



# A 'How to' Guide - Tips for Exam Success

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## **Introduction**

This document provides support, advice and guidance on how you should attempt IBMS qualifications that have written or microscopy examinations as part of the assessment process. These include the IBMS Diploma of Expert Practice (DEP), Higher Specialist Diploma (HSD) and Advanced Specialist Diploma (ASD) qualifications.

## **Support Available**

Before undertaking the exams as part of the portfolio requirement for these qualifications, candidates are expected to show evidence of attendance at relevant courses and training sessions. Local employers may offer these but in addition the following support is available for specific qualifications:

### **Higher Specialist Diploma (HSD)**

The IBMS holds candidate preparation days to support those undertaking the HSD. These events are not mandatory but as part of the agenda for the event you will go over past exam questions with IBMS examiners and be provided with advice on how to construct the HSD portfolio. This offers a good opportunity to understand what they are expecting in the answers to the exam questions. The event also provides you with a chance to network with others undertaking the HSD.

### **Cervical Cytology and Non-Gynaecological Cytology, Histological Dissection, Histopathology Reporting Qualifications**

The North of England Pathology Screening and Education Centre (NEPSEC) holds events that supports candidates undertaking other IBMS qualifications such as the Diploma of Expert Practice/Advanced Specialist Diploma (DEP/ASD) in Non-Gynaecological Cytology, ASD in Histopathology Reporting and the DEP in Histological Dissection. These events provide information on what should be included in the portfolio for the qualification and examples of exam questions. The Cytology and Reporting events go over microscopy slides that you can expect to see in the exam.

## **Exam Technique**

### **Practice Makes Perfect**

You may have excellent subject knowledge and a wide range of experience but if you have a poor examination technique your marks will not reflect this. No amount of advice and guidance can make up for a lack of preparedness or knowledge, but it is important to remind yourself that there are things you can do to help you succeed in the exam.

It may be several years since you last sat an exam and day to day you are probably used to writing on a keyboard rather than with a pen. This means that your hand and wrist muscles will probably not be used to writing for long periods of time. It is therefore a good idea to practice writing by hand as you will not be able to type your exam. It is also worth noting that the examiners will not be able to award you marks if they can't read your handwriting so practice writing legibly and in pen.



You should make use of the past exam papers that are available on the IBMS website. This will also help you familiarise yourself with the type of questions asked in the exam and what the paper looks like before you enter the exam room. You can use these past papers to practice reading and understanding the questions that might be asked and to practice writing timed answers - although you will be doing so without the additional pressure that comes from being in the exam room.

### **Read the instructions**

Although this sounds obvious, and it is something that you will have been told many times before, it is worth reiterating here.



Institute of  
Biomedical  
Science

**Higher Specialist Diploma**  
**Examination 2019**  
**Paper 2**  
**Generic questions**  
**120 minutes**  
**Attempt 3 questions**  
**1 Mandatory Question in Section A**  
**2 Questions out of Four (One from Section B and one from Section C)**

Instructions to candidates

1. Record your candidate number, qualification title and where appropriate the discipline and examination paper number on the front sheet of the answer booklet
2. Record your candidate number and the page number in the spaces provided on the answer sheets
3. Begin each new answer on a new page
4. Write on one side of the answer sheet only
5. Each question is worth 100 marks

Recently there have been several instances in the HSD exam where candidates have been asked to answer **one** question from each of the **three** sections but in the exam have panicked and attempted **two** questions in **one** section, **one** question from another section and have **failed** to attempt any questions from another section. Candidates who did this immediately **lost a third** of the marks available for that paper. In addition, the examiners were only available to mark the first two relevant questions.

Similarly, on the second paper for the DEP in Histological Dissection, where candidates are required to answer **six** out of **eleven** optional questions some candidates have only provided answers to **five** questions. This may have been because they ran out of time, did not read the instructions on the front of the paper or did not know the answer to any further questions on the paper but whatever the reason it resulted in the candidates losing 17% of the available marks for the paper.

