



UPSC CIVIL SERVICES MAINS 2026 · SOLVED

Essay Paper

Model Answers

Every question of the paper written on 21 August 2026, answered in full: the examiner's demand decoded first, then a structured answer with dated figures and a source list in which each entry is marked primary or secondary.

8

TOPICS

8

ANSWERED

250

MARKS

3 hrs

DURATION

INSIDE

- The examiner's demand decoded before every answer
- A full model answer, with its real word count against the paper's limit
- Value additions that earn marks, and the mistakes that lose them
- Sources under every answer, each marked primary or secondary
- The dated current-affairs trail behind the question



Bharat Choudhary

Editor · BharatNotes and Ujyari



BharatNotes

Syllabus-wise notes,
solved papers, answer keys



Ujyari

Daily current affairs
and editorial analysis

FOREWORD

Why this document exists

On 21 August 2026 a few lakh candidates sat down to write two essays in three hours. By evening the paper was everywhere and the answers were nowhere, because the Union Public Service Commission does not release model answers for the Mains examination and never has. What fills that gap is usually written fast, sourced thinly and never corrected.

This is the alternative I wanted when I was preparing. Every question in this paper is answered here in full. Each one opens with the examiner's demand decoded, because most marks are lost to a misread directive rather than to weak content, and *analyse*, *examine* and *comment* are not interchangeable. After the answer come the additions that earn marks and the mistakes that lose them.

On sourcing

Every source under every answer is labelled **primary** or **secondary**, so you can see at a glance whether you are reading the issuing authority or somebody's account of it. Where a document exists but its host could not be reached, it is cited in full rather than pointed at a URL that may not resolve. No link here was invented to satisfy a format. Where two official figures disagree, both appear with the basis of each. Where a widely repeated quotation could not be traced to a primary source, the page says so and tells you not to use it.

On length, honestly

The blueprints here are built to the paper's own 1000 to 1200 word limit, but they are plans rather than finished essays. What you get is the argument hidden inside the topic, the counter-position that earns the second half of the marks, an illustration bank and a paragraph-by-paragraph structure. The writing has to be yours.

On the two sites

This paper was written by an examiner reading the same year you were. Questions came from the Kalpakkam reactor, an amendment passed in March, a judgment delivered in May. So under each answer, where a question grew out of a story, you will find the dated coverage on **Ujiyari**, which is where the year is tracked, alongside the chapter on **BharatNotes**, which is where the syllabus lives. Static preparation without the year is out of date; current affairs without the framework is trivia. The two sites exist as a pair for that reason.

Use this to audit your own answer, not to replace it. Compare the structure, the sourcing and the balance of argument, then write your own and have it evaluated. That is the only part of this that actually raises a score.



Bharat Choudhary

Editor, BharatNotes and Ujiyari

27 August 2026

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

Five things worth knowing before you read

1. **Read the demand line first.** Most marks are lost to a misread directive, not to weak content. Each question opens with what the examiner actually asked for.
2. **Treat the answer as a skeleton with muscle.** Copying it into a test verbatim will not help. Internalise the structure, the data anchors and the balance of argument.
3. **Build to the word limit.** Both essays are to be written in about 1000 to 1200 words each, and these blueprints are built to that length.
4. **Follow the source links.** The Budget, Economic Survey, PIB, RBI and ministry documents named under each answer are where the numbers came from, and are worth reading on their own.
5. **Use the current-affairs trail.** Where a question grew out of a story from the year, the dated Ujyari coverage is listed so you can see how it built up.

CONTENTS

The eight topics

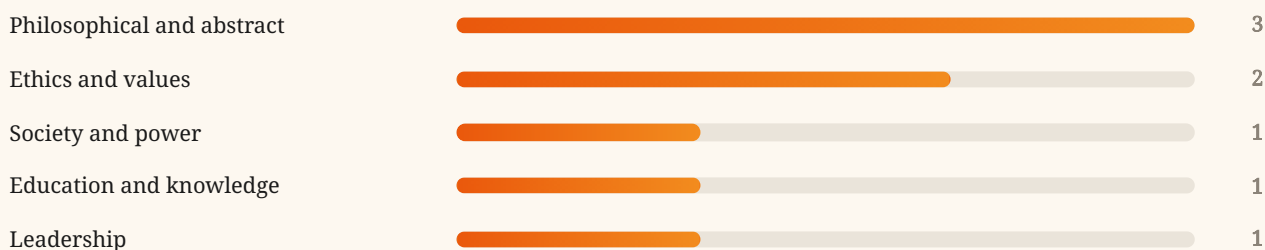
TOPIC	THEME	MARKS	WORDS
1	Section A — philosophical, on paradox · Section A	125	1200
2	Section A — ethical and psychological · Section A	125	1200
3	Section A — metaphorical, on adversity and transformation · Section A	125	1200
4	Section A — geopolitical and social · Section A	125	1200
5	Section B — philosophical, on nature and meaning · Section B	125	1200
6	Section B — education and epistemology · Section B	125	1200
7	Section B — ethics of decision-making · Section B	125	1200
8	Section B — leadership · Section B	125	1200

