

strategies by  
CAT 100 Percentilers



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# PREFACE

*For the past couple of years, the difficulty level of the CAT and other MBA entrance exams has been escalating. MBA has become an upcoming field and the number of students that apply for it has also gone up. The entrance exams have become so competitive that they test more than just the core concepts of Mathematics, Verbal Ability and Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning.*

*Test takers are under tremendous pressure to score well in these exams. The unpredictable nature of the CAT keeps applicants on their toes in search of foolproof strategies to crack the exam. In this book you will read about different test taking strategies that will help you in your preparation for the CAT.*

*The articles featured here are original and unique, written by well known CAT 100 percentilers - Munira Lokhandwala, Shantanu Gangal, and Gourav Bhattacharya. Each one of these toppers has their own unique perspective and their individual style. Learning different things from these different people will provide you with an insight that will prove invaluable to your test taking experience.*

*We are sure that our readers will benefit greatly from the articles in this book. They are designed specially to give students that extra edge and confidence needed to be ready for any surprise that CAT might throw their way.*

# HOW TO PREPARE FOR CAT 2009

**Munira Lokhandwala**

CAT 2008 100-Percentiler

Hi Everybody,

I am sure that even before you start reading this article, many of you would have already made assumptions about my natural abilities based on my background and my consistent performances in CAT over the years. That is why I would like to tell you a little more about my background. All of us would remember the seventh standard scholarship exam that tested the math, verbal and visual skills of students. In that test I scored 36 out of 100 in Math, 64 in Verbal and 50 in visual reasoning. (Nowhere near to what a typical scholar would have got!!) So you definitely cannot say that I was born with the aptitude of cracking all such examinations.

So the obvious million dollar question: How does someone who is not born with the required aptitude skills go ahead and crack the CAT? Not just once to get into IIMs, but every time with confidence!

Most competent CAT aspirants do realize that the difference in knowledge between them and one of the guys who has made it to the IIMs is not high enough to warrant a massive difference in CAT scores. (Here, by "knowledge" we mean "CAT related knowledge".) Still most aspirants become skeptical about their own abilities during their CAT preparation and start looking at other exams or other institutes. When I was preparing for my CAT, I didn't even consider taking the other entrance exams for various institutes. Was this misplaced arrogance? Let's see.

For my CAT 1996, even I had started my preparations in February. Whew! I was in the same boat as most of you are. I was in the second year of my Bachelor's studies. So I started in Feb, took a break in April for exams, in May for some holidaying and started again in June and continued till the end. Excluding these breaks, I was preparing for the CAT 2-3 hours a day, 6 days of the week, every week. This article is all about this long preparatory period before the CAT right from when you decide to take it to a nice slightly chilly Sunday morning when you are checking your pencils, eraser and admit card. And the result is in front of you: calls from all 4 IIM's (IIM I and IIM K had just started that year and I hadn't applied to either).

## **1. Plan backwards**

You will never know exactly when your CAT preparation started, but you will always know when it will end. Did I hear 15th November? No, it will end on the 13th of November. The CAT is an exam where presence of mind is essential; studying till the last minute or till the last day leads to an exhausted mind. So it is a good idea to stop preparing on the Friday evening before the CAT. So currently your deadline is 13th November. The last few months will be spent primarily on taking comprehensive tests. Let's try and work that out.

Right now is a good time to decide how many comprehensive tests you will take. The main objective behind taking comprehensive tests is to get your test taking strategy in place as you measure your own strengths across different sections. The secondary objective is the relative performance measurement.

I think 30 tests are fairly sufficient as there is no point taking a test everyday or worse still take 2 tests per day. Working with 30 tests will easily take between 70-80 days. This is because if you take a test with feedback on day 1 you will revise and take some section tests on day 2; you may also need 1-2 days break. So assuming 75 days for comprehensive tests takes your deadline to the end of August.

Before you formulate your test taking strategy, you need to measure your performance in individual sections. That is where section tests come into play. So in the last fifteen days of August you should take around 2 section tests at least from each area and spend some time going through the analysis and feedback for the tests. This will be the first time usually when you really start solving with the second hand making a loud noise every second. So get used to the idea before you venture into the comprehensive test territory.

So finally we have come to our first major deadline 15th August i.e. Independence day. By this date, you would ideally finish learning new concepts. From 15th August you will be primarily looking at applying what you have learnt and if you have learnt it well, then believe me you will enjoy the process.

## 2. In-depth Scheduling

With 15th August as the deadline you should make a list of what is the kind of theory you want to complete till that time.

I have made a rudimentary representative list here to work from:

- Reading
- Word List
- Study Material for the following areas
  - i. Verbal Ability questions
  - ii. Reading Comprehension questions
  - iii. Analytical Reasoning
  - iv. Data Interpretation
  - v. Math
  - vi. Your maximum time should be spent doing two major activities: reading and Math.

## 3. Daily schedule

Make a daily schedule which incorporates all your routines and breaks. If you watch movies a lot then it would be silly to make a schedule which does not consider 3 hours a week on the week-end spent in catching the latest release. Also try to shuffle the subjects so that you do not get bored with one subject.

A good time table for 2 days can look like this:

- Day 1:
  - i. 0.5 hour reading
  - ii. 0.5 hour word list
  - iii. 2 hours math
- Day 2
  - i. 0.5 hour reading
  - ii. 0.5 hour word list
  - iii. 1 hour analytical reasoning / data interpretation
  - iv. 1 hour reading comprehension exercises / verbal ability

## 4. Reading

For those who read as a hobby, this will not be a major problem. For others, it is essential that you take out anything between 0.5 hour to 1 hour for reading, daily. For the uninitiated reader, you can start by reading fiction but there is no use if you spend 3 months reading one big book; instead pick up any collection of short stories by assorted authors and start reading those. You will get used to various styles and different settings and of course different content. After reading fiction for 1-1.5 months you can graduate to non-fiction. So next time you log onto TestFunda.com start a parallel window where you Google on various CAT topics and read articles on them. The advantages are two-fold, firstly you will get used to CAT like passages and secondly you will start gaining some knowledge on these topics so next time you have an RC on the same topic you will not feel completely lost. For these reading sessions never focus on time only; focus on understanding as well, if you read enough your time will automatically decrease.

Reading will not only help you in the verbal section, but also increase your comprehension in the other sections. It is the single most important factor that will help you crack the CAT.

## **5. Word List**

There are very few questions that directly require knowledge of words. But knowing a lot of good words and improving your vocabulary will never harm but always help you in your CAT preparations. So pick up a good word list and start doing the word list every day or if your vocabulary is already good then every alternate day. Even if you do an alphabet a week you will take around 6 months to complete the word list. Having a good vocabulary also ensures fluency in GDPI. This is the part where students are lazy, but after the CAT if you feel that just knowing one word would have got an extra mark in no time then that should really hurt.

## **6. Math**

Math based on strengths and weakness should be done either every alternate day or every day. Go through the theory, solved examples and then tackle exercises. If you cannot solve a problem do not rush to the explanatory answers, give it some time, think, get your mind to oil those rusted math gears and levers.

- Try solving problems in the head, minimize pen on paper. To achieve this, one should be able to simplify a complex problem situation and should know tables well to do calculations faster.
- Make a note of important relationships in a topic.
- Make a note of innovative approaches.
- Remember writing a lot is very unhealthy for the CAT, but after you solve it in your head, writing the explanation will clear doubts and reinforce learning. So please make good notes.

## **7. Puzzle Solving**

With the increased focus on logical reasoning based Data Interpretation, one should practice solving puzzles from books like George Summers. Puzzle practice helps in developing a logical base and in thinking in diverse directions.

## 10 MONTHS TO CAT '09

### Shantanu Gangal

CAT 2008 100-Percentiler

The Common Admission Test (CAT) is the first evaluation in being admitted to the Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) and other affiliated colleges. Assuming that the CAT 2009, will be held on a single day (like CAT 08 and earlier), there are roughly 10 months left to prepare well for it.