### **Choose the questions to answer and the order in which to do so**

Plan your answers at the start of exam. Read all the questions that appear on the paper and then select the order in which you will attempt the questions.

If you have to choose which questions to answer, this is probably the most defining moment in the whole exam process. To do yourself justice, it is vital that you **read all** the questions carefully. You may find it a good idea to do a quick reckoning as to what questions you think you will be able to provide your best answers for. Although this is not necessarily an easy task, it is much better than answering the first question you like the look of and know something about. Just because the question is on a theme that might interest you it does not mean that you will tackle it well in exam conditions. In addition, you may find that there is another question later in the paper that you know even more about and can answer well in the time pressured environment of an exam.

It is **normally** the case that you will be able to answer the questions in any order and therefore it is good practice to attempt those that you are more comfortable with first. Doing such questions first can provide a useful boost to your confidence and can help to reduce potential feelings of panic that might arise when you are looking at other questions on the paper.

If you do what you feel are the easier questions first it is likely you will spend less time than average on these. This means that you will be ahead of schedule - which will give you more time to answer what you feel are the more difficult questions.

### **Answering the question that is actually set!**

When answering the question stick to what is being asked of you. Candidates have, on several occasions, presented an answer that demonstrated a good degree of knowledge and understanding on a topic but missed the fundamental point of the question.

In preparation for your exam, it will be good practice to have attempted questions used in previous exams, but you may be tempted to let this dictate the substance of the question that

you answer and therefore you should check that you understand the precise requirements of the question that you are attempting. You cannot be awarded marks for an answer that is nothing to do with the question.

### **Content of answers**

Be specific and not too general - most questions will be more precise and narrow in concept and/or scope than you think and therefore it is vital that you look for the keywords that will provide the outline for your answer. Do not be afraid to be controversial, as your own way of looking at the problem may be better than a stereotypical or formulaic answer. However, where the question allows for this type of response you need to be able to justify your approach.

Examiners do not want to see unsubstantiated opinions. For example: 'I think', 'I understand' or 'I believe' without any adequate explanation, argument or supporting evidence. Remember also that you should not overemphasise or focus on procedures or practice that are commonplace within your laboratory.

You should be able to refer to the main theorists, researchers, key reports, guidance documents, procedures, policies, guidelines and legislation et cetera and be aware of techniques used elsewhere rather than just those that are used within your place of work.

When the examiners mark your exam papers, they are not going to expect you to be able to recall the full title, page number and publisher of a particular book where you may have read something that backs up your argument. However, knowing the authors of key texts and the dates of publications of key guidelines and reports such as Francis Report (2013), NHS Long Term Plan (2019) or the latest set of Standards for a particular discipline will enhance your answer and the marks you are awarded.

### **Key Words and Phrases Used in Exam Questions**

It is good practice to read and then reread the question carefully to make sure you clearly understand what the question is asking and what is required of you. Have a look at the keywords in the question as these will indicate how the question should be answered. The following table provides information on keywords and phrases used in exam questions and what they require you to do.

<b>Analyse</b>	You are asked to determine / explain the constituent parts of an issue or a set of data.
<b>Annotated Diagram</b>	If you are asked to draw an annotated diagram - draw the diagram as requested and include appropriate labelling. The examiners are not examining your artistic skills but are instead looking for a diagram with the key features clearly and accurately labelled. The number of marks for the question will give you a good indication of the number of features the examiners are expecting to see labelled.