PAPER ANALYSIS

What this paper actually tested

The 2026 Essay paper was a **quotation-and-metaphor paper**, with no policy-style topic anywhere on it. Section A offered a paradox (oxymorons), a virtue (gratitude), a metaphor of transformation (thorn and bud) and a proverb about power (elephants and grass). Section B took a line from Emerson, a proposition about education, a claim about the ethics of indecision, and a paradox about leadership. Not one topic could be answered by reproducing a General Studies answer, which is a marked shift from years in which a candidate could carry an economy or a governance essay into the hall. Three of the eight — the thorn, the elephants and the leader who follows — reward a candidate who notices that the sentence contains a hidden argument rather than a sentiment. Two of them, Emerson on nature and the line about a well-educated mind, invite quotation, and one of those is a trap: the education line is unattributable and citing it confidently is the easiest avoidable error on the paper. The successful essay this year was philosophical in structure, Indian in illustration and disciplined enough to argue a position rather than survey a theme.

WHERE THE 8 TOPICS FELL



1

Section A

125 marks

~1200 words

Section A — philosophical, on paradox

Oxymorons reflect the ironies of life.*Syllabus: Essay, Section A***WHAT THE EXAMINER IS ASKING FOR**

An **oxymoron** is a figure of speech yoking contradictory terms — deafening silence, cruel kindness, bittersweet. The topic claims these are not merely verbal tricks but that language reaches for them because **reality itself is contradictory**. The essay must therefore move from the figure of speech to the structure of life, and it must argue, not merely illustrate.

- Resist the temptation to write a list of oxymorons. Two or three, used well, are worth twenty.
- Build the argument in domains: personal life, society, governance, technology, history. In each, name the irony precisely and show why it is structural rather than accidental.
- Take a position in the last third: irony can be read as absurdity or as the condition of a mature moral life. Choose, and defend the choice.

ESSAY BLUEPRINT

979 words · paper allows 1200

What the topic is really asking

Language invents oxymorons because it has to describe a world that does not resolve into single values. The essay's task is to show that the contradiction is **in the thing, not in the phrasing**, and then to ask what a person and a state should do about it.

A structure that works

Opening (150 words). Choose one of three doors.

- *The concrete image.* A photograph from a famine relief camp: a mother smiling as her child is fed, having walked forty kilometres to reach it. Joy and devastation in one frame. Name it, then name the idea.
- *The linguistic door.* Note that the word oxymoron is itself an oxymoron, from *oxys*, sharp, and *moros*, dull. Language demonstrates the point in the very word for it.
- *The philosophical door.* Open with Hegel or with the Upanishadic *neti neti*: we approach truth by holding contradictions rather than dissolving them.

Body one: the ironies of the individual life. Freedom brings anxiety, so we build the cages we escaped from. Success arrives after we have stopped wanting the thing it was for. Grief is the price of love, so the depth of the wound measures the value of what was had. *Illustration:* Viktor Frankl in the camps finding meaning in suffering. *Idea:* the moral life is not the absence of contradiction but the capacity to live inside it.

Body two: the ironies of society. Cities crowded and lonely. Connected and isolated: more communication technology than any generation, and rising reported loneliness. Prosperity with hunger, since India holds record foodgrain stocks alongside high child stunting. Caste in modernity: the anonymity that was supposed to dissolve it, preserving it as network.

Body three: the ironies of governance and development. The state must coerce to protect liberty. Dams that drown the people they are built to serve. Green Revolution self-sufficiency purchased with depleted aquifers and burning stubble. Reservation that must use caste to abolish caste, which is Ambedkar's own acknowledged paradox. Welfare technology that excludes the beneficiary it authenticates. *Analytical point:* these are not administrative failures; they are **trade-offs presented as if they were mistakes**, which is why they recur.

Body four: the ironies of knowledge and technology. Splitting the atom to end a war and to threaten every war afterwards. Artificial intelligence built to save time, generating work. The more we know, the larger the surface of our ignorance, which is Socratic and is also literally how research works.

Body five: the ironies of history. Empires that spread the language of liberty and used it to justify subjection, and colonised peoples who took that language and turned it against the coloniser. Non-violence proving the more effective weapon. Partition, freedom and catastrophe arriving on the same date.

The turn (this is what separates a good essay from a very good one). Ask *why* life is ironic rather than continuing to catalogue that it is. Three answers are available, and you should choose among them:

1. **Values are plural and genuinely incommensurable** — Isaiah Berlin's argument that liberty and equality, mercy and justice, are all real goods that cannot be maximised together. Irony is the residue of a real choice.
2. **Human beings are divided** — reason and desire, self and society; the contradiction is in the creature.
3. **Time reveals what the moment conceals** — an act is one thing when done and another when its consequences arrive. Irony is the shape of hindsight.

The response. What follows for how we should live and govern?

