of the situation. An occasional cup of coffee or tea may be of help.

Effective steps

Estimate the time at your disposal and the extent to be covered.

Be conservative in your estimate of time; unexpected elements may pop up.

Make a quick study of the previous question papers and identify the favourite questions of the examiners.

Intelligent selection of the areas to be handled is a vital step in effective cramming.

Note down important points, using standard abbreviations, and simple sketches if relevant. Remove all fluff and frills; reduce the matter to the bare minimum. No fluff, all stuff! Use mnemonics or mind maps if suitable.

Refer the underlined or highlighted parts in your lecture notes.

Repeat them verbally or write them out, till you are thorough with the material.

What has been selected should be learnt thoroughly. If you are shallow in a number of areas, you will not be able to answer any question well.

If you have no notes, go to a standard textbook and focus on chapter summaries, highlighted portions.

In subjects in which numerical problems are common, master at least a few important types, perhaps by cramming the formulae and noting how to substitute values and solve problems.

If drawing sketches are important in the subject, develop skills to draw a few important ones from memory.

Frame mnemonics if several disconnected points have to be remembered.

Try to repeat the matter in your mind, if not aloud, several times. Recitation is a significant drill in cramming.

Cram with full concentration.

You have to use the material crammed to answer at least partly, if you do not know the full answers.

Never think of failure in the examination, while learning. Maintain a confident approach.

If you are cramming for a mid-semester examination, go back to the lessons immediately after the examination, and learn them in a scientific manner. Whatever you had crammed will not be retained for long in your mind. In fact cramming is a form of self-deception. You should go back to the lessons to learn them the right way at the earliest. You had given yourself special permission for an only one-time cramming. You had organised your limited study time as an exception. You should not want to make cramming a habit.

Never plan to cram during the final weeks of the academic year, and waste precious months before them. It is certainly better to learn slowly. Learning two hours a day for ten days is of course better than trying to learn for twenty hours at a stretch.

Cramming is only a final option for students who have to face examinations. You are trying to make the most of the situation

EXAMS: DRIVE AWAY THE MISCONCEPTIONS

TAKE IT EASY: Think logically and keep your confidence in tact in the examination hall.

There are several myths about examinations. Never fall a prey to these. Some of the popular myths are:

The examiners deliberately set difficult questions. (A baseless conjecture.)

I will not understand the questions properly. (Why? What others can understand, you will also understand. You are not inferior to others.)

Anyway, I will not pass the examination. (The past results will tell you a different story.)

Unless I know everything, I cannot pass the examination. (In the first place, there is no one who knows everything. Even if you do not know some parts of the syllabus, normally you can score well in the examinations.)

I will forget everything in the examination hall. (You are unnecessarily nervous, if you feel so. Be confident that if you have learnt your lessons well, your memory will not fail you in the crucial moments. Get rid of needless anxiety and focus on your lessons.)

You can learn everything the previous night; your memory will be fresh. There is no point in struggling to prepare for the examination wasting several months. (This is an old wives' tale. Systematic preparation is the key to success in any examination.)

If I fail in the examination, everyone will make fun of me. (Yet another instance of unwanted fear. You think about success and not failure. However, failure in a single test does not make you a laughing stock. There are candidates who pass and those who fail in most examinations. Even if you fail once, you will pass the next time and forget the failure and move forward. Hope for the best and work steadily.)

If someone suggests any such myth to be true, do not trust his/her words. Think logically and keep your confidence in tact.

In the hall

Your performance in the examination hall is the most vital factor that decides your score. Something similar to the serving of a well-prepared dinner. All your hard work in preparation would come to nought if you fail in doing the right things at the right time in the examination hall. If the questions are of the descriptive type, you should necessarily go through them at the outset, so that you can identify the relatively easy ones to be attempted in the beginning.

Also if there are choices, you should plan the questions to be attempted. The optimum combination of questions that would give you the best score should be carefully selected.

At this stage, it is necessary to make a point very clear. If the question paper is of the objective type, in which all questions are compulsory with no option for individual choice, do not waste time by going through all the questions in the beginning. Read each question and provide the answer then and there.

The popular use of objective questions is in competitive examinations that aim at ranking the candidates based on relative merit, and, therefore, deliberately incorporate time constraint. Each second is precious in such a situation; even a small amount of time wasted may tilt the balance in one way or the other.

Prior analysis

A prior analysis of previous question papers of the same examination would give you an insight of the possible style of questions that are likely to appear in your examination. A discussion with senior students may prove insightful, helping you from not falling into the kind of traps or errors committed by them.

Experience we know is the best teacher. But then you cannot make all possible errors and then correct them. The wise invariably learn not only from their own errors, but from the errors committed by others as well.

The marks allotted to each question should be considered while deciding the time you should devote to answer it. What is expected from you is not writing down what all you know on the concerned subject, but presenting what forms a good answer to the question.

To the point

Elimination of irrelevant data is as important as presenting the essential data. Do resist the temptation to write everything you have learnt on the topic. The popular dictum of schoolmasters, 'Answer to the point' is pertinent in this context.

Further, if you write all that you have learnt and not just what is expected of you, the examiner would feel that you have not come to grips with the content of the lesson. This in turn will go against your interest in gaining a good score.

While allocating time for each question, you have to give some allowance for unforeseen roadblocks during writing.

For example, if you have to answer six questions carrying equal marks in three hours, you cannot afford to allocate 30 minutes for each question; restrict it to 25 minutes. This will give you time for initial preparations, for the final reading and correction of the answers, etc.