<b>Assess</b>	Judge the worth of something (i.e. the extent to which it is true or of its value). You may have to consider a statement, or several options and/or opinions. You need to weigh these up and come to a justified conclusion about appropriateness, effectiveness or validity. In your response you should try to cite relevant research or opinions – it is not about your opinion only.
<b>Calculate</b>	Generate a numerical answer – you may or may not be required to show your working.
<b>Comment</b>	When asked to comment, for example, on a set of results in a case study, you are being asked for your opinion and should explain why you think what you do.
<b>Compare</b>	For these questions you should identify both the similarities (as well as the differences) between the things you have been asked to compare. In particular, you should explain the reasons for the similarities between the things and state whether any of these are more important than others.
<b>Contrast</b>	This is different to ‘compare’ because for these questions you should draw attention to the differences between the things and should state any of the differences which you think are particularly important.
<b>Critically</b>	This will often appear before ‘assess’, ‘evaluate’ etc. You are being asked to examine the issue from the point of a view of a critic. You should focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the stated opinion, statement, theory, view etc. and should also refer to alternative perspectives. You need to provide to the examiner with a convincing argument.
<b>Criticise</b>	You are being asked to judge the merit or worthiness of the issue being discussed. You should explain your reasons and include both favourable and unfavourable comments.
<b>Define</b>	You are required to set down the precise meaning of a word or phrase. You should explain if there are different interpretations to the definition.
<b>Describe</b>	You are required to provide sufficient detail so that the examiners can clearly see your understanding of the subject matter.
<b>Discuss</b>	<p>These questions are asking for you to share your views on the subject or issue. You should put forward opinions (ideally backed up by research or evidence) both for and against (balance) but these opinions may not have equal weighting.</p> <p>Remember to come to a conclusion and make a final standpoint on the particular issue (such questions would normally include ‘justify your answer’ in their wording).</p>
<b>Evaluate</b>	You should make a judgement on the issue/topic and explain your opinion/reasoning behind this. You should provide information on both sides of the issue before coming to a conclusion based on those arguments.
<b>Explain</b>	You should clarify a point, issue or a topic by giving a detailed account as to how and why it occurs, or what is meant by the use of a specific term in a particular context. Your writing should have clarity so that complex procedures or sequences of events can be understood, defining key terms where appropriate, and be substantiated with relevant research.

<b>Illustrate</b>	This is similar to explain - such a question will normally involve providing a clear description and will make use of diagrams, graphs, tables and statistical information.
<b>Justify</b>	You need to give reasons for the worthiness/validity of an idea, standpoint or view that you have on an issue or why you would take a particular course of action. To provide balance, you should also discuss other views or other courses of action, but you should explain why you think they are not appropriate.
<b>List</b>	Simply list in bullet form the points that are relevant
<b>Outline</b>	In such a question you need to provide only the essential and main points related to the issue. You do not need to go into depth.
<b>Propose</b>	You should suggest, with reasons, why a particular set of results has occurred, or the steps that should be taken in the future to solve a problem or issue.
<b>Review</b>	This is similar to evaluate or assess - you should be examining a particular subject. You might, for example, be asked to review the success of a set of guidelines in ensuring that something happens. You would need to explain what the guidelines were attempting to do and with evidence you would need to explore whether this had happened or not and the reasons for this.
<b>Summarise</b>	This is similar to outline. You should stick briefly to the essential points for example on a piece of research. These answers will be brief and will get the key points across to the examiner in a succinct manner.

### How much to write?

Where the question is broken up into different sub-questions look at the number of marks awarded for each of the sub-questions. There is no point in writing several paragraphs when a question only carries five marks. Equally if there is a question that is worth 20 marks, the examiners are not going to be able to award you full marks for your answer if you only write a couple of sentences, no matter how concisely you are able to write.

### Style of Writing, Nomenclature

As well as the aforementioned comments about practising writing by hand remember that an examination is a formal assessment, so it is essential that you do not answer your questions using text speak, colloquialisms or slang. Examiners will not accept writing of this kind.

It is also important to try to avoid using jargon and acronyms and contraction of words unless they are in very common usage. Equally, whilst it may be useful to use some abbreviations it is essential that you write them out in full the first time that you use them.

For essay questions you **must not**, as some candidates have, simply write a series of bullet points under different topic headings. It is important for there to be a clear beginning to your answer, but you should not take long to get to the subject matter of the question (the body of your essay). Also, do not forget to put a conclusion to your response (although you do not need to use the headings of introduction and conclusion).