There are two primary reasons to do well:

1. If a person gets GD calls, the CAT score still is an important parameter on which the final admission is going to be based.
2. If one doesn't do well, it might unfortunately be the last evaluation – if a person fails to get GD / PI calls from an institute of his choice.

However, I think 10 months are sufficiently long to prepare well for it. In fact, most students I know who did well, didn't prepare too much more than 8-10 months.

The sections in the CAT paper – Verbal, Quantitative, Logic / Data Interpretation – each are aimed at testing how well a person can apply skills that are extremely important in daily life, first & management, thereafter.

I would roughly divide the 10 months till the CAT, into 2 parts – months upto August and the 15 weeks. This division is not rigid and actual preparation pattern changes slowly from a style to another. This division is especially helpful for the Verbal section. I think that the first part should be devoted not only to CAT exam but also to generally preparing to get into b-schools. The effort during these months which one mightn't explicitly direct at the CAT exam in fact does help in many subtle ways for the CAT exam as well. The last 15 weeks or so should be aimed at intensively preparing for the CAT exam. Most students who appear for CAT, do so while managing their daily jobs / education etc. as the case may be. Hence, intensive preparation for too long (while managing a hectic schedule) can be tiring and take the fun out of the process.

Hence, it is better to have a different approach to the exam in each of these time frames.

### Quant

Most of the students are pretty quick with numbers in 12th standard due to the numerous entrance exams that they appear for. However the 3-5 years of graduation and the job thereafter, are loitered with electronic devices that hamper the speeds of mental calculations. Given the current pattern of CAT, it is very important to get back these speeds and is something many of us overlook. Since many people agree that the questions in Quant section aren't difficult to solve given ample time, I would suggest that a person uses the months upto August to gaining speed. The time taken to solve the straightforwards (questions on distance-velocity, area-volume and the like) will be drastically reduced; leaving a person time to attempt the tricky ones. This is also a good time to understand the theory behind advanced topics like probability or Permutation/Combinations – especially for students who hadn't had these topics in their graduation curriculum. However, it is fair to devote

less time to Quant leading upto August.

However, in the last dozen of weeks, practice is of utmost importance. Decide on some material and aim to be through with it. This material should cover the complete of topics. At most 10% of the CAT questions might require original approach & exceptional ability. It is often prudent to not attempt these questions. Except for these questions, most questions in a CAT paper will be similar to a question you can find in this material. Hence, it is important that a person attempts all the questions and knows the approach to the questions he couldn't answer correctly by himself.

How-much-so-ever a person prepares for the exam, I have observed that there are some students who are exceptional in their mathematical ability and the rest of us can't overcome them. Instead of fidgeting no end over this, I think it is practical to do one's best and do better in the other sections.

### **Logical Reasoning / Data Interpretation**

This section typically is made up of 5-6 sets of questions. Each set of question is related to a central idea or theme. While the entire section might seem unstructured, the key to solving a problem in fact is identifying the structure to the theme of a question. By structure, I mean, the best framework to represent the data given in a set. This structure might be in the form of tables or trees etc. Once the structure to a question has been identified, the next step is inferring more data from the given (now structured) data.

A lot of puzzles are available which essentially hinge on the ability to find a structure to the problem. In these questions once the structure is identified then the inference is obvious. There is no algorithmic procedure to arrive at a structure of a completely new problem. But solving more of these puzzles certainly helps a person gain an understanding of the structuring involved. The puzzles might be harder than those asked in CAT, but are an excellent learning tool. Thankfully though, many questions in the CAT (like Venn Diagrams, reading table) are already structured.

Once a problem is structured we need to answer questions based on it. In order to improve upon the inferring of new data, I would recommend puzzles like the Sudoku or the Kakuro. These have the information in a highly structured form but inferring difficulty varies a lot. Sorting through the available information and inferring more data quickly is very critical.

Since, there is very little theoretical aspect to this section, one needs to extensively practice various questions so that he may be quick and accurate.

### **Verbal**

The best use of ones time till the months of August is to be made for this section. It is very commonly observed that people who habitually read a lot do well in this section. I think that the first months should be devoted exclusively to reading a lot of articles in English. This has the following advantage:

- i. It is critical that a person be able to read the passages provided quickly. Hence he has to be in the habit of reading long articles.
- ii. Most of the vocabulary is learnt by the way of usage in sentences.
- iii. A person needs to understand not only the given text but also what is likely to be leading up to it and what will follow.



In this regard, I think we should prepare ourselves in the first few months to read extensive opinionated / argumentative articles from good sources. These sources are typically British magazines and like. Not only should you read it fast, but also understand how the writer flows the article and reaches a conclusion. A few people reading the same article independent of each other and thereafter discussing what (& how) the article was trying to convey, helps a lot. The passages in the CAT are typically excerpts of such articles. In these months, it is a bonus if a student can finish a standard set of word lists (used for exams like GRE etc.) Planned and sincere study during this time will take you far in improving your Verbal section score.

In the last 15 weeks or so, a student should diligently solve a lot of questions. In passages, often 2 answers seem very close. The knack of picking one of them comes from answering questions and understanding the explanations given along with answers.

To round off, I think in the coming 6 months read a lot of good argumentative English (Verbal), improve your speed (Quant.) and attempt as many different puzzles (Logic). Starting August, practicing questions will hold the key in each section.

# HOW TO IMPROVE AT VERBAL ABILITY

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Many students feel that the performance in Quant & Logic sections of the CAT written exam hit a ceiling at some point or the other. Thankfully, the Verbal section of the paper always has a scope of further improvement.

In this article we shall broadly try and understand what purpose the Verbal Section serves and how should we try and score well in it.

Since communication is a very important tool in all spheres of management, this section tests a person's skill at the English Language. That the CAT paper increased the number of questions in this section, points to the importance that the examiners attach to testing us on Verbal Ability. By this, the schools want to gauge how well a person,

- i. Comprehends the given data (passage / sentence) and understands
  1. the meaning of each of the words used,
  2. the explicit message conveyed,
  3. the implicit undertones of the passage or sentence,
  4. the correctness of grammar (punctuation, usage etc.) and
  5. the direction / conclusion that is being hinted at.
- ii. How well he manages to respond to the question posed by applying similar analysis of each of the 4 / 5 options presented, before picking his answer.

Thus in order to do well in this section, we need to demonstrate competence on the above metrics. It is easy to see that each question type asked in the CAT paper is trying to test us on one or more of the above. Since the reading comprehension section of the CAT employs almost all these skills in parallel it poses the most hazard to a student.

It is also known that students who are voracious readers do well in this section. This is now clear since they have honed their above skills for years. Hence, in order to excel in Verbal one should start well in time.

## **Read a lot:**

The most important part of Verbal preparation is the reading up. [In fact, not only does it help in the Verbal section of CAT but also in General Awareness section of other MBA entrances.] This effort can't be intensive in nature, since we need to assimilate what we read. Thus the reading has to be consistently spread out across a few months or more.

## **Why to read:**

It is much easier to understand any language by knowing the way its words are used, its sentences framed and ideas conveyed than by opening an English guide. Also, noticing how a word is used will cement the correct meaning and usage of the word / phrase than learning it by rote.

The structure of the paper is such that a lot of time is required to read a passage. Irrespective of the style of answering followed (reading before answering or vice versa) the speed at which you read the passage is critical. Someone who can read an average length passage (400 words) in 3 mins has a definite edge over someone who takes 4 mins. The best way to improve reading speed is by reading articles in progressively lesser time.

**What to read:**

Since, management schools want us to become good business leaders they dish out stuff that an MBA graduate is most likely to read. However, due to exam constraints the passages in the exam are often excerpts of a bigger and wider article. These articles typically deal with economic, social, political etc. issues and the impact of these issues on the intended reader.

