

Think Ahead

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*Strategic Business Leader –
‘Over your shoulder’*

Advice from the examining team on how to successfully attempt the exam

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Introduction

This document provides a more general guidance on how to successfully manage the Strategic Business Leader exam within the time allowed.

Before attempting the real exam, ensure you tick all the boxes in the following list:

1. You fully understand the rationale for the exam and you have read the examiner approach article.
2. You have mastered the technical knowledge detailed in the Strategic Business Leader syllabus and study guide and bridge any prior knowledge necessary for Strategic Business Leader. Please read the mapping underpinning knowledge and skills article.
3. You are fully equipped with the demands of the professional skills for the exam and have read the marking guide article.
4. You are fully aware of the style and demands of the exam and you have practised the two specimen exams under timed conditions.
5. You have referred to other support resource relevant for Strategic Business Leader on the website.

Assume that you are now ready and just about to start the Strategic Business Leader examination, and over your shoulder is a member of the examining team whispering guidance into your ear. Of course, we cannot do this for real as you would both be removed from the exam hall and reported to ACCA for engaging in unfair practice!

So, there you are sitting at your desk in a room full of anxious people, anticipating the start of the exam. You should be well rested and had a good meal; so the energy consumed earlier in the day will be released throughout the four hours, keeping you both physically and mentally alert.

Having fully prepared for the rigours of the Strategic Business Leader exam as a candidate, your mind now needs to focus on how you are actually going to spend the next four hours. Effective time management is going to be critical to you passing the examination, because although four hours is a long time – it will fly by. You must avoid the temptation to start the exam at a leisurely pace, but instead you should prepare a time plan and stick to it. We will cover this idea in more detail later.

Finally, the invigilator starts the exam and it's time to put into action the techniques that you've practised many times before the big day.

Like all ACCA exams there are 100 marks up for grabs and that's how many you are aiming for. Of course, you are very unlikely to score 100 marks because if you could, then you would be an absolute superstar. However, never set your sights below perfection, as you don't know what to expect on the day. Having such a large margin of safety will help you attain the pass mark of 50 more easily. Saying that, it's not going to be easy – so what do you do first?

Sort out the time

Scan the entire exam, which is likely to be around 12 to 15 pages in length, focusing on the various requirements that you must complete in the allotted time. Although not exactly in an exam format you have experienced before, you will still be challenged by attempting several different but complementary tasks all based on the scenario information contained within the case study.

The first specimen examination comprised only three separate tasks with sub-requirements worth 60 marks, 22 marks and 18 marks respectively, whereas the second specimen examination was formed from five tasks each worth between 18 and 24 marks. So as there is no predictable structure, it is important that time is carefully allocated at the start of the exam. This will ensure that sufficient time is allowed for completing all of the tasks, as it would be a fatal flaw to mess up on your timings and be unable to finish the latter tasks in full.

You will have four hours, or 240 minutes, to read and analyse the case study and requirements, plan your approach to answering each of the tasks, and produce full answers to them all. This may seem quite a long time, but I can assure you that you will need to be on top of your game from minute one if you are going to perform at your best. So, assuming it takes 40 minutes to read through the whole of the case study – and there's more about how you should do that later – then you will have 200 minutes to plan out each of your answers and write them. In simpler terms, this gives you two minutes for every one of the 100 marks you are targeting, but as there are only 80 technical marks on the exam, this effectively increases to 2½ minutes per mark. This is because the 20 professional marks will be earned in the way you construct and present your answers, not for writing additional content.

So, let's consider the two specimen examinations, as examples, and how best to apportion the time in line with the mark allocation. The two diagrams below illustrate how the four hours would need to be managed to allow a candidate to develop and maintain a constant scoring rate over the whole exam.

Of course, this is dependent on being able to read and understand the scenario and requirements fully within 40 minutes, and it's certainly advisable not to rush this exercise. So, if you need more time, take it but reallocate the remaining time proportionally over the 100 marks. However, with extensive practice you should be able to complete the reading within the target of 40 minutes.