In an exam situation you are not going to present your work as neatly as you would when you had time to prepare your answer. A messy, badly written response, without paragraphs or a logical progression is going to be extremely difficult to read and understand, therefore, difficult for the examiners to mark. In some circumstances bullet points can provide a reasonable way of setting out a lot of information in a short period of time but unless required by the question, providing a list of bullets will not answer the question that has been set and will only result in a small number of marks.

Pay attention to spelling and appropriate terminology and nomenclature. The examiners will not expect every word to be spelt correctly but specific terminology related to the subject such as medical terminology and the names of microorganisms should be written correctly. If you cannot spell words that are associated with your particular discipline properly then it is likely that you have not revised in a satisfactory manner.

## Exam Strategies



### The Exam Dates - Practicalities

Try to have a good night's sleep before the exam. Don't stay up attempting to do last minute revision. This doesn't work and instead you will just end up being tired in the exam which will affect your performance. It is best to avoid using laptops, gaming machines, tablets or smartphones for at least an hour before you go to bed. The type of light that is used to illuminate such devices can disrupt sleeping patterns. You may want to consider having a warm bath or shower or undertaking some relaxation exercises.

If you have to travel a long distance to get to the exam centre it is better if you stay in a hotel that is relatively close by. When it comes to the day of the exam allow yourself plenty of time to get to the exam venue. It is better to be there early than late and we all know what public transport can be like!

Make sure you have the necessary candidate information with you. This should include your exam itinerary letter, which will include your candidate number, and some form of formal identification (e.g. driving licence or work pass) as this is likely to be checked by the invigilators.

However knowledgeable and well prepared you are for any examination it is difficult to avoid being nervous when you arrive at the exam centre. Remember that the other candidates will also be feeling the same.

### **Special Arrangements**

If you think you are entitled to special arrangements in the exam (for example, additional time for a defined condition such as dyslexia) it is important to notify the IBMS Head of Examinations (via [examinations@ibms.org](mailto:examinations@ibms.org)) as soon as you have been informed that you have passed the portfolio stage.

### **Equipment**

You should also ensure that you have the appropriate equipment for the exam such as pens, pencils, ruler and eraser. For some exams you may also be required to use a calculator so check that you have one that works prior to the exam. For the microscopy exams you will normally have a choice of bringing your own microscope or using one from the centre where the exams are being held. For the Cytology exams you will be given time prior to the exam starting to set up your microscope.

### **In the Exam Room**

Once you are in the exam room listen to any instructions given by the lead invigilator. Try to remain calm. Having tension is perfectly normal so check your breathing and attempt to minimise any distractions. Relax any tense muscles and stick to your time plan. Try to reduce anxiety by thinking positively and reminding yourself of all that you have done in preparation for the exam.

There will be no trick questions. Don't waste time and energy judging the merit or wording of a question. Instead, focus on what has been asked and keep track of the time in the exam making sure that you answer all the questions you need to answer. There should be a visible clock in the examination room but it would be wise to have your own watch (however, this must not be a smart device).

Sometimes your exam might not go according to plan. Keep these strategies in mind to increase the marks you can gain for your performance:

### **Blank Mind**

Many candidates fear that this will happen during the exam. If it happens to you:

- Put your pen down, take a deep breath, sit back and take a moment to go over what you have written so far
- Jot down anything you know about the topic on a separate piece of paper
- Leave a gap and move on to the next question
- Come back to the question before the end of the exam

### **Short of Time**

- Don't panic - divide the remaining time by the number of questions that you still have to answer
- Be economical - in order to maximise the marks that the examiners award try to get your main points down for each of the remaining questions

### **Losing the Plot**

- Stop writing and re-read the question
- Look at the plan you have made and decide whether there is more for you to say or if you are just re-writing a point you have already made, deviating from the question that was actually asked or uncertain as to what to say next.