I think however it is much better to start off and read articles longer (abt. 5000 words) than the ones that appear in the exam (abt. 400 words). A complete article has a proper structure unlike those in the exam. However, it is important to figure out how excellent English is written.

Also, while reading in English we should make a conscious effort to start thinking in English as well, since this can be a handicap for many of us who come from vernacular schools.

I personally found that articles in reputed magazines / newspapers like The Economist or the New York Times are written well.

**How to read:**

Upon reading an article it is important to discuss it with friends who have read it. You should make sure that all the implicit opinions / arguments are talked about and not missed. Often at the face of it the article seems straightforward but we fail to locate the point the author is trying to make. Correctly filtering the facts from the author's opinions help get an insight into the article.

Similarly, it is important to get a feel as to how arguments are built by good writers and what is an expected line of thought, following a seen passage. This again comes with discussing the passage with friends who have read it.

**Learn Vocabulary:**

While learning words organically (through essays and articles) is an excellent long term option, with the view of preparing for the CAT exam – it makes sense to parallelly learn the less common words. Many students praise the virtues of books like Word power made easy for improving vocabulary. These books help students derive the meaning of a word from its word roots and other techniques. However in case of extreme crunch, its best to pick up a standard word list provided by books that prepare students for GRE, TOEFL etc. and attempt learning them by rote. As the CAT draws closer these lists are a good tool to recall what one has learnt. Whenever a new word is learnt, try using it in a sentence for better retention.

**Practice:**

The verbal section too calls for a lot of practice, which should be duly done in the last few months. The scores in the Reading Comprehension section get tremendously boosted by practice followed by analysis of the questions attempted incorrectly. The associated explanation to an answer is very important since it

shows what the examiner thought was the correct answer, why and how it was different from what we thought. While answering subsequent RCs, we should be mindful not to repeat earlier mistakes.

For questions in the vocabulary section it is important to also know why the incorrect answers were incorrect. In case, the options to a question throws up a new word make it a point to check the word up in a thesaurus.

In summary, scoring in Verbal Section can be elevated by sincere efforts towards improving the language followed by extensive practice. It is very difficult to score well unless a person has good command over English as a language. Similarly, it is very easy to make many mistakes in case a person is over reliant on his English skills without the requisite practice.

Every person should try and modify his approach to suit him best, while remembering the above skills at the back of his mind.

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR DATA INTERPRETATION AND LOGICAL REASONING

**Gourav Bhattacharya**

CAT 2007 100-Percentiler

The Data Interpretation and Logical Reasoning section of the CAT is probably closest in resemblance to the kind of problems you will be dealing with as a manager. It tests your decision-making ability and speed using limited input. As with all other CAT sections, the most important part of preparation is practice. Needless to say, you should give every practice test as seriously as the real CAT. There is absolutely no sense in giving untimed tests. In fact, giving tests without looking at the watch will only hamper your preparation.

Start off with topical tests in the initial stage of preparation. When you gain confidence in all areas of DI/LR, it is time to start giving a couple of full-length DI/LR tests. After this, merge individual sectional tests and start giving CAT-type full length test papers containing all three sections. Always analyse your performance after every test you give and use tests as a valuable feedback mechanism. If you feel the need, keep going back to topics which you feel require more work and take 1-2 more area-specific tests in that topic. An important thing you need to work on is the judicious selection of questions. Utilize practice tests for this purpose.

The Data Interpretation/Logical Reasoning section can be divided into three key areas:

1. **Data Interpretation:** This is the calculation intensive portion of the section. It consists of a myriad of graphs, charts and tables from which you will have to glean and analyse data. The key to cracking this area is to quickly identify the key pieces of data that you will require to work on the questions asked. It is not unknown for question-setters of the CAT to try and bewilder students with a large amount of data, most of it unnecessary. As a rule, the more the data presented, the easier the questions that follow, so don't lose heart if you see a table with 10 columns occupying one whole page. On the other hand, several seemingly innocuous questions may trip you up. Therefore, I would advise you to look at the questions first to get an idea of what data you need to be searching for in the graphs/charts/tables in the main question asked.

Another interesting feature of DI that you as a student can use to your advantage is that, usually, not all questions in a set are of equal difficulty. Specifically, most sets have a 'counting' type of question (How many companies have profits more than x%, how many people have incomes less than Rs. Y etc.). Most of these questions can be solved without calculation but by close inspection of the data presented. These I would categorize as 'gift' questions designed to test a student's presence of mind, and should never be missed out on. There are other similarly easy questions in most sets, and you should practice identifying the level of difficulty of questions so you know immediately which ones to attempt and which to avoid. There is no rule that states that you need to attempt all questions in a set, so it is a perfectly valid strategy to attempt selected questions across your DI section, without perhaps completely attempting even a single set.

An unusual source of practice questions that I would recommend for DI is a GRE preparation textbook or software. These contain several graph and chart type questions, most of which are near CAT level. You can utilize these questions in the initial source of preparation to practice reading data off charts

and tables, and then gradually move on to tougher questions from CAT preparation material. GRE software comes with the added advantage of an inbuilt timer that keeps you on your toes.

2. **Logical Reasoning:** This is the tougher (as perceived by most students) portion of the section. It consists of logical puzzles with several questions that follow. The most important and first step to solving an LR problem is to write down all of the information given in a box, table or diagram e.g. if the problem involves seating arrangements at a round table, always draw the table first and then try various permutations and combinations of people seated around it. Once you have drawn the figure for the problem, you are free to think with an uncluttered mind. LR problems usually contain several statements which serve as clues to solving the problem. Thus, the problem should always be attempted in a methodical fashion, and solved step-by-step, because trying to look at all the information at once will confuse even the best of us.

LR problems are usually 'all-or-nothing' type, in the sense that if you crack the problem you will have answers to all the questions that follow, and if you don't you will not be able to answer even a single question. This is because if the logic to the problem is apparent to you, the questions that follow are trivial. Hence, proper selection of problems to tackle is even more crucial here than in DI. Often, students fail to solve a problem after investing 10-15 minutes on it. Since the information they have at the end of that time is not much more than that at the beginning, they cannot answer even a single question in the set and have nothing to show for their effort. Problem-selection is tricky, so if you find that you are unable to make headway after the first 5 minutes, do the smart thing and switch to another set or section. You can always come back later if you have the time.

LR requires the maximum amount of practice among all areas in the DI/LR section. Apart from picking apart problems in your CAT preparation material, try looking for puzzle books or newspaper leisure sections that contain logic puzzles. Puzzle-solving is a knack, and the more you start enjoying logic puzzles, the better you will get at them.

3. **Data Sufficiency:** This is the third portion of the section, and quite a few DS questions were asked in the last CAT paper. Data Sufficiency problems usually take the form of a logical puzzle, and are in the form of a question followed by two statements. You need to answer whether you can solve the problem using the statements individually, or using both, or whether you cannot solve the problem using the information provided. The key to answering such problems is to pretend like one statement does not exist, try solving the problem, and then pretend like the other statement does not exist and try solving the problem again. These problems are generally tricky, and I would recommend lots of practice and perhaps solving them near the end of your section, after you have solved the other problems.

The DI/LR section is one of the higher scoring sections on the CAT, so you can look to it for help in improving your overall score as well, as long as you devote a good proportion of your time to it. Although recent CATs have had 4-5 question sets, be prepared for 1-2 question sets as well. DS questions have never appeared in sets. Important things to remember while attempting this section are that you need be quick in switching sets if you find a particular set tough, and you need to have presence of mind while solving DI/LR questions. Both of these things can be achieved with the help of practice.

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR QUANTITATIVE ABILITY

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The Quantitative Aptitude section in the CAT draws upon theory learnt in school up to the 12th grade, so it is theory that every one of us has learnt at some point of time or the other. Therefore, there is absolutely no need to pick up textbooks with advanced engineering mathematics in them. Textbooks I would recommend for theory are the NCERT textbooks for the 9th to 12th grades, and a personal favourite of mine – ‘Higher Algebra’ by Hall and Knight. All of these are very reasonably priced.