First impression

The first answer should be your best answer; this would create a fine impression about you in the mind of the examiner. This impression will certainly have a benign influence in the matter of deciding the marks for other descriptive answers.

To gain this advantage, start with a question you are confident of scoring well. It is important that you write legibly. No examiner would strain him/herself to decipher your scribbling or scrawl. It may not be possible for everyone to write in a beautiful hand, but anyone can write legibly.

ART OF LISTENING

THERE ARE many reasons why you may not listen properly. You may have this pre-conceived notion that the teacher is dull and cannot evoke your interest. Sometimes the dress or demeanour of the teacher may put you off.

Mannerisms such as the frequent repetition of certain words or expressions by the teacher may prove a deterrent to the pupil. If the teacher mentions a new term that you do not understand, then further listening will not be effective. So you have to raise a doubt and get it cleared. A good teacher will only welcome such doubts, since it will help not

only you, but also the entire class. Irritating gesticulations or poor voice levels of the teacher may also discourage students. Good teachers normally speak loud enough so that all the students can hear the lecture well.

Distractions such as the conversation of students next to you while the teacher goes ahead with the lesson, or your own preoccupation with other thoughts can also result in poor listening.

Worry or fear, anger or depression may prove a barrier to listening. In fact, such internal distractions are more damaging than the external ones. Another reason for poor listening could be your lack of interest in the subject. Or perhaps you fear that the subject is tedious or boring. The inability to see the teacher's face because of a poor seating arrangement is yet another reason.

Good listening

- ⇒ Make prior preparation for each class, by revising the previous lesson, reviewing class notes, and reading the day's lesson in advance.
- ⇒ Maintain good eye contact with the teacher. (You may have to shift your eyes to the notebook for writing lecture notes.)
- ⇒ Face the teacher squarely.
- ⇒ Take note of non-verbal cues such facial expressions, posture, tone of the voice, and gestures of the teacher.
- ⇒ Remain open minded while listening. You need not try to predict what the teacher would say next, even if you have read the lesson in advance.
- ⇒ Sit relaxed and composed.
- ⇒ Never get distracted by extraneous sounds.
- ⇒ Don't look out of the window or at whatever else is going on in the room. Focus your attention on the teacher.
- ⇒ Never allow your mind to wander. Never daydream. Maintain your concentration at the highest level during the lecture. Listen actively. Be alert, attentive, and enthusiastic.
- ⇒ Listening to a classroom lecture should not be taken as a passive act. You have to focus on what is said by the teacher and process the new ideas continuously in your mind, and promptly write the salient points in your notebook.
- ⇒ Asking mental questions will keep you active and alert.
- ⇒ As a part of listening, go on asking mental questions such as 'What is the key point at this stage?' 'What is the application of this idea?' 'How well does this point agree with my prior knowledge?' or 'How can I easily remember this idea easily?' This is not at all difficult, since you think much faster than the teacher can speak. Your mind remains occupied with the lesson content; you do not give room for distraction of any kind.
- ⇒ If you feel that your mind has started wandering after you listen for sometime, forcefully tell your mind "Come back".
- ⇒ Be responsive to the teacher through your expressions and confirm that your listening. Never keep a blank face.
- ⇒ Look for key points presented by the teacher and note them promptly in your notebook. Write out clearly new words or terms or expressions mentioned by the teacher.
- ⇒ You can ask questions such as what, why, when, where, how, and who in your mind while listening. If you cannot find answers to the relevant questions, you can raise your doubts in the class or ask the teacher for clarification after the class. You can link the new ideas you hear with your prior knowledge.
- ⇒ In higher classes, students should practise critical listening of a high order. You are not supposed to swallow what is heard hook, line, and sinker, but process the lesson in the crucible of your mind, appreciate it fully, and arrive at proper conclusions and inferences.

You should necessarily apply logic and systematic reasoning as a part of exercising wise judgement.

No amount of theoretical discussion can help us, unless we practise systematic listening and learn lessons from our lapses. Remaining silent is no proof of good listening.

Practise

Try to put your best effort in listening and check how well you can recollect the points made by the teacher. Try to focus on the points brought forward by the teacher, and not on the teacher or his techniques and strategies. If you are analysing in your mind what the teacher is speaking about, you are on the right track.

Apply the steps to ensure proper listening and find out how much improvement you could make.

This is the application of the 'hot stove' principle. You may read or hear a lot about the damage that would be caused by touching a hot stove. But that would be nothing like the real experience of touching a hot stove with your own fingers.

There is no substitute for practise in any human endeavour, and developing good listening skills is no exception. Remember that there is always room for improvement

YOUR GUIDE TO TOTAL RECALL

I HAD indicated certain memory techniques such as the use of acronyms and acrostics in my series on essay-type examinations. There are other techniques such as rhyming, loci method, chunking, and pegging.

Acronyms

In acronyms, we use each first letter from a group of words to form a word that may be an artificial one. LASER for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation is an example. You should remember that though acronyms are good memory aids, they do not help comprehension or appreciation of the subject content. Sometimes it may be difficult to make easy-to-remember acronyms. Further, you may even forget the acronym. Remember the old man who made knots in his clothes to remind him of the items to be bought from the market, but forgot the items represented by each knot, while he stood before the vendor.

Acrostics

In an acrostic, you make a sentence instead of an artificial word. Acrostics help to remember a number of items in a specific order. "My very educated mother just showed us nine planets" helps you remember the names of the nine planets in the order of their distances from the sun: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto.

