

CII AF exams: 10 ways to pass first time

By Ian Patterson, Founder of the Patterson Group

If you look at the CII AF exam pass rates, they don't look pretty. For the written technical AF exams, these range between only 44% and 50% which suggests that many people would benefit from avoiding some of the key pitfalls.

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As a training firm, we have helped over 6,000 individuals in the last year prepare for the CII exams. Our belief is that many people who sit these exams could be more effective with their study and so this article will explore what working smarter and working harder actually look like. Here are our top 10 tips:

1. **Start early.** Rockefeller, the American industrialist, once explained the secret of his success: 'get up early, work late – and strike oil'. Revising for exams isn't really all that different. For the written technical exams, the CII suggest 150 hours of study (100 hours for AF7) for each AF exam. This suggests that most people will need to invest a serious amount of their time in these exams. It is clear that the earlier you start, the less disruptive it will be.

Most people will have done lots of exams before they sit an AF exam and many will have been successful by 'last-minute cramming'. This is far less likely to work with an AF exam because:

- the technical content of each AF exam is very wide;
- they are level 6 exams and you will have to apply your knowledge, not regurgitate lists, so exam technique becomes more important; *and*
- most AF exams are starting to become less predictable (making it harder to second-guess the areas the exam will cover).

Unfortunately, this means there are no shortcuts. For the October exams, we recommend starting your study in July before the holiday season starts.

2. **Make a plan.** If you start in mid-July, this is around 12 weeks before the October exam. This equates to something like 8 and 12 hours per week (or between 2 – 2 ½ hours per working day). If you leave your study until the beginning of September, you have just six weeks to prepare for your AF exam in October.

Whatever you decide to do, make a plan that structures this revision around work and family commitments. However desperate you are to pass the exam, you must get your life / work / study balance right and allow time for the family and downtime.

3. **Work smarter, not harder.** What I've said so far sounds as if this exam study will take over your life. We don't believe that it has to, nor does it have to be something that always requires dedicated 'study time'. We started producing MP3 material for the CII exams over 21 years ago to help people fit their learning in around their lives; not fit their lives around their study.

The important point here is that success isn't purely about how many hours you do. It's about how effective they are. Scheduling regular 20-30 minute slots of revision is proven to be effective. There are also a wide variety of study options for the AF exams that will suit your preferences - so use them.

4. **Mix up your revision methods.** When you enrol for a CII AF exam, you now get access to the CII's online RevisionMate for the following:
- a CII study text for AF7 or the related Diploma study texts for AF1, 2 and 4
 - case study workbooks for AF1, 2 and 4;
 - multiple choice practice questions that enable you to test your knowledge; *and*
 - a host of past exam papers.

Relying solely on one form of revision is rarely a recipe for success, so use a range of different methods that work for you.

5. **Know the exam.** This sounds like stating the obvious but, in our experience, many people only look at past exam papers shortly before they sit the exam. We believe that you should start using past exam papers at the start of your revision, not at the end of it. Complete at least one exam paper, under exam conditions, at the start of your revision. This will be painful, and most people will score badly. But it's a price worth paying because it will give you a good idea about your current level of knowledge, where your gaps are, and how good your technique is.

It is also useful because each of the AF exams have some themes that get examined frequently. For example, AF1 will typically have between 35-50 marks for calculation style questions so be prepared for these. If I stick with AF1, it is highly likely that there will be some type of question around each of the three personal taxes: income tax, CGT and IHT along with a question on trusts. Bankruptcy and LPAs also feature regularly. These are all points that you can pick up by looking at the past AF1 exam papers that are supplied to you on RevisionMate.

6. **Know yourself.** This is linked a little to the previous point. For most people, the knowledge from their day job will help with the exam - but this will rarely be enough on its own. Be clear where your technical knowledge is both weak and strong. Focus your revision on the areas where your knowledge is weakest and where it is likely to be examined.
7. **It's not all about knowledge.** In our experience, many people who fail an AF exam by a small margin have just as much knowledge as some people that pass. So it isn't just about knowledge, technique is also important.

AF exams aren't generally about remembering lists; they are about applying knowledge. To do this successfully, you have to know what the CII exam questions are asking you to do and apply the information provided to you in the case study. The information provided isn't there to just pad out the information or to confuse you - it's there for a reason, so use it! You can only truly learn what a type of question is asking you to do, and how to lay out your answer, by completing past exam papers under exam conditions.

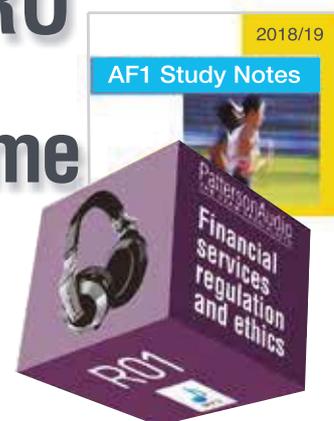
8. **Learn by doing.** You are more likely to learn from activities that require you to actively do things, rather than passive activities such as just reading. So write summary notes, complete past exam papers, get a partner or colleague to test you on an area you are unfamiliar with, or use Brainscape (this can be downloaded free and allows you to make electronic version of index cards that can be used on an iPad).

9. **Little and often.** Some people think that revision is only 'proper revision' when they spend several hours doing it. Research tells us that nothing can be further from the truth. You learn better by learning in short 20-30 minute bursts. If you take this on board, this means that effective revision needs to be regular, and fitted in around other activities in small doses.

10. **Build in treats or rewards.** Some people like revision; most don't. If you fall into the latter camp, then make sure you give yourself recognition and reward for your commitment to the cause.

It is a fact of life that few people go into an AF exam over prepared. After all, a level 6 exam is degree standard: completing this successfully after only a few hours' work just isn't going to happen for most people. So there are no real shortcuts when sitting an AF exam - you will have to put in the time and not just rely on your day job to get you through. That said, it's also about effectiveness and not just effort. Ultimately, success is about working hard, but also smarter.

Unique support material to help you pass your AF or RO exam first time



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