The approximate structure and recommended time allocation for each of the two specimen examinations are given in Tables 1a) and 1b) below:

Table 1a) Specimen 1

SPECIMEN EXAM 1				
Time plan	Marks		Mins	
	Tech	Prof		
Reading	0		40	
Task 1	a) i)	15	37	
	ii)	12	+4	30
	b)	12	+2	30
	c)	6	+2	15
	d)	5	+2	12
Task 2	a)	6	+2	15
	b) i)	5	+2	12
	ii)	5	+2	12
Task 3	a)	9	+2	23
	b)	5	+2	12
	80	20	240	

Table 1b) Specimen 2

SPECIMEN EXAM 2				
Time plan	Marks		Mins	
	Tech	Prof		
Reading	0		40	
Task 1	a)	8	+2	20
	b)	6	+2	15
Task 2	a)	12	+2	30
	b)	8	+2	20
Task 3	a)	8	+2	20
	b)	6	+2	15
Task 4	a)	8	+2	20
	b)	8	+2	20
Task 5	a)	8	+2	20
	b)	8	+2	20
	80	20	240	

To effectively read the 12+ pages of case study information, you must thoroughly understand all that is contained within it, evaluating and linking all pieces of relevant information to the requirements. You should start to think about the implications of the information that you are reading, and mentally compile a big picture of the organisation and the issues it is currently facing.

Clearly there is no advantage by skimming through the pages, as you are going to have to read them again anyway. However, it is advisable to firstly review each of the requirements before you get into the detail of the scenario, as this ensures that you have the requirements in mind when you're reading through the examination, and so you can distinguish between the more and less relevant information provided. The actual exam is in hard copy format [at least for the time being] so you

can highlight and annotate those areas of text that you consider to be useful to answering the questions. This makes the information more easily identifiable when you are producing your answers, and avoids you wasting time by frantically searching for pieces of data you recall reading earlier.

Although I'm not going to suggest the best way of marking up your paper, as we all have own preferred systems, I would guard against over annotation. I could well imagine a candidate entering the exam hall with the full set of coloured highlighter pens and using a different colour for each question. This might seem a logical system but if the candidate is then tempted to over annotate the exam paper it could end up resembling a piece of abstract art. Remember if you annotate everything you have annotated nothing – so be selective and prioritise appropriately when marking up the paper.

Analysing the requirements

I suggested earlier that the first parts of the examination which should be read need to be the requirements. The requirements need to be systematically analysed so that you know exactly what you are being tasked to do.

Remember that there will be no specific guidance as to particular theories/models/methods or approaches you should use in answering the questions – it is your decision and you can draw from your knowledge of the Strategic Business Leader syllabus itself, or even on your previous knowledge from exams taken in the Applied Knowledge and Applied Skills examinations.

QUESTION 2 A)

From the second specimen exam states:

Alex Reed has asked you to prepare a report for the Rail Co. Trust Board which:

- A** Evaluates the implications of the findings of the passenger survey results and reviews the actual and relative performance of Rail Co. over the last three years.

(12 marks)

Professional skills marks are available for demonstrating *analysis* skills in reviewing the information presented in the spreadsheet.

(2 marks)

The first thing to note is that in the role of assistant auditor to Alex Reed, you are required to prepare a report, so a specific answer format is required. Hopefully you will have practiced compiling reports [and other communication tools] in preparation for the exam, so this will be second nature to you. Then you should note the target audience for your report; the board of the company. Therefore, the tone and content must be suited to strategic decision makers and pitched at an appropriate level. Care should be taken to avoid the use of unnecessary jargon which the diverse board members would be unfamiliar with,

but at the same time you must not approach it too simplistically or appear in any way condescending.

The requirement opens with the verb ‘evaluate’, which has several definitions depending on the context of the question, but in this instance, could be considered to mean: judge or determine the significance, worth or quality of the passenger survey results. Candidates should realise that there are around 10 regular question verbs that could be used in the exam, so you should become familiar with all their meanings as they are subtly different.

While reading the requirement, you should note the inclusion of the word ‘and’, as this indicates to you that there are two separate tasks to complete. The second task of this requirement is to review the performance of the company over a defined time period, and it would be easy to forget this if you do not take great care when reading the question. As the total technical marks allocated are 12 and there two sub-requirements it would be sensible to allocate each 6 marks and develop your answer accordingly. However, it might be that you might anticipate a mark allocation that skews slightly in favour of one sub-requirement over the other, but under exam pressure it is advisable to keep your approach to mark allocation simple and consistent. This is the safer approach, because unless it is very obvious from the difference in intellectual levels attached to each separate requirement within one part question, the examining team will usually allocate marks evenly between the two.