The most important part of preparation for QA in CAT, and in fact for CAT overall, are practice tests. I would recommend taking every practice test as seriously as the real CAT. Time yourself for every test that you take and have a target time in which you have to finish the test. For engineering students or students currently in college who may be familiar with the theory, it is okay to start off with tests immediately. However, for working professionals who may be out of touch with academics, I would recommend taking at least a couple of weeks to look at some of the formulae and theorems that you will require for your CAT.

Start off with topical tests in the initial stage of preparation. When you gain confidence in several topics, it is time to start giving a couple of full-length QA tests. After you have gained confidence in QA, merge individual sectional tests and start giving CAT-type full length test papers containing all three sections. Always analyse your performance after every test you give and use tests as a valuable feedback mechanism. If you feel the need, keep going back to topics which you feel require more work and take 1-2 more area-specific tests in that topic. An important thing you need to work on is the judicious selection of questions. Utilize practice tests for this purpose.

Most importantly, try and ensure that you do not have more than one really weak topic which you wish to avoid, as you never know which areas the CAT will test you on. It is okay to have one dodgy area, but you will still be taking a risk, and need to be that much better in the other topics. Therefore, I would recommend working hard in every area, so that you have the luxury of having all questions to select from in the real CAT.

Quantitative Aptitude for CAT can be broadly divided under three main heads:

1. **Geometry, Coordinate Geometry and Mensuration:** I have grouped these topics together since they deal with the portion of QA that can be visualized. Of the three, maximum weightage is given to geometry, although every CAT paper will have 3-4 questions on mensuration, as well as a couple of questions on coordinate geometry, totalling about 25-30% of questions in the QA section. Topics that need to be covered in geometry are basic theorems involving triangles, circles and parallel lines. A common type of question that is often asked in CAT is to find the value of certain angles or length of certain sides. Therefore, make sure that you cover topics such as congruency and similarity of triangles.

The only things that you need to do in coordinate geometry are straight lines and circles. Don't go into conic sections and other advanced topics. More importantly, do not try and solve IITJEE level questions in coordinate geometry. Given the equation of a circle, you should be able to comment on the centre and radius of the circle and draw it on a piece of graph paper, and nothing more. Similarly, you should

know what the slope and y-intercept of a given straight line equation is, and be able to draw the line on a piece of graph paper.

For mensuration, flip through a school level textbook for basic formulae on areas, surface areas and volumes of triangles, circles, cylinders, cones, cuboids and spheres. Mensuration problems are calculation intensive, and require lots of practice.

NCERT textbooks will suffice for this head.

2. **Algebra and Number Theory:** Algebra and number theory provide the major chunk of questions in any CAT QA section – 55-60%. Topics that you need to look at are Permutations and Combinations, Probability (very basic, including die and card problems and perhaps Bayes' theorem), Functions, Progressions (A.P, G.P. H.P. and A.G.P), Logarithms, Equations (Quadratic and Linear/Simultaneous) and, most importantly, Number Theory.

Number Theory problems are usually very simple, if you know how to do them. They require certain tricks that you can pick up from any good textbook. Having said that, number theory contributes 3-4 questions to every CAT, and so it is a very important topic. You should be comfortable writing numbers in their algebraic form (e.g. a three digit number having digits xyz can be represented as  $100x + 10y + z$ ). You should also learn about divisibility tests and the 'modulo' notation and its applications (for programmers,  $10\%5=0$  is also referred to as 10 modulo 5 is 0, that is, the remainder when 10 is divided by 5, is zero).

A textbook I would recommend for algebra and number theory is 'Higher Algebra' by Hall and Knight, which is available at any bookstore that sells textbooks for IITJEE.

3. **Arithmetic and Miscellaneous:** 15-20% of questions in any CAT paper fall under this head. Major topics that you need to cover are Set Theory (especially Venn diagrams) and problems on Time, Speed and Distance, both of which are always asked. Both of these topics are covered as part of the school syllabus, but may need some brushing up on. Sometimes, questions on topics such as Linear Programming are also asked. An NCERT textbook is enough to study from for this head.

Miscellaneous problems are those problems which do not fall under any head. They are rarely asked, and even when they do appear in a CAT paper they do not number more than one or two. They are purely tests of mathematical aptitude, and you cannot learn how to solve them. The only advice I can give for dealing with these problems is to try back-substitution of answer choices, or to avoid these problems altogether.

An area that had a high concentration of questions in CAT 2007 was Data Sufficiency. Data Sufficiency problems can come from any of the three heads, and are in the form of a question followed by two statements. You need to answer whether you can solve the problem using the statements individually, or using both, or whether you cannot solve the problem using the information provided. The key to answering such problems is to pretend like one statement does not exist, try solving the problem, then pretend like the other statement does not exist and try solving the problem again. These problems are generally tricky, and I would recommend lots of practice and perhaps solving them near the end of your QA section, after you have solved the other problems.

Although there is absolutely no substitute for knowing your theory, and practice, in your QA section, there are some question-solving strategies that you may use. They are:



1. Substitution of numbers for variables in algebraic problems, which may make the problem simpler. Remember, however, that this usually does not work when the answer choices are also in terms of variables.
2. Back-substitution of answers into the problem in order to solve it, i.e. assume one of the answer choices to be the answer and then solve the problem. If the problem cannot be solved or reduces to the trivial case, repeat for another answer choice until you stumble on the correct answer choice.
3. Substituting variables for numbers in the answer choices. This usually works for progression problems. Let's say the  $n^{\text{th}}$  term of a progression is given in terms of  $n$  and some other terms. You are then asked to find the  $100^{\text{th}}$  term in the progression. The answer choices are of the form  $2100$ ,  $299 - 1$  etc. (say). Then, you can start with the first answer choice, assume that the  $n^{\text{th}}$  term will be  $2n$ , solve the first few terms of the progression and find if this is indeed the case (lets say it's easy calculating the  $3^{\text{rd}}$  term, which you find to be  $8$  or  $23$ . Hence the  $100^{\text{th}}$  term will be  $2100$ ). If it is not, assume that the  $n^{\text{th}}$  term is  $2n-1$  and repeat, until you get to the correct answer choice.
4. Solving coordinate geometry algebraically or vice-versa. Often a complicated algebra problem involving several equations can be solved very easily if you draw the corresponding figures on an imaginary graph paper. Similarly, coordinate geometry problems can often be solved by writing corresponding algebraic equations. Always remember the correspondence between algebra and coordinate geometry.
5. If you can eliminate all options except two, guess. The CAT rewards educated guessing. Look at it this way: If you have two questions, probability states that you will get one of these wrong and the other right. The expected number of marks you will get is  $+4$  and  $-1$ , which translates to  $+3$  for both the questions combined, or  $+1.5$  per question answered. If you do this for a significant number of questions, unless you are exceptionally unlucky, the benefits of not wasting time solving every problem completely will far outweigh the loss of marks due to some incorrect answers.

To summarize, the most important part of your QA preparation is PRACTICE. The theory is not too tough, so practice as much as you can. QA has been an area where students have done well in the last two CATs, so you should look at it as an area where you can also improve your overall score.

# HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE CAT WITH 6 MONTHS TO GO

**Gourav Bhattacharya**

CAT 2007 100-Percentiler

The CAT itself should ideally be given with 6 months preparation, as then a student has enough time to space out his preparation and work at a comfortable pace. Also, for working professionals who don't have as much time on their hands as the college students, and who perhaps have to devote more time to preparation than college students, it is essential to start early. Several steps which are key to giving a good CAT cannot be taken overnight or crammed into a couple of weeks' time. Starting early enables a student to work out the best possible strategy and implement it effectively. Some measures I believe students should take to enhance their level of preparation are:

1. **Identify the time of day when you study the best:** If you are starting 6 months before the CAT, you have enough time to plan out your preparation, and don't need to study for more than two hours a day at this stage. Now is a good time to experiment by studying at different times in the day (whenever possible) to find what time suits you best. When you need to crank up the hours you put in later on, you'll know exactly when you feel at your freshest and concentrate best. As far as possible, try giving tests on Sundays (or other holidays) at the CAT time (10 in the morning). Try making this a sort of ritual so you get used to giving a CAT-type test every Sunday morning.
2. **Subscribe to a daily newspaper and/or a weekly news magazine:** 60% of the Verbal Ability section in a typical CAT paper comprises of Reading Comprehension passages. Cultivating the reading habit is therefore essential to your CAT preparation. Indeed, even if you solve only RC with an accuracy of 70% (very achievable), you will comfortably clear your VA cut-offs without even having to touch the dreaded grammar section. Reading a daily newspaper and a weekly news magazine has several purposes. It increases your speed of reading. It also ensures that you are quickly able to pick up the salient points in even abstract passages. Finally, it also broadens your horizons and gives you something to talk about in the Group Discussions and Personal Interviews that come later.
3. **Study in bursts:** If you are one of those that need to warm-up for an hour before beginning to be able to concentrate and study productively, now is the time to break that habit. The entire CAT evaluation (including GD/PI) is designed for people who can switch on and switch off for short periods of time. You need to be able to start concentrating almost immediately, and don't need to do the same thing for more than 40-45 minutes. This is why the CAT paper itself has three sections, instead of only one long section. Practice studying in short productive bursts (typically 45-60 minutes) and take breaks in between. It will be hard to start concentrating immediately after a break in the initial stage, but soon you will get used to it.
4. **Get your theory right:** CAT tests you on the theory that you learnt in school, so there really is no excuse for getting it wrong. If you have lost touch with high school maths, and especially if you are a working professional, it may be a good idea to set a week aside to actually go through maths formulae that you will need as well as a few basic proofs. Again, don't try to do things that are extremely complicated. Stick to the basics – CAT is designed to identify managers with efficient time allocation, not Math specialists.
5. **Develop a proper test-giving routine:** This is the most important part of your CAT preparation. CAT does not ask you complicated Phd level questions. Instead, it puts pressure on you by giving you far less time to solve the paper than is reasonable. It is up to you to develop the best possible test-giving

strategy you can, to solve the CAT paper. Therefore, it is essential that you give practice tests seriously. If you join a classroom coaching program you will be given several practice tests. If you don't want to join a classroom program (which is also perfectly fine), make sure that you get enough practice tests from your friends/colleagues/seniors. Needless to say, attempt to clear EVERY sectional cut-off (and the overall cut-off) in EVERY paper that you give. There is no sense in attempting only one section well in a paper at the cost of the others. It is a complete waste of time and will hamper your preparation. Also, never ever give a practice test without timing yourself. Don't cheat the clock (or yourself) either.

6. **Keep experimenting:** Keep changing things – the section you attempt first, the target number of questions you want to attempt, the time you spend on each section etc. Only then will you finally perfect your optimum CAT-solving strategy which strikes just the right balance between speed and accuracy, ensuring that you clear all cut-offs and are well on your way towards that coveted IIM seat.
7. **Start doing crosswords, logic puzzles etc.:** Solving the daily crossword (and checking the solutions the day after) improves your vocabulary by leaps and bounds. Solving logic puzzles will help you immensely in Logical Reasoning questions which have become an integral part of Data Interpretation sections in recent years. More importantly, CAT-taking is a habit. Once you get into the habit of solving problems, CAT should be a piece of cake.
8. **Develop a hobby:** Seriously. It gives you something to do in your free time. After all, you can't be expected to study 24x7. It gives you perspective. CAT is only an exam, not life-and-death. Finally (and this is planning ahead at its best), if you do crack the CAT, it shows you to be a well-rounded personality and gives you something to talk about during your Personal Interview.
9. **Avoid over-preparation:** There is a limit to how much a person can do, and every person has his/her own threshold. The minute the CAT starts getting to be a drag, take a break. Strange though it may sound, you cannot do well on your CAT unless you enjoy it. I even went to the extent (and this is NOT recommended) of not doing anything for the last week, because I wanted to have fun solving the CAT. There's absolutely no harm in doing nothing for three or four days until you feel like solving CAT questions again. Treat it as a challenge, not as routine work.

I feel confident that someone who follows these measures can increase his level of performance significantly. The measures are in no particular order, except for the last one which is the most important. Remember, the CAT should be FUN, above all else. I wish anyone reading this the best of luck with CAT.

# WHAT TO DO DURING THE CAT

**Gourav Bhattacharya**

CAT 2007 100-Percentiler

## **Time: 24 hours before the paper**

This is when you should be looking at your books for the last time. It doesn't matter how much you're going to study on the last day - none of it is going to go into your head, and you are going to retain none of it. In fact, the more you study, the more you tend to forget. This is because before big exams such as the CAT, there's absolutely no substitute for being calm and relaxed. If you utilize every last minute cramming, you lose out on something very important – your peace of mind! Things you can do one day before the CAT are to get everything you need for the exam in order, such as your admit card, pencils and erasers, and to try and go to your exam centre to familiarize yourself with the route. People DO go to the wrong centres on CAT day. It happened to me this year, but because I was lucky enough to get there early, I got to the other (correct) centre on time. Apart from that, although it sounds clichéd, try watching a movie, especially a comedy. It helps tremendously. Try and get at least 7 hours of sleep.

## **Time: 3 hours before the paper**

Eat a light breakfast, check all of your stuff, and plan to reach the centre at least an hour before the paper starts. You never know what may go wrong during the journey to the paper, and this is one day when you don't want to take any chances. Carry a chocolate bar with you – it helps to pass time in case you get there early, and also makes you a little more alert before the paper. Don't forget to carry a water bottle either.

## **Time: 15 minutes before the paper**

This is when you'll be allowed into the exam hall. Locate your seat and start filling in all of the necessary forms (attendance sheet(s) mainly) and the OMR sheet. You will have plenty of time to do this, but there's no sense in slacking now and wasting valuable time later on. Don't forget to keep your admit card with you. Check and recheck your OMR sheet – if you screw this up, there's no point in sitting there for the next two and a half hours!

## **Time: Start of the paper**

This is when you are allowed to open your question papers. This is NOT when you start writing your paper. The difference between doing well on your CAT and doing badly lies in the first 2-3 minutes. Please don't start off with the first question blindly. READ all of the instructions on the question paper very carefully. Familiarize yourself with the pattern of the CAT that year. Set yourself a target number of questions (depending on your speed) that you want to attempt. Then look through the sections and mark the questions that you think you can attempt, and the ones you definitely can't. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this step. The KEY to giving a good CAT lies in proper selection of questions. It is essential that you spend at least 2 minutes selecting questions you wish to attempt and those you wish to avoid. At this point of time you should also allocate how much time you want to spend on each section.