See another example, one from biology. The wide variety of organisms in a kingdom, subdivided into subgroups and arranged from the largest to the smallest would read like this:

Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species

These can be remembered using this sentence: King Phyl Came Over For Good Spaghetti.

Compared to acrostics, acronyms are more easily made. However, acrostics also suffer from the drawback that they do not aid understanding.

Rhyming

We remember verse better than prose. Most of us can recollect some of the poems we learnt in the elementary school, since they rhymed and perhaps could be sung as songs. Almost all the books on religion and science in ancient India were in the verse form, permitting easy memorisation in an age in which there was no printing.

It is a good idea to convert important points into a line with rhymes. You know how nursery teachers teach the tiny-tots the sequence of the alphabet by making the 26 letters rhyme with "twinkle twinkle little star," You do not have to be a great poet to draft quickly a couple of rhyming lines.

Loci method

In the loci method, you associate each item on a list with a particular location - a combination of visual memory and association. Let us say you want to remember the names of our Presidents in the chronological order. The list reads thus: Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Dr. Zakir Hussain, V.V. Giri, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, Giani Zail Singh, R. Venkataraman, Dr. S.D. Sharma, K.R. Narayanan and Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

You want to remember the sequence. You are of course familiar with the layout of your house. Imagine that the presidents are seated in the house in the proper order. You seat Dr. Rajendra Prasad in a fine chair in the front verandah. Next to him sits Dr. Radhakrishnan with a learned philosopher's look. Then you enter the drawing room. In the first single chair sits Dr. Zakir Hussain wearing his dark glasses smiling at V.V. Giri seated next to him. At the far end of the drawing room is Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed with his Gandhi cap. In the living room coming next sits Sanjeeva Reddy with a coloured cap chatting actively with Zail Singh wearing his turban. The other eminent men can also be imagined to be in your home in the right sequence, at predetermined locations.

You may visualise walking in your house and paying respects to the great men. In this example, you are associating each name with a specific landmark in your house.

This principle can be used effectively to help memorise names or points in a lesson, in a specific order. This method is more effective than trying to remember the names without any signpost for reference. As a part of essential drill, try to memorise a few sets initially so that the landmarks are firmly fixed in your mind. There is a variation known as the Roman Room method where you associate the items with specific objects in the house.

Chunking

This method is useful for remembering numbers, although it can be applied for other things as well. Normally short-term memory is limited to five or six digits or items at a time. Imagine that you have to remember a telephone number with 13 digits. Instead of trying to remember all of them in one go, split it to three chunks of five, five, and three digits and try them.

Pegging

This method uses the basic principle of associating an unknown thing with a known object. First make a list of 10 or 20 convenient pegs or keywords that you can easily recall in the right sequence. For example: ant, butterfly, cat, dog, elephant, fox, giraffe, hyena, and so on. These are easily remembered since they are all living beings and their first letters follow the alphabetical order.

If you want to remember eight things in a particular order imagine funny pictures of each one of them with the first eight pegs we have fixed in our minds.

Let us say that the first three items to be remembered are clock, calculator, and measuring tape. You visualise ants moving along a clock, a butterfly fluttering with a calculator on its back, and a cat trying to unwind a measuring tape. The more amusing the pictures, the more easily would you remember the sequence. If you make a list of twenty pegs and remember them, almost all practical requirements can be met.

The method may not sound effective to a stranger, but many memory experts have proved the singular effectiveness of this method. Some use pegs such as bun, toe, tree, door, hive, etc. to rhyme with one, two, three, four, and so on.

Simple repetition

This is a simple yet successful method that is popular. Children often commit poems to memory by reading them over and over. There should be some effort to over learn, since what is committed to short-term memory may not last for long.

Some people suggest a formula known by the acronym **MURDER - Mood, Understand, Recall, Digest, Expand, Review.**

Mood - create a positive mood for studying

Understand - learn with concentration

Recall - recall after learning each unit of the lessons

Digest - make further attempts to embed the ideas more firmly in your mind by going to further sources Expand - Ask questions on the content and think of applications in new environments

Review - Go over the contents and the learning strategies you had adopted

HOW TO MEMORISE WELL

Any learning process involves application of memory. Skills in memorisation help you recall at will the information you had once mastered and perform well in tests and examinations. There is a school of thought that relying on memory is not a healthy way of learning and that you should apply logic on each occasion for deriving information. This may be a good platitude; students in schools and colleges aiming at good scores in examinations have to remember a lot, irrespective of the test style.

We easily remember matter that has some meaning. Let us illustrate it with an example. See the words arranged in different columns.

The first column is the toughest to remember, as it contains nothing but nonsensical syllables. The second column is relatively easier, since it has words with some meaning. The third one is still easier, as the words belong to a family. The fourth one is a meaningful sentence; we can commit it to memory in one reading. The last one is the easiest, as it is a meaningful sentence with a rhyme. It may be remembered that the ease comes not only in just remembering but also in meaningful learning as well.

If the words carry some sense, we learn the idea easily. As part of learning, if an effort is made to translate tough matter we wish to remember into something that can be taken in with ease and delight; we make memorisation and learning more effective.

Memory is often classified as short-term and long-term. When you recite a passage, the idea may be in your memory only for a couple of seconds. This cannot last long. If you want to commit the idea to long-term memory, you have to think about it for a few minutes. This is, of course, part of any learning process. Trying to recall an idea frequently will entrench it in your memory.

While learning a piece for the first time, you may benefit by reciting it a few more times after you have learnt it. This is called over-learning, which 'engraves the mental trace deeper and deeper, thus establishing a base for long-term retention.'

