Preparing to Pass IFE Examinations

Guidance for Candidates

Introduction

This guidance has been developed to assist candidates preparing to take the IFE's examinations.

Candidates who are unsuccessful in IFE examinations are generally unsuccessful for one of the following reasons:

- not providing enough relevant information to address the scale of the question.
- not responding at the appropriate level.
- misreading the question/not following instructions.
- not conducting sufficient study prior to the exam.
- making mistakes in allocating time to questions.
- providing irrelevant information.

This guide aims to assist candidates in developing their understanding of the way in which IFE examinations are structured and to assist them in preparing to answer examination questions.

Getting Started

The IFE publishes all examination specifications/syllabuses on the website – please see IFE qualifications. Candidates should always view the specifications/syllabuses as the starting point as these documents set out what might be tested in examinations and signals the level of the questions that may be asked.

Past papers/sample questions are published on the IFE website and candidates are advised to look at these papers and also any examiner reports available. Past papers/sample questions will provide guidance on the types of questions that may be asked whilst the examiner reports provide more detailed guidance on the way in which the questions were answered by candidates who took the examinations and include information on the responses that were required.

Candidates should also see the list of recommended reading provided for each qualification provided within the specification/syllabus document.

Tip: Candidates are strongly recommended to start preparing for examinations as soon as possible. The most common reason for failing examinations is that candidates do not provide enough information in their responses to secure marks – candidates need to be familiar with the syllabus and to have undertaken study relevant to each part of the syllabus in order to be able to attain the maximum number of marks available.

Requirements at Different Examination Levels

The level (i.e., level 2, 3 or 4) assigned to different qualifications signals the broad level of difficulty and therefore the depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding that candidates will need to demonstrate in order to achieve the qualification. Descriptions of different levels and examples of other qualifications at the same level are provided in the table at the end of this section.

The IFE's examinations are aligned to two different types of framework i.e.:

- Job roles e.g., crew manager/watch manager/station manager/fire safety adviser etc

AND

- The Regulated Qualification Framework (specifically levels 2, 3 and 4).

When examinations are developed, examiners set questions that reflect the specified level of difficulty and marking schemes are also designed to reflect these levels.

Candidates should familiarise themselves with the level of difficulty and the associated scope of qualifications by:

- Identifying the level of the qualification and the implications for the level of difficulty of questions - the level of each qualification is included in the qualification's title e.g., Level 3 Diploma in Fire Science and Fire Safety. In broad terms, the level of difficulty increases as the level increases e.g., at level 2, candidates will be expected to demonstrate knowledge but at level 3 they will be expected to demonstrate that they can apply more detailed knowledge in different situations and at level 4 they will be expected to draw on in-depth understanding in complex and broad situations.
- Finding out about the purpose and aims of the qualification - the range and depth of questions will reflect the level of authority/difficulty associated with the specific job roles/tasks relevant to the people the qualification is designed for. Questions in the Level 3 and Level 4 Certificates often specify that the question should be addressed from a particular perspective e.g., as the officer-in-charge or as a fire safety adviser. Candidates should take this perspective (and the associated level of the task) into account when responding to the question.
- Finding out about the learning outcomes/objectives of the examination - At unit (examination) level, the learning outcomes specified in the syllabus provide a summary of the knowledge, understanding and skills of successful candidates. An example of a learning outcome for a unit within the Level 3 Certificate is: "evaluate risk and identify appropriate action in order to preserve the safety of firefighters and members of the public." This information signals to candidates that examination questions will be set at a level that enables candidates to demonstrate that they can assess and evaluate situations.

Levels of Difficulty

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) has set out descriptions of qualification and component levels within the Regulated Qualification Framework. The level descriptors set out the expectations of individuals achieving qualifications at each level. These descriptors are set out in the table that follows.

Level	Knowledge Descriptor (the holder…)	Skills Descriptor (the holder can…)	Qualifications at the same level of difficulty
2	Has knowledge and understanding of facts, procedures, and ideas in an area of study or field of work to complete well-defined tasks and address straightforward problems. Can interpret relevant information and ideas. Is aware of a range of information that is relevant to the area of study or work.	Select and use relevant cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined, generally routine tasks and address straightforward problems. Identify, gather, and use relevant information to inform actions. Identify how effective actions have been.	♦ GCSEs at grades C-A* ♦ NVQs at Level 2 ♦ BTEC awards, certificates, and diplomas at level 2 ♦ IFE Level 2 Certificate in Fire Science, Operations and Safety ♦ IFE Level 2 Certificate in Passive Fire Protection
3	Has factual, procedural, and theoretical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to complete tasks and address problems that while well-defined, may be complex and non-routine. Can interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas. Is aware of the nature of the area of study or work. Is aware of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.	Identify, select, and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills, methods and procedures to address problems that while well-defined, may be complex and non-routine. Use appropriate investigation to inform actions. Review how effective methods and actions have been.	♦ AS/A levels ♦ Advanced Extension Awards ♦ International Baccalaureate ♦ NVQs at level 3 ♦ IFE Level 3 Certificate in Fire Science, Operations, Fire Safety and Management ♦ IFE Level 3 Certificate in Passive Fire Protection ♦ IFE Level 3 Diploma in Fire Science and Fire Safety