## **Time: 3 minutes into the paper**

This is when you should take a deep breath and start attempting your paper. Now, there are several strategies that I used during the mock tests and in the actual CAT paper, for attempting questions. These strategies may not work for everyone, and it is very important to keep experimenting with your own strategies until you zero in on one or two which you are confident about. Most importantly, choose flexible strategies. You don't know which section is going to be intimidating during your CAT paper. Some of the strategies I would recommend are:

- Always have a default section which you think you are best at. This is the section with which you will start giving your paper, all things being equal. Only if in your assessment your default section is significantly tougher than the other sections, you should switch to another section.
- Always have a backup section, which you need to shift to in case your default section is very tough. This happened to me this year. My default section was Quantitative Ability, but on my initial reading I found it to be a little tricky. I immediately started off with Data Interpretation, and came back to Quantitative Ability later on. By then, because I had finished the rest of the paper and was not under much pressure, QA did not seem as tough as it initially did.
- Have a filler section for when you need to take a break from the other sections. Your filler section could be any of the three, as QA and DI are caselet based anyway, and VA has grammar and RC. The idea behind a filler section is to release pressure. We often panic during CAT thinking of the sections in which we have not attempted any questions at all. However, a filler section is a section in which, after every 25-30 minute spell attempting another section, you pick up an RC or a caselet from and solve. It is a tremendous confidence-booster when, after finishing with two sections and flipping to the third, you find that you have already solved 7-8 questions in that section. You should utilize the mocks that you give in identifying which of the three sections is your default section, and also your backup and filler sections.
- Try and get an idea of how tough a section is, relative to the other sections. VA sections have been extremely tough for the last couple of years, so there is no sense in wasting time solving every question in order to clear the cut-off. Be confident that the cut-off would be low, and solve only enough questions for you to be confident that you would clear it. On the other hand, since DI sections have been easier, they are worth spending a little extra time on, so that you clear your cut-off and score well overall.
- In Verbal Ability, avoid attempting more than two Reading Comprehensions one after another. The reason is that your concentration starts flagging after the first couple of passages, and you invariably make careless errors in the third and fourth passages you attempt, if you are attempting them in succession. Instead, mix it up by doing a little grammar or even another section in between passages, to keep your mind fresh.
- In most Data Interpretation caselets and most Reading Comprehension passages, there will be 1-2 questions easier than the others. Make sure you attempt them at the very least, even if you don't attempt the rest of the question. Conversely, there is no rule that states that every caselet or passage has to be attempted completely (i.e. all questions answered), so don't waste time doing difficult questions.
- Avoid doing Quantitative Ability for long stretches of time, as your concentration starts flagging. Mix up Quantitative Ability with some grammar or some DI caselets.
- Keep checking your OMR sheet to ensure that you have shaded the correct circles for the questions that you have answered. Every year some people do badly because they shade in their OMR sheets incorrectly.
- Never ever make solving a question a matter of personal pride. Time is your most valuable commodity during the two and a half hours. If you can't see how to solve a question, leave it immediately. Think of it as a question you could have solved if you had the time, but chose not to. Spending copious amounts of time on a question breaks your rhythm and comes with absolutely no benefit.
- Finally, don't panic. It sounds easy, but it takes practice. This is where your mocks come into the picture. Give enough mocks to get used to exam-like situations. A calm, relaxed mind is paramount. A good way to take a breather and calm yourself down during the paper is to take a minute off to sip some water and re-gather your thoughts.

**Time: 2 minutes before the end of the paper**

Check your OMR sheet again, and gather all of your things. Prepare to hand in the paper, and then continue solving it. No sense in giving the invigilator the chance to not take your paper by delaying handing it in.

## HOW TO TACKLE THE PERSONAL INTERVIEW

**Gourav Bhattacharya**

CAT 2007 100-Percentiler

The Personal Interview is the last stage of your evaluation to get into an IIM, and by far the most important of the factors you can control (the others being your CAT score and the GD), where factors not under your control would include your school and college marks and overall profile. The Personal Interview (henceforth referred to as PI) offers a golden opportunity to create an impression on your panel which will evaluate you and perhaps deal with you in the future. Candidates that perform well in the PI despite being average in other areas are sometimes recommended for admission purely on the strength of their interview. On the other hand, there have been cases of candidates who, despite having fantastic profiles, choke under pressure and say something inappropriate which automatically leads to rejection.

There is only one way in which you can do well in the PI, and that is to believe with all your heart that there is an IIM seat with your name written on it, and that you are better than all of the other candidates that have turned up for the interview. This is not arrogance, but belief in your self. There will be a hundred factors gnawing at your head before the PI (my GD was poor...my tie is awry...I don't have all the required photocopies...), and the only way to ensure that you do not crumble before the interview panel is to be firm in your self-belief.

At the end of the day, your interview is about yourself. I can (and will) tell you some techniques to help you, but your interview is a very personal thing. There is no standard method to do well on an interview, and you can never know how you have done. I have seen a lot of people coming out with smiling faces that have eventually failed to convert their calls, and many people with long faces who have been pleasantly surprised.

If you can maintain your composure during an interview and justify everything that you have put down on your Candidate Information Form (which will be mailed to you along with your interview call letter, and has to be submitted at the time of your interview), you will sail through the interview. Some basics to help you keep your cool are:

- 1. Be prepared:** Shine your shoes, adjust your tie-knot, comb your hair and arrange all of your certificates in chronological order. Carry photocopies of everything. Don't forget your CAT admit-card or the interview call letter. A well-organised candidate creates a good impression on the panel, and ensures that the PI has got off to a good start before the questions even begin. Also, when in doubt, always wear a suit.
- 2. Treat the panelists as humans:** The people interviewing you are not gods. They are professors whom you will have an opportunity to interact with in a few months' time. Don't assume that they know everything, and that they cannot make mistakes. The panelists often have a shallow knowledge of areas that they question you on, but ask questions with tremendous self-confidence. Therefore, it is up to you to not stumble at these points. Explain to them what you know about the topic. Often, even the most rudimentary answers contain more information than the person asking the question has with him.
- 3. Be humble:** At the same time, never underestimate the panel. They have knowledge in depth of several diverse fields, and will definitely surprise you with their lines of questioning. They have far

more experience and knowledge than you, and have interviewed candidates like you by the hundreds, so give them their due respect. By virtue of this experience, they can size you up pretty quickly, and they don't like someone who thinks he is better than them.

4. **Don't give a 'stress' interview:** A 'stress' interview exists only in the mind of the interviewee. If the panel starts questioning you aggressively, sit back, smile and take your time answering their questions. They will appreciate your composure, and soon revert to a normal interview format.
5. **Know what you have written in your Candidate Information form:** The form is one of the few sources of information that the panel has about you, and they will ask you several questions on it. Be prepared to justify every line of what you have written, and don't just write things down for the 'sake' of doing so. A good candidate who can defend his point of view is almost always preferred to a brilliant candidate with a half-hearted defence.
6. **Be honest:** The panel will catch you out pretty easily if you are lying, unless you are a pathological liar. Dishonesty creates a very bad impression, and will almost certainly lead to rejection. Even if you do manage to hoodwink the panel, will you really be comfortable going to an IIM knowing you don't deserve to be there?
7. **Say 'I don't know':** It is absolutely okay to not know the answer to something the panel asks you. They don't expect you to know everything, and will purposely keep asking you questions to test the limits of your knowledge. I'm not just talking through my hat here. In the 5 IIM interviews that I have attended (ABCLK), I have said 'I don't know' twice or thrice in every interview. Yet every panel saw enough in me to select me.
8. **Speak slowly, look everyone in the eye:** Despite what GD/PI coaches say, avoid looking at all the members of the panel while answering a question. If someone has asked you a question, respect that fact and give him/her your undivided attention while answering. Speaking slowly helps you gather your thoughts and stops you from blurting out incoherent or inappropriate sentences.
9. **Be diplomatic:** The IIMs like 'safe' candidates. This is because mavericks rarely make good managers, and are often more trouble than they are worth in the corporate world. Diplomacy is a valued virtue in any good manager. Therefore, avoid taking a stand during the interview, especially on controversial issues. If you are forced to take a stand, justify completely why your views are what they are, and always admit that there may be opposing views as well. Finally, never criticize anyone, however deserving they may be of censure. Sidestep the question by saying something like 'I don't know enough to pass judgement.'
10. **Ask questions:** The IIMs want you as much as you want them. When the interview is over and they indicate that you may ask questions, take the opportunity to ask intelligent questions and figure out if that IIM is right for you. Read up on the IIM you are interviewing for, and never belittle the newer IIMs. The panel will appreciate the effort you have made.
11. **Don't time your interview:** A shorter interview just means that you were easier to 'read' for the panel and that they judged you faster than some of the other candidates. The duration of your interview has absolutely no relation to how good or bad the interview was.