Finally, this requirement attracts an additional two professional marks for demonstrating analysis skills. These extra marks are not awarded for additional content as mentioned earlier, but on how you approach the question and present your answer. Competently investigating, enquiring and considering the information provided in the passenger survey will allow you to produce an answer that demonstrates the analytical skills expected from a professional accountant; this will earn you both marks.

Planning

During your studies, you will come across several mnemonics to help you remember specific parts of the syllabus that might be useful in the exam.

I have another, the 5Ps, to remind you about the importance of planning your answer, which stands for **Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance** – and it's most definitely true. There is always the temptation to start answering the question as soon as you can, but unless you have planned a suitable structure, you are quite likely to deviate from the point and start to waffle. The method you should adopt in planning is the one which suits you best and may involve you making notes or an answer plan on your answer booklet beforehand.

The plan must accurately reflect the questions, so by analysing the requirement you will be able to write some headings that will give structure to your answer. Using the requirement earlier this could be structured as illustrated below in Table 2.

The blank bullet points should then be populated with the findings you have drawn from the analysis, using suitable supporting information from the scenario and exhibits and the application of relevant syllabus knowledge. These would then be sufficiently expanded to produce the finished answer.

TABLE 2

Example answer plan for Q2a) in the 2nd Specimen examination.

Report	
To:	Rail Co. Trust Board
From:	Assistant auditor [your stated role]
Subject:	Evaluation of the passenger survey results and reviews the performance of Rail Co.
Introduction	
Evaluation of passenger survey results	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪ 	
Performance Review	
Actual	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪ 	
Relative performance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪ 	
Conclusions	
Appendix: Analysis of results	

The answer itself

You should always work on the premise that you should not start writing until you have planned what you will say and in which order you will say it or how you will structure it. However, in this exam there are two aspects you need to bear in mind when you are writing your answer, the technical content and the professional skills to be demonstrated.

You must always avoid any temptation to make any irrelevant points, repeat the question or pad out your answer in any way; instead attempt to write as much as you can but using as few words as possible. The exam is not an exercise in volume, but assesses the quality of the answer produced. The ability to write concise but accurate and complete answers is a skill that should be practiced as it will save you time on the day of the exam and result in far better quality answers.

Obviously if a prescribed format, such as a report or email is required, then this should be used. However, all of your sentences should be short and to the point. You should aim to write between two and four sentences in a paragraph to develop each point you wish to make in sufficient depth. This will be enough content to demonstrate and apply relevant syllabus knowledge, using the information contained within the scenario, and should secure you around 2 marks per point. Leave space between the paragraphs as it makes the answer easier to read, and mark. Additionally, if you have compiled some supporting numerical analysis, such as that in the requirement we have been considering above, this should be referred to in the body of your answer and expanded appropriately.

In terms of structure, it can be very helpful to include headings and sub-headings, beyond those already in the plan, if they allow the target audience [and the marker of course] to easily navigate their way through your answer. This also suggests a professional and organised approach to dealing with the complex array of business problems contained in the exam, which will undoubtedly impress the marker.

There are five professional skills that can be examined, and all of them will be tested in every exam, although the mark allocation for each may be different. However, you must understand the meanings of each skill by referring to Section I of the Strategic Business Leader syllabus, which provides clear guidance on three discrete aspects of each skill. There will always be 20 marks allocated to professional skills, and performing well professionally, may well be the difference between passing and failing the exam. So, spend plenty of time practicing questions that require a demonstration of each skill, reviewing your response against the meaning defined by ACCA to check you've got it right! There are plenty of such examples and guidance about professional skills marks on the ACCA website and being published in the Approved publishers texts and practice and revision kits.

Summing up

Obviously, it is essential that you study the syllabus sufficiently to ensure that you have all the knowledge necessary to answer any question posed in the exam.

Remember, as mentioned earlier, that knowledge brought forward from your Applied Knowledge or Applied Skills exams may also be useful to you in undertaking Strategic Business Leader tasks. Once you are confident of this, it is time to practice exam standard questions. Practise under timed conditions is essential to prepare you to manage this in the exam hall.

Master the following techniques that have been covered in this article:

- time management;
- effective reading;
- clear planning;
- concise business writing; and
- Professional skills.

The Strategic Business Leader exam is not going to be an easy challenge for you, but with time and effort and good examination technique, you can certainly pass this exam and do well in it and that should be very satisfying indeed. The skills you will apply during this examination and bring forward from the ethics and professional skills module will prepare you well for your future career as a Chartered Certified Accountant and ACCA member.

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