4	Has practical, theoretical, or technical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to address problems that are well defined but complex and non-routine. Can analyse, interpret, and evaluate relevant information and ideas. Is aware of the nature of approximate scope of the area of study or work. Has an informed awareness of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.	Identify, adapt, and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills to inform actions and address problems that are complex and non-routine while normally fairly well-defined. Review the effectiveness and appropriateness of methods, actions, and results.	♦ Certificates of Higher Education ♦ NVQs at level 4 ♦ Key Skills level 4 ♦ IFE Level 4 Diploma in Fire Science and Fire Safety

Approaching Examination Questions

Examination questions provide candidates with instructions on what they need to do in order to answer the question in an appropriate manner. Candidates should note:

- the number of marks allocated to the question and, if relevant, each of its sub-parts.
- the command words used e.g., describe, explain, assess.
- specific issues to be addressed, scope and context.

Mark Allocation

The mark allocation for each question is provided on the examination paper. This provides guidance for candidates as to how much time to spend on the different parts of the question i.e., if one section of the question is worth five marks and a second section is worth 15 marks, candidates should allocate their time and structure their responses to reflect the proportion of marks allocated.

The mark allocation also signals the number of different points required in the response. The general rule is that candidates will need to earn each mark that is available by making at least one valid point (i.e., a point that is *relevant and at the right level*) that can be rewarded with a mark.

Some examples of the way that marks may be allocated follows:

- a question that includes the instruction "state three" and indicates that there are three marks available requires candidates to provide three brief relevant points.
- a question that has four marks allocated to it and where the instruction asks for a description of an item or situation will require four relevant and correct descriptive points.

- a question that requires candidates to identify and explain three issues and has six marks allocated will require candidates to identify three relevant issues and then provide further information about each issue.
- a question that requires an assessment of a situation and has eight marks available will require a response that includes eight points relevant to the situation and appropriate for inclusion in an assessment scenario.

Tip: Most candidates who fail IFE examinations fail because they do not provide sufficient points in their responses to capitalise on the marks available; candidates who provide only three substantive points in response to a question with fifteen marks available will secure only three marks and lose the opportunity to secure the other twelve.

Instructions and Command Words

Each question will include instructions as to what is required. There can be more than one requirement in the question and candidates must address all requirements to secure all of the marks – for example, if the question asks candidates to "identify" issues and "assess the implications" candidates should ensure that they do not limit their response to listing issues as this will only partially answer the question and therefore restrict the amount of marks that can be achieved.

The instructions will also help candidates to determine the complexity of the answer that is required – for example, a question that requires candidates to "assess" a situation requires a more considered response than a question that requires only a "list" of points.
A summary of the most common instructions follows, together with a brief guide as to the expectations in terms of responses to these terms:

Term	**Guide to Requirements**
Assess	Review a given situation and draw together all of the key issues in order to draw a conclusion about the way forward e.g., review a particular incident and make a judgement as to what the key risks are and/or what is needed to resolve the situation. In order to assess effectively, candidates will need to draw on relevant knowledge and understanding, providing reasons and evidence for their conclusions.
Calculate	Make a mathematical calculation. Candidates will need to understand and apply appropriate formulae and methods of calculation. Candidates for the Level 3 and Level 4 Certificate papers should always show their working out, as marks are usually available for correct use of formula and/or steps in the calculation process.
Compare	This assumes underpinning knowledge and understanding that will enable candidates to identify specific features/issues. It can require descriptions of similarities and differences or higher-level explanations of relative suitability, effectiveness, or proficiency.

Define	Give an exact meaning or description. Definitions can relate to technical terms or to processes, concepts, or theories.
Describe	Summarise information related to appearance, feature, or structure. Descriptions can relate to roles, objects, and techniques or to complex operations and processes. Responses should demonstrate knowledge. Candidates should always check the question/mark allocation to identify how many points/how much detail is required.
Detail	Describe completely, providing all the facts and, if relevant, itemising or listing in sequence.
Discuss	Present viewpoints/alternatives from various aspects of a subject e.g., discuss the different options available for addressing a particular situation. This assumes in-depth knowledge and understanding which can be drawn on when making relevant points.
Evaluate	Determine/Analyse the value, quality, or importance of something, providing reasons and evidence for conclusions.
Explain	Demonstrate understanding and the ability to link ideas/aspects together e.g., explaining why an object or process delivers a particular outcome or, at higher levels, explaining why a particular process or approach should be adopted to address a given situation – this sometimes requires an analysis.
Identify	Review a situation or object and select the key points/issues. Responses usually require more than a list of single words.
Outline	Provide a brief description or summary, establishing the key points.
State	Clearly specify a point/figure.

Tip: Candidates should be wary of providing responses made up of a list of single words e.g., weather. This approach is rarely appropriate as most questions ask for descriptions/explanations and lists of single words rarely meet this requirement or secure marks.