1	2	3	4	5
Jiekq	Ability	Cow	The	Morrow
Kasjv	Pencil	Horse	Bud	And
Fwnv	Cart	Pig	May	Borrow
Jeomf	Wolf	Sheep	Have	Rhyme
Ezind	Pet	Rabbit	A	Well
Mqilx	Rule	Camel	Bitter	With
Nhrl	Lips	Donkey	Taste	Sorrow

Aspects of memory

There are various aspects of memory one should be aware of. Good memory cannot be developed, but its full potential can be used by developing the right habits. Here are some right steps:

Total concentration: Concentrating on the lesson content while learning is one of the important steps. We should focus on names and numbers. Even difficult material has to be converted into easily digestible logical matter. There should be a deliberate will to remember; the approach should not be casual. In other words, you should attempt active learning.

Reviewing should not be after a long time, since the material would have faded from your memory in the meantime.

Logical organisation: Material that is logically organised clings to our memory far better than random or disjointed floating bits of information. Infuse meaning into whatever you learn. Nothing you learn should be like nonsensical syllables.

From the woods to the trees: First try to get an overall idea of the lesson before going to specific details. Sometimes this style is called the funnel method.

We go from the general to the particular. Awareness of the general concepts makes the details more meaningful and easier to remember.

Associating with known facts: With each additional bit of knowledge committed to our memory, the brain goes to a new configuration and this is a continuous process. It is wise to take new bits as additions to existing knowledge. At the recall stage, such association will help easy retrieval.

Mock teaching: If you find a particular portion of the lesson difficult to digest, imagine that you are teaching it to a student sitting before you.

Speak it out in the form of an explanation, so that the idea gets hammered into your mind. This method is more effective than just reciting it aloud, since teaching involves the explanation of the same idea in different phrases, bringing illustrations, raising questions for clarification, and so on.

Visual encoding: Those who have a special aptitude for remembering pictures or charts or graph may translate information into visual formats.

High spirits

Do not get dispirited if you find that occasionally your learning becomes slow or even at a standstill.

This is normal, if you try to study difficult lessons for more than four or five hours a day, or if you have anxiety, fatigue, or boredom. Rest assured that you will recover from such negative spells.

Also, it is not advisable to go in for invidious comparisons with regard to learning speeds. Some of us may be faster than others in learning. Learning a bit slowly need not alarm any student, since he can learn as much as a bright student is able to do, provided he devotes a little more of time for learning with appropriate breaks.

You cannot denigrate the use of mnemonics or memory crutches, such as the popular VIBGYOR, which helps one list the seven rainbow colours in the right sequence.

We should make an intelligent use of aids to memory, without sacrificing the effort to grasp the ideas contained in lessons.

READING TO UNDERSTAND

Instances when we should read aloud have been touched upon earlier in these columns.

But most of the time, we shall not be reading to enjoy poetry, or correct errors in pronunciation. So, it is not necessary to read aloud always. In fact, reading aloud has its own defects. Suppose, we are reading a newspaper to quickly have an idea of the important news items. By reading aloud, we cannot do that.

On the other hand, silently glance through the headlines and read selectively. We read only what is of interest to us. This is possible by reading silently and not loudly. By reading aloud for a long time, we feel tired because by wasting energy. Hence, for studying for a long time, we have to read silently.

There is yet another defect in loud reading. We go on reading at a steady speed. Certain ideas may be difficult to grasp. To digest them, we may have to pause, think for some time and then proceed. A loud reader may not do this. He goes on reading a whole lesson at a stretch at the same speed and then, think that he has studied the chapter. The truth is that he has passed through the sentences without following what they meant. Moreover, a loud reader reads

every word of a passage even if he knows the ideas contained in them. A silent reader has the advantage of being able to skip the portions he knows well.

Some may not read aloud, but they move their lips and tongue as if they are pronouncing each word. Here again, there is the disadvantage that the reader may not change the speed of his reading in keeping with the difficulty level of the passage. He may pass the passages without understanding the contents properly. Or, he may waste his time slowly reading something he already knows very well. It is true that he does not waste energy by reading aloud. Still, he goes through the passages at a steady speed. Also, he is likely to believe that he has mastered the lesson by just going through the lines.

We may read silently while studying lessons. Read slowly when we find a passage difficult. Read fast if we feel that a certain portion is easy. If we come across something which we know well, skip it. All these are simple steps which anybody can easily follow. Experts have made detailed study on reading and have suggested some good methods. We shall go into a couple of them that help improve study habits.

The 4R method

Keep in mind four words starting with the letter **R**: **read, recall, reflect and review**.

Read: not just read mechanically, but read carefully, understand every point, question anything unclear, and find the answer to the questions.

Recall: Stop after a portion has been read, try to remember what you just finished reading, go back to the text if you cannot remember something, and try to write the formula or draw the sketch, if any, in the portion you have read. You should be thorough with what you have learnt. Only after making sure that you have learnt it well, should you proceed further.

Reflect: After some time when you are free, you may try to think about what you have learnt. Perhaps, you will be able to connect the new knowledge with something you already have in mind. This will help you keep the ideas firmly in the mind, and to apply the knowledge in a new situation.

Review: After a long time, you may try to look back on what you studied. At this stage, you may have forgotten certain things you had studied earlier; but you can quickly bring them back to mind by glancing through the text.

The SQ3R method

The letters stand for **survey, question, read, recite, and review**.

Survey: Before you start reading, go through the title, headings, subheadings, pictures and their captions, graphs, charts and maps. You may also look at the chapter summaries, conclusions and review questions.