Remember to always greet the panel with a smile and thank them for their time when you leave. Politeness will hold you in good stead inside the interview room, and outside it as well

# PERSONAL INTERVIEW PREPARATION

**Munira Lokhandwala**

CAT 2008 100-Percentiler

## 1. Personal

Knowing yourself is the most important part of your interview preparation. It is not acceptable if a candidate cannot answer questions based on his/her own personality. It would give an impression of an immature or “self – unaware” person. A candidate hence needs to do a lot of soul searching on questions like: “Why MBA?”, Strengths and Weaknesses, Examples of Leadership abilities, long term/ short term goals.

Projecting a consistent personality demands clarity of thoughts. So the best and easiest way to manage this is to be honest with you.

Avoid saying something like “I do not have any weakness” as it is obviously an overstatement; such an answer implies either an arrogant person or a misinformed person and the panel would not want either.

Sometimes, introspection becomes quite tricky as various qualities may coexist in bits. One should always consider the dominant quality. In such cases, feedbacks from friends and colleagues can be quite effective. Try to supplement your answers with at least two relevant examples while preparing; so that during an interview you are not unnerved if the interviewer asks you for another example. It brings additional coherency in your thoughts.

Quite a few interviews start with “Tell us something about yourself.” please refrain from giving a summary of what is already written in your form / resume. Try to use this question to lead the interview into your comfort zones. For example, if you are an avid reader then you could speak about the influence of your favorite books on your character.

## 2. Work Experience

If you have been working for more than six months then questions on your work experience will play a role during your interview. The obvious areas of questioning are work profile, your projects, organization chart of your company and where you fit in. You should be able to give some examples of team work and leadership from your employment.

You must also focus on the macro picture of your experience in the corporate life. What it has taught you? What kind of mistakes have you made? How it has influenced to make choices in specialization for your MBA? How you have influenced the goals of your department / company? Along with this, you should also do some home work on the industry in which your company operates the history of your company, the culture of your company / industry, etc.

## 3. Academics

If you have been working for less than 2 years then you are still supposed to remember some aspects of your education. Sounds pretty scary, considering that a lot of us do not know what we are studying even when we are studying it. Do not worry; you do not need to study everything, ensure that you know the basics of all the subjects that you have studied. A good barometer would be curriculum till higher secondary. You should also have one or two favorite subjects (If you do not have one, pick one); for these subjects you should know your curriculum and maybe a little bit more in-depth.

## 4. Hobbies

Ideally, hobbies should be the area of your comfort and can really make interviews quite interesting as they can clearly make a distinction between you and the rest. Most IIM graduates possess influential hobbies like reading, playing some sports, (watching sports does not count unless you are a walking sports encyclopedia), dramatics, photography, trekking etc. Watching movies and listening to music do not count as hobbies unless you can discourse on topics like directorial styles or history of various genres of music. Not having a hobby is certainly negative; but worse is getting grilled for a cited hobby when you do not have one.

## 5. General Knowledge / Current Affairs

General Knowledge can be a really vast topic. However, this should not stop you from having opinions on current affairs. Familiarize yourself with the issue by reading magazines, blogs, and newspapers. Back your opinions with facts and justifications. Common knowledge like the capital of some countries should be known. Prepare for GK only if you have the time and have finished preparing for all the other areas.

Be systematic regarding your preparation, make a check list of what you do not know and work with it. If you are organized, you will definitely do well in your interview. Best of Luck!

## Commonly asked questions

### I. Personal

#### A. Background

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What would you like me to know about you that is not on your resume?
3. What are the three most important events of your life?
4. What was an experience in your life that you would want to go back and change?

#### B. Self Description

1. How would your friends describe you?
2. Give me three words to describe yourself.

#### C. Goals

1. What new goals have you established for yourself recently?
2. What are your five to ten year career goals?
3. What are the attributes of an ideal job for you? If you could do "it" all over again, what would you do differently?

#### D. Values

4. What does "success" mean to you?
5. What does "failure" mean to you?
6. Which is more important to you: money or the type of job?
7. Who do you admire? Why?

### II. Management / Leadership Style

1. Define leadership.
2. Tell me about a time when you successfully resolved a conflict.
3. Give me an example of a leadership role you have held when not everything went as planned.

4. What two attributes are most important in your job?
5. How do you feel about working overtime?

### III. Strengths / Weaknesses and Skills

1. What are your strengths/ weakness?
2. Give me an example of something that you have done that shows initiative.
3. What makes you stand out among your fellow students?
4. Have you ever had any failures? What did you learn from them?
5. How do you feel about working in a structured environment?
6. In what kind of work environment do you do your best work?
7. What kinds of tasks and responsibilities motivate you the most?

### IV. Education

1. Why did you decide to get an MBA?
2. Why IIMA? (Or whichever institute you are being interviewed in.)
3. What made you decide to major in \_\_\_\_?
4. What electives have you taken? Which did you enjoy the most?
5. What college classes did you like the least? Why?

### V. Extra Curriculars

1. What extra-curricular school activities are you involved in?
2. What have you learned from your activities?
3. What is your favorite book/movie/song/painting or author/actor/singer/artist?
4. Which magazines/newspapers do you read regularly? Which books have you read recently?

### VI. Job / Company / Industry

1. What do you know about your company?
2. What do you predict is going to happen in this industry in the next 5 years?
3. Do you know who your competitors are?
4. What interests you most about this position? What parts of the job do you think you would find the least satisfying?
5. What concerns you about your company?

## HOW TO DO WELL IN THE GROUP DISCUSSION

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CAT 2007 100-Percentiler

The Group Discussion stage forms an integral part of the admission process to most IIMs. It tests you on several aspects. The Group Discussion is an excellent platform for you to showcase your communication skills, reasoning ability, ability to be a team player and also your leadership qualities. All of these are essential in order to be a good manager.

The weightage that the Group Discussion carries in your final admission decision is also significant, ranging from 15-20%. More importantly, the Group Discussion is your first opportunity to make an impression on the panel that will be interviewing you later. First impressions always count, and you don't want the panel to have any negative preconceived notions about you.

The Group Discussion can follow any of several formats. Usually, the groups are of 8-11 people. The topic is given at the start. At this point, the panel may ask you to write on the topic for 5-10 minutes and then discuss it, or to gather your thoughts for a couple of minutes and then start. In either case, there is absolutely no excuse for not carrying a pen and paper into the Group Discussion room. If you are required to start after a couple of minutes, quickly jot down some points that seem relevant to you. Concentrate on thinking of as many points as you can at this point instead of trying to frame the points in your best language. If you have more time, you can present the points in a more coherent fashion. However, remember that substance is always more important than style. This does not, of course, mean that you should write abbreviations, sms-language, or use poor grammar, but there is no point in being unnecessarily verbose.

Group Discussion topics are of three types. The topic may be a social or political issue that the panel wants you to discuss e.g. climate change. It may also take the form of a case where you are required to think for a protagonist and decide on an appropriate course of action. Finally, it may be a completely abstract topic such as "Orange". A common variation in Group Discussions occurs when the panel asks you to select by consensus a topic to be discussed (without giving you any options), or asks you to choose between two topics the one you wish to discuss as a group. Remember that you are being judged even during the process of reaching a decision. Never assume that the Group Discussion has not begun because a topic has not been selected. Every word you speak in the Group Discussion room is on the record, as GDs are meant to simulate corporate meetings which are always painfully formal discussions in the real world.

There are some tactics that I used during my IIM GDs, which helped me a great deal. They are:

1. **Pretend like its real:** In a real corporate meeting, you need to treat everyone with respect and also win their respect in order to bring everyone around to your point of view. There are several things that you simply cannot do in a real meeting that I find people do during Group Discussions, such as putting someone else down or using a casual tone of voice. Pretending like it's a real meeting will automatically make you more alert and less prone to making mistakes during the GD.
2. **Treat everyone with respect:** An important attribute you will be judged on is whether you are a team player or not. Being disdainful will therefore not help you. Be polite when dealing with

opposing points of view. Try to explain with logical reasons why a person is incorrect, no matter how outrageous his line of reasoning is. Also, never ever tell someone that he is wrong. Use softer phrases like 'That's interesting but another point of view would be...' or 'That's true in some cases but I would also like to point out that...'