- **Intellectual humility.** Certainty is the failure to notice the other half of the truth.
- **The tragic sense in policy.** Good policy admits its own costs and compensates them, instead of pretending they do not exist. A displaced family is not a rounding error.
- **Irony as a democratic virtue.** Satire, dissent and the capacity to laugh at power are how a society metabolises contradiction without violence. Where irony is criminalised, contradiction turns brittle.
- **Not paralysis.** The point is not that everything is contradictory and therefore nothing can be done. It is that action taken in awareness of its costs is more honest, and usually better, than action taken in innocence of them.

Conclusion (150 words). Return to your opening image and re-read it. Something like: *the oxymoron is not a flaw in language but its honesty. A language of only consistent phrases would describe a world nobody lives in.* Close forward-looking: the mature individual, and the mature state, are the ones that hold the contradiction without either denying it or surrendering to it.

Illustration bank

- **Literature:** Dickens, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Milton's "darkness visible". Tennyson, "His honour rooted in dishonour stood".
- **Indian thought:** *neti neti*; the Gita's insistence on action without attachment to fruit; Kabir's paradoxical couplets.

- **History:** 15 August 1947 as freedom and Partition. Gandhi absent from the celebration, fasting in Calcutta.
- **Science:** wave-particle duality; the immune system that protects and, in autoimmunity, attacks.
- **Contemporary:** record foodgrain output alongside stunting; digital connection alongside loneliness; the safest era in history producing the most anxious generation.

Openings and closings you can adapt

Opening: "The word oxymoron is built from *oxys*, sharp, and *moros*, dull. The name of the figure is an example of it. That is not a coincidence; it is a warning about the kind of world the word was invented to describe."

Closing: "We do not resolve the ironies of life. We learn to stand inside them without lying about them, and that standing, in a person or in a state, is what maturity means."

What kills this essay

- A list of thirty oxymorons with a sentence each. The examiner is reading for argument, not vocabulary.
- Treating every irony as a failure to be fixed, which misses that most are genuine trade-offs.
- Cynicism as the conclusion. Noting that life is contradictory is the beginning of the essay, not its end.

VALUE ADDITION THAT EARNS MARKS

- The etymology of oxymoron, from *oxys* (sharp) and *moros* (dull), is a self-demonstrating opening and very few candidates will have it.
- Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism is the strongest analytical frame available for this topic, because it explains irony rather than merely observing it.
- The Indian example that lands hardest: record foodgrain production alongside high child stunting, which is checkable and current.
- Ambedkar's acknowledged paradox, that caste must be used to abolish caste, is an irony from within Indian constitutional thought rather than a borrowed one.

WHERE ANSWERS LOST MARKS

- Writing a grammar lesson on figures of speech.
- Never answering *why* life is ironic, which is where the essay's argument lives.
- Manufacturing paradoxes that are merely tensions, which reads as padding.

SOURCES · EACH LABELLED PRIMARY OR SECONDARY

- BOOK** Isaiah Berlin, Two Concepts of Liberty and The Crooked Timber of Humanity, on value pluralism
- BOOK** Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, 1946

CURRENT AFFAIRS BEHIND THIS QUESTION · UJIYARI

Essay and answer-writing vocabulary
<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/>

REVISE THE CONCEPT ON BHARATNOTES

Moral thinkers
bharatnotes.com/subjects/ethics/ethics-aptitude/moral-thinkers/

2

Section A

125 marks

~1200 words

Section A — ethical and psychological

A grateful mind is very beautiful.*Syllabus: Essay, Section A***WHAT THE EXAMINER IS ASKING FOR**

A short, warm sentence that is easy to write badly. The word to interrogate is **beautiful**: why beauty, and not goodness or usefulness? The essay should argue that gratitude is an *orientation* to reality, that it has measurable psychological and social effects, and that it has a public and political dimension, not only a private one.

- Distinguish gratitude from indebtedness and from politeness in the first section; the distinction carries the whole essay.
- Move outward in widening circles: the individual, relationships, society, the state, and the nation across time.
- Include the honest counter-argument, that gratitude can be manufactured to keep people quiet, and answer it. That is where the essay earns its marks.

ESSAY BLUEPRINT

938 words · paper allows 1200

What the topic is really asking

Not "is gratitude good", which nobody disputes, but **why gratitude is described as beautiful**. Beauty implies proportion, fittingness, something that draws others to it. A grateful mind is beautiful because it sees the world accurately, as a place in which one has received more than one earned, and because that seeing changes how the person acts.

A structure that works**Opening (150 words). Options:**

- *Anecdote*: the person who thanks the sanitation worker by name, and what changes in the exchange for both of them.
- *Contrast*: two people with identical circumstances, one measuring what is missing, the other what is present. The facts are the same; the lives are not.
- *Etymology*: gratitude, *gratia*, grace, the same root as gracious and as gratis. What is received without being earned.

Body one: what gratitude is, and is not.