### **Once the exam is over**

Once the exam has finished, and of course this is easier said than done, do your best to forget about it. It is perfectly natural to want to discuss how the exam went with other candidates who have sat the exam. No two exam experiences are the same and just because they say that they wrote something different to what you did doesn't mean that they are right or you are wrong or vice versa. In any case, you won't be able to change anything that you have written at that point. The result will be what it will be.

## Advice for Specific IBMS Exams

### Microscopy Exams



If you are undertaking an Institute microscopy examination, remember that these are all real patient cases. The slides will reflect things that are seen in the laboratory in day to day / regular practice. The slides will have been selected by the examiners from the appropriate conjoint board and would have been chosen particularly to test your understanding and knowledge of the issues in the exam.

Each case consists of stained slide(s) with summary clinical information. Candidates are expected to prepare full reports, including case discussion where relevant, and are required to indicate their diagnostic opinion.

For the DEP examinations although an 'equivocal' tick box is included on the answer sheet for each case for quality and objectivity, all cases within the practical examinations have a correct answer of either 'benign' or 'malignant'. The 'equivocal' box is therefore purely for candidates' uncertainty and although using this option will mitigate an incorrect response it will not achieve a pass mark for the case in question.

Candidates are reminded that as examiners hold patient safety as the priority only a certain level of inaccuracy is allowed. In the practical microscopy exams failure to distinguish across the benign/malignant boundary in a number of cases will result in failure of that paper with no leeway to compensate no matter how well other cases are answered.

### Pre-Seen Questions in HSD Exam

For the Higher Specialist Diploma (HSD) where there are mandatory pre-seen / pre-released questions it is essential that you use the time from the release of the questions to the exam date to prepare your answer. If you do not you are wasting the opportunity to gain better marks for your response than you would get if you saw the question for the first time in the exam. This planning **might** include speaking to colleagues about the question – although do

not assume that what they say is correct – or researching and reading around the topic posed in the question.

It may be tempting for the pre-seen questions to try to write the answers and then learn it by heart ahead of the exam. However, it is unlikely that this will give you the best result. This is because you will inevitably make some mistakes in attempting to re-write it and in the exam room you will be writing by hand to a specified time limit. This means you will not be able to write as much as you would or in the same way as you were able to do when preparing for the exam at home.

One way of approaching the seen questions is to firstly read, analyse and research the essay question or case study as if you had been including it as part of the portfolio requirements. Once you have done that, write a plan as to how you would approach the question and then draft, by hand, a response checking your notes and plans as you do so. You can then write a response, keeping to the time you will have in the exam, without checking your notes. After that you can compare your two responses for anything that you missed or is unclear so that you can then fill in the gaps. This will mean that when you go into the exam room you will be able to write a response on the topic which you will now be familiar with rather than trying to remember an idealised answer.

Whatever you do in advance, please note that you cannot take your prepared answers into the exam room and any attempt to do so will result in you being excluded from the exams.

When it comes to exams remember that these pre-seen questions are worth the same amount of marks as the other questions on the paper. If you have prepared your answers you are very likely to be able to write more on these questions than you will be able to do on the other questions on the paper. However, no matter how much or how well you write on that question you will not get the marks you need if you do not leave time to answer the other questions. Ensure you answer the other questions on the paper and plan your time in the exam to enable you to do so.

### **Case Study Paper in HSD Exam**

It is normally the case that you will be able to answer the questions in any order, however for the HSD case study paper it is important that, within each case, you answer the questions in the order that they appear on the exam paper. This is because it is likely that more information will be provided later in the case that will alter your perspective on the case and would change your answer to the question posed. You should answer the questions based on the details that you have at that point in the case rather than with the additional information given to you later in the case. This is so that you provide sequential responses from the information provided as you progress through the case.

**Good luck in your IBMS exams!**

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## **About this document**

**Document title:** A 'How to' Guide – Tips for Exam Success

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**Version:** Version 1.0

**Active date:** January 2021

**Review date:** December 2022

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