Question: While surveying, raise questions such as why you should read the text, what prior knowledge you have on this subject, and how reading this will help you.

Read: This is the most significant activity. Read with full concentration, focusing your mind on the lesson content, underlining the most important phrases and merging pictures or graphs, if any, with the explanation in the text. Adjust your reading speed to suit the difficulty-level of the passage you are reading.

Check if you get the answers to the questions you had raised in the beginning. Try to find answers to the questions at the end of the chapter.

Write what you find to be very tough, and also the matter you have to memorise, such as poems or definitions. Solve numerical problems. Try to draw sketches from your memory. Read again what you could not grasp fully in the first reading. Use a dictionary to get the meaning of words. Make notes covering the essential points. Read in manageable chunks.

Recite: Soon after reading a section, try to summarise in your mind what you just finished reading.

Try to recite it in your own words. Which means that you have to speak it aloud. This is the most effective method for transferring material from one's short-term memory to long-term memory.

If necessary, improve your notes. Answer the questions orally. Recitation enriches learning, since it involves seeing, saying, and hearing. This process very powerfully hammers the material in your memory.

Review: This has to be done at intervals to confirm fully your learning. You should be able to answer all the questions. Any area which is not clear to you should be learnt again. Instead of SQ3R, some suggest SQ4R, the fourth R representing words such as record, repeat, respond, revise or rite (meaning write).

READ WELL TO BE WELL-READ

EFFICIENT READING: Mere skimming through pages will not suffice.

READING BEING an integral part of any learning process should be learnt the right way. If you err here, it would be something like putting the first button of a coat wrongly, leading to total disarray.

As in the case of breathing, we seldom think about or discuss the importance of reading. Here we confine ourselves to reading for learning. Reading for pleasure or relaxation has to be discussed from a different angle - it is beyond our scope now.

Efficient reading

Whether you are a child in the first standard or a high-profile research scholar, you have to read. Anyone may say that reading has to be efficient. What is efficient reading? Is it just reading aloud? Or is it reading fast? Is it skimming through the pages, noting only the main points? Is it stopping at every word and moving slowly, so that its full meaning is grasped?

Indeed, these questions have to be kept in mind when we try to read efficiently. Not only should reading be efficient, it also has to be effective as well.

An efficient reader would read at a reasonable speed and understand what he reads. But this is only a general statement. A person may read at different speeds on different occasions.

While reading a newspaper, none would read every word from the first line of the front page to the last line of the last page.

Normally we will have a quick glance at the headlines. Then we would read the first paragraphs of the news items that interest us. Certain articles that we feel is important would be read in full. If there is a serious article we may keep it for very careful reading later.

Selective reading

Sometimes we may not read anything on certain pages. Some of us may rush to the finance page.

Our grandmother may simply skip the sport page and the finance page. A young boy may see only the children's page. An old man may first read the obituary column.

In other words, we select portions of the newspaper and read them. This is selective reading.

Now let us take the case of our English textbook in the class. How will you read it? You may read the same lesson many times, studying each sentence or even each word separately.

You may focus on new words, study their meanings, related phrases, idioms, and usage with the help of a dictionary. You may break up long sentences into clauses.

All that makes a detailed study. It takes much time.

Take the case of a definition in physics. You may sometimes memorise it by reading it many times, and analysing its meaning. You may also try to write it out.

This is because you may not be able to express the idea in your own words, with precision and accuracy in a concise manner without missing any relevant point as in a standard definition.

So also, you read a good poem many times in order to enjoy its literary merit, and memorise it, to quote it later.

Speed factor

The speed at which a person reads is always not the same. Suppose a mathematics teacher gets a new textbook written by a new author for her class. Let us say the teacher has been teaching the subject during the past 10 years. She may finish reading the entire book in just one hour.

She can do so because she does not have to go through every sentence in the book. She already knows the contents very well. She only has to check whether all the lessons have been covered well and look for anything that is new. On the other hand, a new student may have to spend hundreds of hours to study the various chapters, and solve all the problems.

Efficient reading should satisfy many things:

- ◆ Understanding the correct meanings of words in the given context.
- ◆ Selecting and understanding key ideas.
- ◆ Associating words with pictures if any.
- ◆ Following directions.
- ◆ Keeping ideas in mind.

How can we know whether we have read a passage well? See whether we can do the following after we have read a passage:

- ◆ Answer brief questions on its content.
- ◆ Describe in our own words what we have read.
- ◆ Relate what we read with something we had known earlier.
- ◆ Follow any direction

Improving efficiency

How can we improve efficiency of reading? There are several steps.

- You should develop good vocabulary.
- You should have good eyesight; if glasses are needed, one should wear them.
- You should develop reading speed
- You should read in a good environment (good lighting; free from noises)

Look at these wise words.

"Typing without accuracy is not typing. Driving without safety is no driving. So also, reading without efficiency is no reading."

"Reading without reflecting is like eating without digesting." (This means that we should think on whatever we read)

Efficient reading is an important part of learning. So you should seriously think about it. Many of you may have the habit of reading aloud. Is it good or bad?

The answer depends on what you read and why you read it. Suppose you are reading a poem to enjoy it. It has rhymes. It has a special music of its own. Then it is fine if you read it aloud. Or, there may be a time when you read for perfecting your pronunciation. When you speak, your words should sound correctly, so that you are understood easily.

If you listen carefully to the newsreaders on television or radio, you would find that they have been trained to speak with clarity.

If you need to develop a good pronunciation, you have to read aloud. You can ask someone who is proficient in the language to correct any error you make while reading aloud. Remember that unless someone points out your errors, you will not be able to correct them.