- Not **indebtedness**, which is a burden and seeks discharge. Gratitude is light; debt is heavy.
- Not **politeness**, which is a social lubricant and may be entirely hollow.
- Not **complacency**, which is the objection to be answered later.
- It is the recognition that one's life rests on contributions one did not make: a language one did not invent, a Constitution one did not write, food grown by someone else, a road built before one was born.

Body two: gratitude and the self. Psychological research on gratitude practices reports associations with lower reported stress, better sleep and higher life satisfaction, though the effects are modest and should be described carefully rather than overclaimed. Philosophically it is a form of realism: the ungrateful mind holds a false model of its own achievements, believing itself self-made. Cicero called gratitude the parent of all the virtues, and the claim is defensible, since a person who recognises what he has received is more likely to give.

Body three: gratitude and others. Relationships survive on acknowledgement more than on affection. Gratitude reduces envy, which is the corrosive emotion of comparison; the grateful mind is beautiful partly because it is not disfigured by resentment. In workplaces, recognition is a stronger motivator than incentive at the margin.

Body four: gratitude in public life.

- **The civil servant** who remembers that the salary, authority and vehicle are given by a public that mostly cannot afford any of them. Gandhi's talisman is gratitude turned into a decision rule.
- **The citizen** who remembers that rights were not granted but won, by people who were beaten and imprisoned for them, and who therefore uses them.
- **The nation:** war memorials, Republic Day, the recognition of unnamed contributors, tribal freedom fighters, the workers who built the railways, the women whose labour is uncounted. A society's memory is a form of gratitude, and what it chooses to forget is a form of ingratitude.
- **Intergenerational and ecological gratitude.** The idea that we hold the earth in trust from our descendants is gratitude in the direction of the future, and it is the strongest available argument for conservation that does not depend on self-interest.

Body five: the honest counter-argument. Gratitude can be weaponised. The powerful frequently demand it: employers of workers, states of citizens, men of women, the upper caste of the lower. "Be grateful for what you have been given" is one of the oldest instruments for suppressing a legitimate claim. Ambedkar's insistence that rights are not gifts is exactly this objection, and it must be met, not dodged.

The resolution. Distinguish **gratitude** from **gratefulness demanded by another**. Real gratitude is freely given, is directed at what was actually received, and is entirely compatible with demanding what is owed. A person can be grateful for a scholarship and still protest the exclusion that made it necessary. Gratitude is not the opposite of justice; **entitlement without acknowledgement, and acknowledgement without justice, are the two failures**, and the beautiful mind avoids both.

Conclusion (150 words). Return to beauty. A grateful mind is beautiful in the way a well-proportioned building is beautiful: everything is in its right relation. It sees the self at its actual size, neither inflated nor crushed, and it therefore has room in it for other people. End with a forward image: a country of 1.4 billion people whose citizens noticed one another would need fewer laws to make them behave.

Illustration bank

- **Indian thought:** the *rina* framework of debts owed to teachers, ancestors and sages; *Matru Devo Bhava*, *Pitru Devo Bhava*, *Acharya Devo Bhava*; Sikh *langar* as gratitude institutionalised as service.
- **Persons:** Helen Keller on Anne Sullivan. Kalam's account of his teachers and of the newspaper-delivery years. Sudha Murty's account of what she owed to J. R. D. Tata's rebuke.
- **Contemporary:** the applause for health workers during the pandemic, and the honest question of what changed for them afterwards, which is gratitude tested by follow-through.

- **Literature:** Shakespeare, *King Lear*, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child"; Wordsworth on the "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love".

Openings and closings you can adapt

Opening: "Gratitude and grace share a root, *gratia*, and so does the word *gratis*. All three describe something received without being earned. That is the first thing a grateful mind knows about itself: that most of what it has, it did not make."

Closing: "A grateful mind is beautiful because it is accurate. It sees the self at its true size, and in the space that leaves, it makes room for everyone else."

What kills this essay

- Sentimentality. Warm language with no argument reads as a greeting card.
- Ignoring the counter-argument, which is the single most common failure on topics of this kind.
- Long definitions of gratitude from dictionaries. Define it by contrast instead.

VALUE ADDITION THAT EARNS MARKS

- The distinction between gratitude and demanded gratefulness, with Ambedkar's insistence that rights are not gifts, is the argument that turns a soft topic into a serious one.
- Cicero's line that gratitude is the parent of all virtues gives the essay a classical anchor without needing an unverifiable modern quotation.
- Intergenerational and ecological gratitude connects a personal virtue to environmental policy, which very few candidates will attempt.
- The pandemic applause, and what did not change afterwards, is a contemporary test case for whether gratitude was real or performed.

WHERE ANSWERS LOST MARKS

- Writing an inspirational speech instead of an essay.
- Treating gratitude and contentment as identical; contentment can be resignation, gratitude need not be.
- Quoting emotionally without a single concrete illustration.