Specific Issues, Scope and Context

In addition to the command words, candidates should also ensure that they understand the full scope and context of the questions and focus their responses accordingly.

Candidates should determine:

- the specific situation that is being addressed.
- the timeframe associated with the situation i.e., is the situation related to something that is ongoing or is it a post-situation review/debriefing or planning/pre-planning situation?
- the perspective that they should take e.g., as a line manager, fire safety adviser or as an officer-in-charge of an event. This will influence the breadth and level of the response.

- the scope of the situation. In order to determine the scope, candidates need to balance the specific situation with the perspective that they have been asked to take. The number of marks available and/or other sub-sections of the question will also assist in determining the extent of the answer that is required.

Common Errors – and Avoiding Them

The most common errors in examinations are:

- not providing sufficient detail/points to align with the mark allocation shown on the examination paper.
- mis-reading questions e.g., missing the question context or the command words (i.e., providing a brief list of bullet points instead of a full description or explanation).
- making mistakes in allocating time to questions.
- providing irrelevant information.

The errors above can cost candidates many marks and ultimately prevent them from passing the examination. Tips to avoid common errors follow:

<u>Mis-reading questions and not following the instructions</u>

Examples of misreading questions include:

- providing a list of facts/single words when the question has asked for an explanation or discussion of a point. Essentially, the response provided is not at the right level and therefore does not demonstrate sufficient depth of understanding.
- failing to complete everything that is required by the question. This is often the case where candidates are asked to complete two or more tasks e.g., identify specific issues/facts and explain/assess implications. Candidates who only specify issues without explaining them will only be able to attain the proportion of marks allocated to specifying.
- taking a narrow focus in response to one or two words in the question rather than exploring the full breadth of the question e.g., in a question requiring an assessment of risks at a road incident where a rescue is required, candidates may focus on the word "rescue" and write about the rescue procedure, omitting to consider the wider issues such as risks due to other traffic etc.
- missing the specific context. This error is similar to the one above, in that candidates focus on one or two words and fail to identify that the question relates to a specific situation e.g., time-bound, or specific group of people.

Tip: Some candidates find it helpful to underline key words on the question paper to help them focus on the key issues e.g., specific situation/equipment and timeframe. Candidates should identify the command word(s) in the question as well as the situation.

Spending too long on one question or one element (sub-section) of a question

Candidates can be tempted to invest time in providing lengthy responses to questions that ask for information that they are comfortable with. This can lead candidates to write several pages on a question (or sub-question) that is worth a relatively small proportion of the marks available.

Tip: When answering a question with two or more sub-sections, check the mark allocation to ensure that time is allocated in proportion to the marks available. Plan how to use the examination time and keep an eye on time throughout the examination. Level 3 and Level 4 Certificate candidates are required to answer six questions - this is approximately 30 minutes per question, although some of this time should be used for reading the question, planning responses, and reviewing the final response.

Providing responses that are not relevant

Candidates are sometimes tempted to provide the examiner with the information that they know and understand rather than answering the specific question on the examination paper. It is always tempting to try to demonstrate knowledge BUT examiners can only allocate marks for points that are relevant to the question.

Information that is not relevant will not earn marks - and will cost candidates time which could have been used earning marks on other questions. For example, if the question focuses on post-incident activities, answers that describe how to manage an on-going incident will not be relevant.

Tip: Candidates should re-read the question whilst developing their answer to make sure that they continue to stay focussed on the question.

General Points - Best Practice in Approaching the Examination

Planning

Candidates are advised to read the whole question paper thoroughly before they start writing. This will enable them to:

- select (where examinations provide options) the best questions to answer.
- manage their time.
- start the process of reflecting on key points that they need to cover in responses.

When planning responses to individual questions, candidates can use pages at the back of their booklets or use the spare paper provided to draft notes. Candidates may find it helpful to draft out the key points that they wish to include in their responses so that they can ensure that they cover everything they want to include in their response to a particular question. Where candidates draft notes/plans, these will need to be handed in at the end of the examination; candidates should therefore cross out any rough notes that they do not want the examiner to mark.

Presentation of Answers

It is important that examiners are able to read candidates' scripts so handwriting should be legible, and answers should be presented as clearly as possible. It is also helpful to structure responses in a logical and clear way as this will assist the examiner in following thought processes and relevance to the question. Examiners do not assess spelling, grammar, or punctuation. Candidates will not be penalised for errors of this nature.

Although some questions can be answered by lists/tables/diagrams, it is often the case that candidates will need to answer questions by writing full sentences. Candidates should be aware that questions that require explanation, analysis etc. will often need responses in full sentences so that candidates can illustrate the points they identify e.g., 'this is a risk because….'

The use of annotated diagrams may assist in the presentation of some answers. However, candidates should be wary of spending too much time on producing diagrams if this is not specifically required by the question.

International Issues

Where candidates relate their response to a particular code of practice or piece of legislation/regulation that applies in their national context, it is useful to state the legislation/regulation so that examiners can validate if necessary.

Further Information

For further information, past papers, examiner reports, recommended reading lists and free resource materials etc., please see the Qualifications section of the IFE's website - IFE qualifications.