GET STARTED TO GET AHEAD

TAKE THE PLUNGE: There is no better time than now to start studying.

YOU MUST have often heard - "Well begun is half done." But many of us find it hard to get started. There may be some hesitation in taking the first step - like stepping into very cold water in a river.

It would be easy to make a quick leap without contemplating much. If you think that a subject is difficult or the learning tasks are heavy, you are likely to postpone the first step. Time and tide wait for none.

If you are late in getting started, you may not finish the job on time. In a competitive environment, this may prove to be costly. No subject is inherently easy or difficult. If 10 others can learn it well, it is likely that you can also do so. But you should have the will to do it. Do not wait for an auspicious day or time.

The best day is today and the best time now. Once you get started, you will gradually gain momentum and proceed smoothly.

Never take refuge under the lame excuse, "I am not in the mood now." Learning for examinations is an inescapable assignment for students.

If you have to do something compulsorily, enjoy doing it. If a batsman takes to the cricket field and says that he is not in the right mood for batting at that point of time, what would be his fate? Befriending discomforts is an essential part of discharging one's duty.

Breaking the syllabus

When you look at the syllabus to be covered in a year, it may seem very vast. The anxiety as to how you would cover such a large territory may be a deterrent.

What you should do is to break it into small chunks, and handle each one at a time.

We are discussing attitudes. If you approach a task with confidence, it is very likely that you will do it well. But if you doubt your own capabilities, the chances of success are remote.

Be organised

Make a clean table. Tidy up your study room so that the environment is congenial for effective learning. You have to be organised, for working effectively. Keep all textbooks in place. Allot separate locations for notebooks, instruments, pens, pencils, calculator, and reference books such as dictionaries or desk cyclopaedia. This will avoid searching time. If you are in the habit of using a computer for storing your notes, see that the files are systematically organised, so that amendment or retrieval of information is easy.

Superfluous and obsolete files should be promptly deleted.

Do make an effort to get standard textbooks, syllabus of each subject of study and a few previous papers of the examination, if you do not want to have surprises during tests or examinations. These are basic tools for preparation.

Advance reading

It is a good idea for students to read in advance the portions that would be discussed in the classroom next day.

You may not comprehend the entire contents, but such advance reading will give you an insight into what lies ahead.

Further, you will be able to raise intelligent doubts before the teacher, by clearing which you will be thorough with the lessons.

Dress rehearsal

Some of you may think that you will be able to perform well in a written examination, if you have learnt the contents of the lessons. This may not be true always. In order to make sure that you will perform well in the examination, simulate the examination environment once in a while, and try to answer a few questions of a previous examination paper within the stipulated time.

To borrow an idiom from the theatre, this is some sort of a dress rehearsal. You may be writing an essay, solving a few numerical problems, drawing a few sketches, or answering a number of objective questions. Whatever is the task involved, you should not seek the assistance of the textbooks during the trial.

If you can do well in this experiment, it is most likely that you can repeat such a performance in the real examination, drawing strength from the confidence gained during the successful rehearsal.

At this stage, it would be interesting to give candid answers to a few questions you can ask yourself.

- ◆ Am I really interested in this course of study?
- ◆ Do I think that learning this subject will help me in life?
- ◆ Am I sure of what I expect from this learning?
- ◆ Are the methods I follow most effective?
- ◆ Am I interested in test rehearsals?
- ◆ Do I prepare adequately for the classes?
- ◆ Do I usually put in my best efforts in studies?
- ◆ Am I bothered about distractions?
- ◆ Can I concentrate even in a disturbing atmosphere?
- ◆ Do I often pretend to learn before my parents, while I am doing something else?
- ◆ Do I enjoy learning?
- ◆ Can I devote more time for studies?
- ◆ Do I use reference books?
- ◆ Do I follow my personal timetable?
- ◆ Do I put off tasks, even when I could do it straightaway?
- ◆ Do I work out home assignments by myself, or do I copy from my friends?
- ◆ Do I take notes while reading?
- ◆ Am I lazy in the matter of doing numerical problems?
- ◆ Do I usually draw sketches, if I want to learn them?
- ◆ During learning, do I just look into the books and think of something else?
- ◆ Do I have a suspicion whether this subject is beyond my level of comprehension?
- ◆ Do I suffer from starting trouble?
- ◆ Have I taken pains to gather copies of syllabus and previous question papers?
- ◆ Do I devote too much time for my favourite subjects, and ignore 'dull' subjects?

Try to analyse the feedback from your answers, and use it for correcting your approach and style of learning.

SET YOUR EYES AND HEART ON YOUR GOAL

In a game of football, all the players have a singular aim - to score a goal. And to achieve this goal they play collectively to put the ball in the net.

Unless there is this objective to score a goal, the kicks and passes would be vain exercises. It is the goal that motivates the players and offers a sense of direction to make the wisest moves in the field.

Learning is no different when it comes setting a goal. There may be long-range goals such as securing a medical degree with distinction, or a short-term goal such as taking a class test. The long-range goals decide the nature of the short-term goals.

Realistic and achievable

The goals have to be realistic and achievable. Once the goals are set, small setbacks should not deter us. They are an integral part of any human endeavour. It is only by surmounting obstacles and changing gears as required that we climb the hill of success. Short-term goals have to be reset frequently.

Though education has many noble goals such as tuning oneself to great values, imbibing the right philosophy of life, or developing a comprehensive and balanced outlook on matters of import, the immediate goal of most students and parents is finding a secure job.