SOURCES · EACH LABELLED PRIMARY OR SECONDARY

- BOOK** Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro Plancio* — gratitude as the greatest of the virtues and the parent of the rest
- BOOK** B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste and the Constituent Assembly Debates*, on rights as claims rather than gifts

CURRENT AFFAIRS BEHIND THIS QUESTION · UJIYARI

Essay and answer-writing vocabulary

<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/>

REVISE THE CONCEPT ON BHARATNOTES

Attitude, aptitude and foundational values

bharatnotes.com/subjects/ethics/ethics-aptitude/attitude-aptitude-foundational-values/

3

Section A

125 marks

~1200 words

Section A — metaphorical, on adversity and transformation

A thorn is a changed bud.*Syllabus: Essay, Section A***WHAT THE EXAMINER IS ASKING FOR**

A metaphor with a botanical basis you can actually use. In many plants the thorn is a **modified axillary bud or branch**: the same tissue that could have become a shoot or a flower became a defence instead. So the statement is not sentimental; it says that the harsh thing and the beautiful thing have a **common origin**, and that circumstance decided which one appeared.

- Open with the botany, correctly, because it makes the metaphor rigorous rather than pretty.
- Extract two distinct claims from the statement, common origin and defensive transformation, and organise the essay around both.
- Include the hard case: some thorns are not noble, and some damage does not become strength. An essay that pretends otherwise is dishonest.

ESSAY BLUEPRINT

909 words · paper allows 1200

What the topic is really asking

The statement contains two claims, and a good essay separates them.

1. **Common origin.** The thorn is not the bud's opposite. It is the bud, altered. Harshness and beauty are not two different substances but one substance under different conditions.
2. **Transformation is protective.** The change is not decorative; it is a response to threat. Something became hard because something else had to be protected.

A structure that works

Opening (150 words). The botanical door is the strongest available. In *Bougainvillea*, *Duranta* and *Citrus*, the thorn is a modified axillary bud or branch: the same meristematic tissue that might have produced a leafy shoot or a flower produced a spine instead, because the plant was in a place that demanded defence or water conservation. Then turn: *what is true of the plant is true of the person, and of the society.*

Body one: the individual. The child who becomes guarded was once open, and the guarding is not a character flaw but an adaptation. Cynicism is disappointed idealism. Anger is often grief that was not allowed to be expressed. *Illustration:* Ambedkar's ferocity of argument is inseparable from the humiliations of his childhood, the boy refused water at school. The sharpness was not a defect in him; it was a bud that had to become a thorn to survive, and it became the instrument that wrote a Constitution. *Analytical point:* if the thorn is a changed bud, then judging the thorn without knowing the change is a moral error. **Understanding is not the same as excusing**, and the essay should say so explicitly.

Body two: post-traumatic growth, honestly stated. Adversity does sometimes produce capability: resilience, empathy for others in pain, resourcefulness. Frankl's account of meaning found in the camps is the standard reference. But say plainly that this is not automatic. Most suffering is not redemptive. Trauma frequently produces damage that never becomes strength, and the popular narrative that

hardship builds character quietly blames those it broke. The honest position: **the potential for transformation is real; its inevitability is a myth**, and what makes the difference is usually support, safety and time, which are precisely what the poorest lack.

Body three: society and history. Movements are thorns that were once buds. The Dalit movement, the labour movement, the environmental movement all began as claims for inclusion and hardened when inclusion was refused. Insurgency in India's north-east and in the Naxal-affected districts has roots in genuine grievance about land, forest and dignity, and saying so is analysis rather than sympathy. *Policy implication:* if a thorn is a changed bud, then counter-insurgency that only cuts thorns will keep meeting new ones. **You have to change the conditions that convert buds into thorns.** That is the most examinable idea in this essay, and it connects to development-security linkage.

Body four: institutions and rules. Regulation is usually a changed bud: a rule exists because something went wrong. Environmental clearance after Bhopal, banking regulation after a crisis, consent protocols after a violation. The thorn is memory made into structure. The corresponding danger is that defences outlive the threat; rules built for a past danger become obstacles in a present one.

Body five: the reverse transformation. Thorns can become buds again. Reconciliation, restorative justice, the Mizo Accord of 1986 turning an armed movement into a governing party, Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa. This section keeps the essay from ending in fatalism and is where hope enters legitimately.

Conclusion (150 words). Bring the botany back. The plant does not choose to make a thorn; the person and the society sometimes can. Close on the responsibility that follows from the metaphor: *if every thorn was once a bud, then the question for a society is not how to remove its thorns but what it was doing when the buds were changing.*

Illustration bank

- **Botany:** thorn as modified axillary bud in Bougainvillea and Citrus; spine as modified leaf in cacti, an adaptation to aridity; the rose's prickles, which are an epidermal outgrowth and technically neither. Use the distinction if you are confident of it; it is a mark of precision.
- **Persons:** Ambedkar. Kalpana Chawla's small-town beginnings. Nelson Mandela's twenty-seven years and the choice not to answer in kind.
- **India:** Mizoram from insurgency to among the most peaceful states; Punjab after the 1980s; the 1991 balance-of-payments crisis producing the reform that followed.
- **Science and nature:** the immune system, protective and, misdirected, autoimmune; scar tissue, stronger and less flexible than skin, which is exactly the double meaning the metaphor needs.
- **Literature:** Ghalib's couplets on pain as the condition of expression; Kabir on the sandalwood tree that scents the axe.