3. **Don't panic:** The point you were just trying to make was just stolen. The person next to you is shouting down everything you're saying. Relax. The panel judging you looks at how well you can deal with people and situations. Take a deep breath, compose yourself, think of another point and jump back into the discussion like nothing happened.
4. **Forget what your GD coach taught you:** Well, not all of it, but the parts about speaking at least 6-7 times in a 15 minute GD. Every GD is different. You can open your mouth just twice during a GD and end up looking like the best candidate in the room, or make 15 points and still find yourself on the list of rejects. There are no set rules that can be framed about the number of times you should speak. Go with the flow, and do what you feel comfortable doing. Quality and not quantity is what the panel is looking for. Remember though, that to get some points you need to speak at least a couple of times.
5. **Get plenty of practice:** The more GDs you practice, the better you get. You can refine your style of speaking as well as your thought process with the aid of practice GDs. Practicing GDs also makes you adept at handling different types of situations and ensures that you're on top of your game when it counts. Practice both case as well as non-case GDs as you never know what the IIMs will spring on you.
6. **Body Language is important, but not that important:** Most GD coaches put undue stress on your body language during a GD. While it is important to look alert during a GD, concentrating on how you look rather than on how you talk will only hamper your chances. Ensure that you do the basics of sitting up straight, looking everyone in the eye while speaking and not being too animated (e.g. waving your arms wildly about). Apart from that, make a genuine effort to listen to people. This will wipe that bored expression off your face, and also stop you from twiddling your pen and staring at your shoes.
7. **Don't be scared to start:** Do not hesitate to be the first one to speak, if you feel that everyone has taken sufficient time to think during the GD. The panel appreciates leadership skills. At the same time, don't just say any old thing. Be prepared with a coherent opening statement, don't ramble, and never, ever summarize the topic given to you or start off with sentences like "Dear Friends, we are gathered here at the GD of IIMX to discuss..." This is a formal discussion, and everybody knows why they are there.
8. **Practice role-play:** For case GDs, practice writing down the names of the concerned parties and writing points from their points of view. This will help you gain a clearer understanding of the problem and help you channel your thoughts better.
9. **Think before you speak:** Needless to say, there is no sense in shouting down someone only to blurt out half a sentence. This creates a bad impression. Mentally prepare at least a couple of sentences that you want to say. If someone cuts you off and prevents you from saying everything you wanted to, hey, at least you tried. The panel will appreciate the effort. Also, concentrate on only one point

at a time. Don't try and touch on multiple points during a single foray into the GD, as chances are that not only will the second point not be heard, it will also be stolen by someone else.

10. **Remember the summary:** Many IIMs require you to write a GD summary. Those that don't usually ask students for an oral summary. This is a great chance to make a good impression on the panel in a safe environment away from the bustle of a GD, as the panel gives their undivided attention to one candidate at a time. Therefore, never lose track of the GD in the rush to speak, and try and always have an overall 'feel' of where the discussion is heading.
11. **Read:** Finally, it helps to keep abreast of the news of the world and the country. People quoting facts and figures during a GD create a fantastic impression if the figures are accurate and relevant. Even if the figures are slightly inaccurate, as opposed to blatantly ridiculous, they ensure the speaker a chance to be heard, as people usually respect someone who they perceive to have a deeper knowledge of the topic. A person who is well-read can expect to encounter few topics which are alien to him, which is a huge advantage in a GD.

The most important things in a GD are your maturity and confidence. When you speak, take your time. Try and show restraint in everything you do. Finally, if the unthinkable happens and you are confronted with an abstract topic or topic that you know nothing about, listen to what other people are saying for 3-4 minutes. You will pick up enough hints on things to talk about before jumping into the Group Discussion with your own points.

# GROUP DISCUSSION PREPARATION

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Real time demonstration of behavioural skills is the basic rationale behind the inclusion of group discussion as one of the selection techniques. None of the other techniques test the candidate's managerial skills like communication skills, knowledge and ideas regarding a given subject, capability to co-ordinate and lead, etc. as well as a group discussion. Involvement of strangers in the discussion, lower familiarity with the GD topic and limited preparation time makes the job easier for the selection panel while making things difficult for the candidates.

A group discussion, by definition involves speaking before a group of people. This puts in some aspects of public speaking i.e. speaking and content. However, due to its interactive nature, a group discussion also involves listening to other people's ideas. A typical group discussion has 8-12 participants and lasts for 15 to 20 minutes. It means each participant gets an average of around 2 minutes to talk; the rest of the time is spent listening.

Consequently, group discussion preparation revolves around these three basic aspects.

## Group Speaking Preparation

In a group discussion, a candidate should be able to convey his/her thoughts satisfactorily and convincingly before a group of people. Knowledge on a given subject, precision and clarity of thought are the things that are evaluated. One should speak only as much as necessary and try to avoid irrelevant talks and being verbose.

1. To enhance fluency, tone of voice and articulation, start by reading aloud from a book or an editorial for around 15 minutes daily. Once a week, try speaking in front of a mirror on some topic. This would also help in collecting your thoughts in an organized manner.
2. Most of us may be very vocal in a one – to – one conversation but are less so when we interact with a group; especially if it is a group of strangers. So, start having some discussions with a group made from your friends. Such discussions are a good way to begin as they allow students to focus on speaking without being distracted by the extremely competitive environment of a formal group discussion.
3. After content preparation for one or two weeks, start attending competitive group discussions with like minded groups.

## Group Content Preparation

Presence of content will be a primary determinant of how you perform in any group discussion. If you are making a content heavy point, especially with some facts and numbers, then everybody else will listen to what you have to say. This generally helps in making subsequent entries in the discussion. For someone who keeps himself updated with current affairs, content preparation may not be an issue. For others, I advise the following:

1. Pick around 6 – 7 current affair topics, (events that took place in the past year) and start researching on these. Understand the event from different perspectives like personal, social, political, cultural, academic etc.
2. While reading magazines or newspapers, focus should primarily be on well covered articles or stories. Reading articles from the Sunday Express, the Mint, Business Standard and the Economist is a good preparation for group discussions. One may also look at some blogs that contain a few well researched articles.



3. While researching on topics, try to remember important facts and figures and form some opinions with justification.
4. In many discussions ranging from the recession to China as a threat to India for outsourcing; comparison between India and China or US is inevitable. So, it is advisable to know a lot of economic and demographic details of these countries like GDP, population, social structure, major industries etc.

### **Group Listening Preparation**

A crucial but ignored part of group discussion preparation is listening. Often we undermine benefits of listening. A good listener would summarize discussions well; he/she may score by presenting a good case over an idea originated by another participant but lost in high decibel noise. Listening seems very easy; but what takes some preparation is to be able to listen and at the same time, structure your own thoughts.

1. Participate in some discussions as an observer. Listening exercise during such practice discussions would help you understand the dynamics of a typical GD that involves high-low noise levels. Such an exercise would provide you with some hints as to optimum moments for entering into discussions.
2. Listening to other people's ideas may help to evolve one's thought processes by adding different perspectives.

### **Group Discussion Tips**

1. In a discussion, if you talk in a long winded way, then the other participants will not be courteous and wait for you to come to the point. Hence, speaking in a concise manner is very important
2. Address everyone in the group so while you are making your point you are not talking to one person only but the whole group. At the same time, do not look at the moderators as they are not a part of the group.
3. Dress formally and use formal language.
4. Address other participants with respect. Do not gesticulate a lot; if you are accustomed to using your hands while making a point ensure that you do not encroach into the space in front of other participants.
5. Do not point to a specific participant while talking. Do not get personal; try to be objective in your arguments.
6. Avoid using extreme words and extreme statements.
7. If you are disagreeing with someone else do it civilly. Disagree with the point and not with the person.

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