Need and desire

The need to learn with this objective in mind is the most powerful source of motivation. The desire to learn may not be a constant one. The mercury column in this barometer may frequently fluctuate. It is the duty of any steadfast student to realise this and try to maintain the intensity of the desire to learn.

Your interest may vary from subject to subject, especially at the school level.

There is no harm in paying a little more of attention and time to your favourite areas.

In other words, the prospective discipline of your higher studies may propel you to devote more attention to certain subjects.

But too much of concentration on very enjoyable subjects should not prevent you from devoting adequate time for other subjects of study.

A word of caution

Here a word of caution is warranted. You may feel that one particular subject is dull or difficult.

But the score in that subject may tilt the balance one way or the other, when it comes to your ranking in the final examination or admission to a programme for further studies. In such a case, you should try to identify the reason for your dislike of the subject, and resort to remedial measures.

Perhaps you may not be sure of the fundamental lessons or concepts in the subject, which makes further lessons too tough for you.

It has been established that certain gifted teachers magically weave the most exciting classes out of very dull subjects. Similarly there may be some teachers who breathe boredom into interesting subjects through incompetent teaching.

If you are an unfortunate victim of such circumstances, do make a deliberate effort to make the subject interesting for you, through self-study and extra reading.

Draw the boundaries

Draw the boundaries of the subject areas to be studied, based on the curriculum, syllabus, and previous question papers. This should be your area of focus. Reading beyond the boundaries is good; but that should not steal your essential time for prime study. The primary objective of a school or college student is to secure good grades in the examination. Every effort in this direction naturally gets priority, while setting apart time for various segments of learning.

Concentration

Whatever be the style adopted for studies, the outcome will not be beneficial unless you maintain concentration. Your mind should not wander, but should remain riveted to the lesson. What Jerry Lynch, psychologist, athlete, coach and author, once remarked is relevant: "When you believe and think I can, you activate your motivation, commitment, confidence, concentration, and excitement, all of which relate directly to achievement." Eliminating distraction and focussing on the task at hand is the key to success in learning.

A simple test

If you are careful, you can easily find your loss of concentration by a simple test. Check whether after reading a page you suddenly discover that you have no idea about what you just read. If it is so, you have lost concentration. The same kind of experience during a classroom lecture also indicates that you should quickly restore your concentration.

When you find that you are losing concentration while learning, its restoration can be achieved by taking a break for a couple of minutes or switching the subject of study. If you were reading, switch to writing, drawing or calculation. If you were daydreaming, stop it. Move away from noise or other distractions.

Andrew Carnegie, the legend in steel industry, once said: "Concentration is my motto - first honesty, then industry, then concentration." Ralph Waldo Emerson, American writer, asserted that the one prudence of life is concentration.

ART OF LEARNING

ENJOY STUDYING: It is an important factor in the development of a good learning style.

Often how you say is as important as what you say. Similarly, how you learn is as important as what you learn. Once a good learning style has been acquired, a student can easily make learning more effective and enjoyable.

It is a fact that a student who follows an unscientific or ineffective method of learning would find the experience drudgery or hard labour.

We come across parents who boast that their children learn till midnight or wake up at four in the morning to study, implying thereby that their learning is very efficient.

How many parents have the patience and common sense to observe the learning styles followed by their children or to analyse the effectiveness of the styles?

You should remember that learning smarter and quicker is more important than learning harder and longer.

Good study habits will in the long run benefit any student. If someone has a poor study habit, it is easier to get it replaced with a good habit, rather than just stop the poor habit.

We often see that smokers who wish to quit the habit are advised to chew something of their choice as a substitute, whenever they feel that they should smoke.

It is not rarely that a student wastes precious time by reading the same essay over and over again every month, without taking care to extract the main points and check how well they have been understood.

A student may passively read the worked examples in a textbook several times, as a part of learning numerical problems in mathematics or science. He/she may gaze at a sketch or figure in the textbook for a few minutes and try to believe that he/she has learnt it well.

But in the examination hall, students who have followed such defective styles may discover their inability to solve numerical problems, or draw the sketches independently. These are just indicative of what may result from incorrect or ineffective methods of study.

Working out

Numerical problems have to be solved independently by the student. He/she may have some difficulties. These hitches can be overcome by referring to the textbook, after which the student will be able to solve similar problems with ease and confidence.

Similarly, while learning, the figures have to be sketched from memory and hitches solved by referring to the textbook, until you reach a stage when you can easily draw it from memory.

These facts point to the need for proper study skills. The time spent on mastering some of the basic learning methods is no waste of time, but it is a worthy investment that will certainly yield great profits in course of time. Learning properly is a habit. Once it is developed, you would learn more in a given time, and learn more effectively so that you can apply what you have learnt in any new environment.

You have to be active and enthusiastic while learning. You should not adopt a totally relaxed pose. Lying down while reading is not desirable. 'Sit straight and read' is a good direction that may be followed.

Learning by heart

Should you learn your lessons by heart? In the first place, such learning is not physically possible in higher classes, because of sheer volume of the lessons. Rote learning consumes enormous time, which could be utilised better in other learning activities. Further, learning by rote without understanding the content is no learning at all. That is why this method is usually not recommended.

However, it is advisable to learn poems by heart, thrilling passages, quotes of great people and definitions in science subjects. Definitions are often framed using minimum words with maximum content, paying attention to precision and accuracy. You should not imagine that there is only one way to acquiring effective study habits. There are indeed several highways and byways, intersections and road signs. Each student has to choose whatever suits him/her the best.