Openings and closings you can adapt

Opening: "In the bougainvillea, the thorn is a bud that was told to defend rather than to flower. The tissue is identical. Only the instruction changed."

Closing: "Every thorn is a changed bud, which means every thorn is a record of what once happened here. Read that way, a society's hardness is not its character. It is its history, and history can be answered."

What kills this essay

- Turning it into a motivational essay on how hardship makes us stronger. That is the shallow reading, and it is also frequently untrue.
- Getting the botany wrong. If you are unsure whether a rose has thorns or prickles, do not raise it.
- Losing the second half of the metaphor. The transformation was **protective**; the essay must ask what was being protected.

VALUE ADDITION THAT EARNS MARKS

- Getting the botany right — thorn as modified axillary bud, spine as modified leaf, prickle as epidermal outgrowth — makes the central metaphor precise and is a genuine differentiator.
- The policy line that counter-insurgency which only cuts thorns will keep meeting new ones converts a literary topic into a governance argument.
- Stating plainly that most suffering is not redemptive, and that the growth narrative can blame the broken, is the honesty that lifts this above a motivational essay.
- Mizoram, from insurgency to among India's most peaceful states after the 1986 Accord, is the strongest Indian illustration of the reverse transformation.

WHERE ANSWERS LOST MARKS

- Writing a self-help essay on resilience.
- Sentimentalising violence by implying every thorn is justified.
- Ignoring the possibility of reverse transformation, which leaves the essay in fatalism.

SOURCES · EACH LABELLED PRIMARY OR SECONDARY

BOOK Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, 1946

BOOK Standard plant morphology: thorns as modified stems or axillary buds, spines as modified leaves, prickles as epidermal outgrowths — any standard botany text

CURRENT AFFAIRS BEHIND THIS QUESTION · UJIYARI

Essay and answer-writing vocabulary

<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/>

REVISE THE CONCEPT ON BHARATNOTES

Caste, tribe and minority dynamics

bharatnotes.com/subjects/society/indian-society/caste-tribe-minority-dynamics/

Insurgency in the north-east

bharatnotes.com/subjects/security/internal-security/insurgency-northeast/

4

Section A

125 marks

~1200 words

Section A — geopolitical and social

When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.*Syllabus: Essay, Section A***WHAT THE EXAMINER IS ASKING FOR**

An African proverb about the **asymmetry of consequence**: those who fight are not those who suffer most. This is the most current-affairs-friendly topic on the paper, and it is also the one most likely to be written as a foreign-policy answer rather than an essay. Keep it wider than geopolitics: the same structure operates in families, firms, institutions and courts.

- Identify the proverb's precise claim early: power contests externalise their costs onto the powerless, who have no part in the decision and no exit from the consequence.
- Move across scales — domestic, institutional, national, global — so the essay is an argument about power, not a survey of wars.
- Devote the final third to what protects the grass, since a purely descriptive essay on suffering has no conclusion.

ESSAY BLUEPRINT

957 words · paper allows 1200

What the topic is really asking

Not simply that war is terrible. The proverb makes a sharper claim: **the distribution of harm does not follow the distribution of agency**. Those who decide are protected; those who did not decide are trampled. The essay is about that gap, and about what can close it.

A structure that works**Opening (150 words). Options:**

- *Scale*. A satellite image of two armies and, between them, a village that appears on no map used by either.
- *The proverb's origin*. An African proverb, whose second half is less often quoted and is more devastating: when two elephants make love, it is also the grass that suffers. Cooperation between the powerful can crush the weak as thoroughly as conflict between them.
- *A number*. In modern conflict, civilian casualties vastly exceed combatant casualties, a reversal from earlier centuries. State the trend rather than an unsourced statistic.

Body one: the global stage. Great-power competition fought in other people's countries: proxy conflicts, sanctions whose costs fall on populations rather than on the sanctioned elite, trade wars in which the tariff is paid by the consumer and the small exporting economy. Supply-chain and energy shocks from distant conflicts reaching an Indian household as the price of cooking oil and diesel. **The Global South's structural position**: it did not create the emissions, it did not start the wars, it holds least reserve capacity to absorb either. *Analytical point*: the modern instruments of great-power rivalry — sanctions, chokepoint control, technology export bans, currency weaponisation — are **precisely designed** to inflict pain on populations in order to move governments. The grass is not incidental to the strategy; it is the strategy.

Body two: climate as the largest instance. Small island states with negligible emissions facing existential sea-level rise. India's own position: a small per-capita emitter bearing heavy climate cost. Loss and damage as the belated recognition that the grass has a claim. This section is where the proverb becomes contemporary policy.

Body three: domestic and institutional versions. Two ministries fighting over jurisdiction while a scheme's beneficiaries wait. Centre-state disputes in which the citizen's entitlement is the hostage. Employer-union confrontations where the casual worker, unprotected by either, loses the wage. Parents in conflict and the child between them. Political polarisation in which the ordinary citizen absorbs the social cost of a fight conducted by others for others' benefit. **The pattern is identical at every scale**, and showing that is the essay's intellectual work.

Body four: why the grass is trampled. Move from description to explanation, which is what most candidates omit.

- **No voice.** The affected are not represented where the decision is taken.
- **No exit.** Elites can relocate, hedge and insure; the poor cannot.
- **Externalised cost.** Decision-makers do not bear the consequences of their decisions, so the incentive to avoid them is weak.
- **Abstraction.** Distance and aggregation turn people into numbers, and numbers do not restrain.

Body five: what protects the grass. The essay must have this section.

- **Law:** international humanitarian law, the distinction between combatant and civilian, the ICC, and honestly, its weak enforcement.
- **Institutions:** the UN with its structural veto problem, and the case for Security Council reform that India presses.
- **Multi-alignment and strategic autonomy**, which is precisely a small or middle power's method of refusing to be the ground on which others fight, and India's own record here is the natural illustration.
- **Voice:** platforms such as the Voice of the Global South Summit, the demand for permanent representation, the African Union's entry into the G20 in 2023.
- **Domestically:** federal dispute-resolution machinery, grievance redress, social protection — the boring institutions that ensure a fight between powers does not become a loss for the citizen.
- **Interdependence:** trade, shared institutions and personal exchange raise the cost of conflict, which is the liberal case and worth stating with its limits.

Conclusion (150 words). Turn the metaphor. Grass, in fact, survives elephants; it regenerates from the base and outlasts what tramples it. Endurance is not the same as justice, and a world that relies on the resilience of the powerless has not solved anything. Close with the standard India should hold to: *the measure of an international order is not how it treats the elephants but whether the grass has a voice in the field.*

Illustration bank

- **History:** Bengal famine of 1943 amid a global war. The Non-Aligned Movement as an explicit refusal to be the field. Decolonisation as the grass acquiring a name.

- **Contemporary:** energy and fertiliser price transmission from distant conflict to Indian farms; students and workers evacuated from war zones; migrant labour during the pandemic, harmed by decisions taken elsewhere and communicated late.
- **Environment:** loss and damage; small island states; the disproportionate exposure of the poorest districts to heat and flood.
- **Literature and thought:** Thucydides' Melian dialogue, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must", which is the proverb in classical form. Gandhi on an eye for an eye. Kautilya's *mandala* as the elephants' own theory of the field.

Openings and closings you can adapt

Opening: "The proverb has a second half that is rarely quoted: when two elephants make love, it is also the grass that suffers. Whether the powerful fight or agree, the ground beneath them is not consulted."

Closing: "Grass outlives elephants. But survival is not justice, and an order that depends on the endurance of those who did not choose the fight has merely postponed the reckoning."

What kills this essay

- Writing a current-affairs briefing on one ongoing conflict. The proverb is about a structure, not an event.
- Naming specific live conflicts and taking sides. Write about the mechanism; the examiner is not looking for your foreign policy.
- Omitting the domestic and institutional scales, which is what shows the idea was understood rather than recognised.

VALUE ADDITION THAT EARNS MARKS

- The proverb's less-quoted second half, that the grass suffers when elephants make love as well, is a genuinely striking opening and reframes the whole essay.
- The insight that modern coercive instruments are designed to hurt populations in order to move governments, so the grass is the strategy rather than collateral, is the essay's sharpest analytical claim.
- Thucydides' Melian dialogue is the proverb in classical form and pairs well with Kautilya's *mandala* theory as the elephants' own doctrine.
- Explaining *why* the grass is trampled — no voice, no exit, externalised cost, abstraction — is the section most candidates omit and where the marks concentrate.

WHERE ANSWERS LOST MARKS

- Turning the essay into a GS2 international relations answer.
- Taking sides in a live conflict, which converts an essay into an opinion piece and invites disagreement rather than assessment.
- Ending on the pathos of suffering with no section on what protects the vulnerable.

SOURCES · EACH LABELLED PRIMARY OR SECONDARY

BOOK Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, Book V — the Melian Dialogue

PRIMARY Ministry of External Affairs — Voice of the Global South Summit documents and India's position on UN reform
<https://www.mea.gov.in/>

CURRENT AFFAIRS BEHIND THIS QUESTION · UJIYARI

Indo-Pacific security and economy, 2026

<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/07/ie-indo-pacific-security-economy-2026/>

REVISE THE CONCEPT ON BHARATNOTES

International law and treaties

bharatnotes.com/subjects/international-relations/global-relations/international-law-treaties/

India, the UN, UNSC reform and peacekeeping

bharatnotes.com/subjects/international-relations/global-relations/india-un-unsc-reform-peacekeeping/

5

Section B

125 marks

~1200 words

Section B — philosophical, on nature and meaning

Nature is the symbol of the spirit.*Syllabus: Essay, Section B*

WHAT THE EXAMINER IS ASKING FOR

This is **Emerson**, from *Nature* (1836), Chapter IV on Language, where he sets out that words are signs of natural facts, particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts, and nature is the symbol of spirit. The topic asks whether the natural world carries meaning beyond its physical properties, and what follows for how we treat it.