You can, however, adopt some of the commonly accepted styles and techniques. There can be individual modifications to meet specific needs.

The first step to developing study skills is the preparation of a workable timetable. It should provide time not only for learning from the textbook, but also for all essential activities of the student. What you should aim at is not being a glorified bookworm, but an individual endowed with sound personality traits.

Making an over-ambitious timetable and then failing to follow it is common. That is why you should take into account the ground realities of student life before blindly drafting a tight schedule, ignoring your diverse pursuits.

The timetable should have the following characteristics:

- Appropriate duration for each subject of study. This has to take into consideration individual variations in inherent aptitude and interest in different subjects.
- Wherever possible, variety in the arrangement of the subjects so that the tasks involved change as the subjects change. For example, learning poetry by heart is different from doing numerical problems or drawing sketches in a science subject.
- You should not attempt to learn the same subject continuously for long hours at a stretch. There has to be a sequence that counters monotony.
- Brief breaks between different subjects, enabling the student to refresh him/herself.
- Necessary durations for co-curricular or extra-curricular activities, domestic chores, extra reading, rest, games, relaxation, and entertainment.
- Study hours to suit the personal preferences of the pupil. Some may choose to work late at night, whereas some others may prefer the early morning hours. Many parents often insist that certain specific hours dictated by them be followed by their children. This may hamper their learning efficiency.
- Separate schedules for working days and holidays.
- Essential flexibility in the schedules for accommodating unexpected events.
- Apart from the daily timetable, there should be a monthly timetable and an annual chart that reflects our overall planning.

- Redraft the timetable every month, in the light of previous levels of achievements.

Irrespective of what the timetable dictates, you should remember that studying while you are mentally fatigued is not effective. If there are very difficult lessons, they may be scheduled for the hours when you are most active and alert.

Homework helps

What are the duties of the supervisor/analyst/marketing executive/deputy editor in this organisation?

The panel would mention the position you are aiming at. It is directly checking whether you have taken pains to study the organisation and the position in detail. Good homework will be of help in this situation.

Could you tell us one of the toughest experiences you have faced?

The answer should be given based on the assumption that the question relates to your experience in your profession/previous job. You may mention an incident, its causes, course, and the actions that led to the solution of the problem involved. Although there is no harm in indicating your approach or actions that helped in resolving the issue, take care not to blame a colleague for having created the problem. You may mention a lesson you learnt from the experience.

Can you work efficiently when you are under tension?

I can do so if the situation warrants. However, my experience tells me that if things are planned well ahead and implemented promptly, the last minute rush that leads to tension in many cases can be conveniently avoided. Procrastination is one of the major causes of such tension. Normally, I try to carry out my work at a properly planned pace.

You hinted that you gained a lot from your experience in the previous job. Do you have any proof?

Yes, Sir. I would compare the amount of supervision I needed in the early stages of my job and that after I had worked for a few months. In the beginning, the supervisor had to brief me several times a day. He used to correct my errors and guide me. Gradually, I picked up my job well; so the supervisor had to discuss my work only once or twice a week. Even those discussions centred on schedules or weekly feedback of results. Nowadays, I work without giving room for error and correction.

How is this job compared to other jobs for which you have applied?

There is a catch in the question. The interviewer proceeds on the assumption that you have applied for several jobs. You have to refute politely the assumption. You may, however, indicate that you are awaiting the results of another selection test. You could say that if you should make an effective comparison of the two jobs, you may have to ask several questions on the job being considered now. It is unlikely that the question is pursued. In case the board insists on an answer, you may mention one or two points.

What are the things you can contribute that others cannot?

I do not make any such claim. But I will certainly put in my best efforts, and work with total dedication.

Would you like to get your boss's job?

You will kindly appreciate that everyone has a dream to go up the professional ladder; I am no exception.

But I would never aspire to replace my boss through any unethical means. As and when I put in sufficient experience in my job, I am sure I will get opportunities for promotion. If at such time, my boss happens to move out on a job change or promotion, I would be happy to replace him. But such a course is not an item in my present agenda.

Would you get angry at all kinds of criticism?

No criticism would make me angry. Criticism can sometimes be a source of help, in the sense that it would tell me about my deficiency in performance. I can learn lessons from the situation and improve my style of work. I will ignore baseless criticism.

Don't you get totally dispirited even at temporary setbacks?

No, Sir. Any setback is part of the work. It has to be taken in its stride. I often feel that failures are steps to success. There is hardly any winner who has never made a mistake some time or another. Occasional setbacks, objective analysis of the setbacks, drawing lessons from them, taking cautious steps to prevent the failures - all these would lead us to success. After all, success and failure are not opposites. This kind of logic helps me from breaking down. I would take setbacks with a positive frame of mind.

If you would rate yourself in a 1 to 10 scale, where would you come?

Never claim to be 10. There is no perfect person. You may say 8 or 9.

What are the things that quickly irritate or annoy you?

Nothing would spark instant anger in me. I seldom get furious at anything. I would, however, confess that I get irritated when I find competent people handling their work indifferently, or employees leaving a job midway at the stroke of the clock even if they could finish it in a few more minutes. (This question is likely in the selection of candidates for supervisory posts.)

Have you ample energy to cope with our tight schedule, and can you work in a team?

You must realise that two different questions purposely are rolled into one, in order to check whether your logic is sound. You may start your response, splitting the question: "Sir, let me answer the two parts separately."

Then you may answer appropriately. Unless you adopt this style, you may give confusing answers mixing up the two parts about energy and team spirit, or forget to answer one part of the question.