- Attribute Emerson correctly and briefly; it establishes authority in the first paragraph.
- Build through: language, religion and philosophy, art, science, and then ecology, which is where the essay becomes consequential.
- Include the materialist objection, that nature means nothing and we project onto it, and answer it rather than ignoring it.

ESSAY BLUEPRINT

1013 words · paper allows 1200

What the topic is really asking

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *Nature* (1836) that "nature is the symbol of spirit", arguing that natural facts stand for spiritual facts and that this is why our moral vocabulary is built almost entirely out of physical images. The essay asks: **does the natural world carry meaning, or do we merely project meaning onto it?** And, whichever answer you give, **what follows for how we treat it?**

A structure that works**Opening (150 words).** Options:

- *The linguistic proof.* Notice that we cannot describe an inner state without a natural image. We are *depressed*, pressed down. We *see the light*. We are *rooted*, we *flourish*, we *wither*, we have a *storm* of feeling, we reach a *watershed*. Emerson's point is demonstrated every time anyone speaks.
- *The image.* A river that is simultaneously water for irrigation, an ecosystem, a mother-goddess, a boundary in a treaty, and, in every literature that has ever grown on its banks, a symbol of time.

- *The Indian door: Prakriti and Purusha*; the Isha Upanishad's opening that all this is pervaded by the divine, and its instruction to enjoy through renunciation.

Body one: language and thought. Develop the linguistic argument properly, because it is the strongest evidence for the claim. Abstract thought is parasitic on physical metaphor. If nature is where our language for the inner life comes from, then nature is not a backdrop to the spirit; it is its **vocabulary**.

Body two: religion and philosophy. Almost every tradition reads nature as significant: the sacred groves of India, *devrai* and *kavu*, protected for centuries before the word conservation existed; rivers as deities; the Bishnoi who died for trees in the eighteenth century; trees under which enlightenment was attained. Wordsworth's "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused"; Tagore's Santiniketan, a school deliberately held under trees; Thoreau at Walden. *Analytical point:* the sacred and the ecological have historically been the **same instruction**. The grove was protected because it was holy, and it survived as biodiversity because it was protected. Meaning did conservation work long before economics tried to.

Body three: art and science. Art has always used nature to say what cannot be said directly, from the *Ritusamhara* to Ruskin. Science, apparently the opposite, arrives at the same place from the other direction: the physicist's awe at symmetry, the biologist's at the improbability of a cell, Sagan on being made of star-stuff. Wonder is not the enemy of measurement; measurement deepens it.

Body four: the objection, honestly stated. The materialist reply is that nature is indifferent matter, that a tiger is not a symbol of courage but an animal doing what tigers do, and that projecting spirit onto nature is anthropomorphism which has produced real harm — flood as divine punishment, disease as karma, resignation instead of intervention. Sacralisation can also be used against people, as when a forest's sanctity is invoked to evict the community living in it. **This objection must be answered, not skipped.**

The resolution. Symbols do not have to be metaphysically real to be true in the way that matters. Nature is where humans have always gone to think about permanence, mortality, renewal and scale, and that fact is itself a fact about human beings. Meaning may be discovered *in* the encounter rather than resident in the object, and it is no weaker for that. Emerson's claim can be read as psychological and cultural rather than supernatural, and it survives the reading.

Body five: what follows, which is where the essay must land. If nature is only a resource, its value is its price and it will be traded away at the margin. If it is also a symbol, then its destruction is a loss of meaning as well as of material, and that changes the calculus.

- Sacred groves as functioning community conservation, and India's biodiversity framework's recognition of other effective area-based conservation measures.
- The rights-of-nature movement and Indian High Court attempts to give rivers legal personality, with their real practical difficulties.
- **Mission LiFE** and the argument that behaviour, not only technology, is a climate lever, which is Emersonian in structure: change what nature means to people and their conduct follows.
- Intergenerational trusteeship, and the honest tension between conservation and the livelihood rights recognised by the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which must not be smoothed over.

Conclusion (150 words). Return to language. As long as human beings describe their inner lives with rivers, roots, storms and light, nature will be the symbol of spirit whether or not it was designed to be. Close with the consequence: *a civilisation that reduces nature to inventory will find, too late, that it has also lost the words it used to describe itself.*

Illustration bank

- **Indian:** sacred groves; Bishnoi and Khejarli, 1730; Chipko; the Ganga as both waterway and deity; *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*; the Isha Upanishad.
- **Western:** Emerson, Thoreau, Wordsworth, Muir, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Aldo Leopold's land ethic.
- **Science:** Darwin's closing "grandeur in this view of life"; Carl Sagan's pale blue dot; the mathematics of phyllotaxis and the Fibonacci sequence in a sunflower.
- **Contemporary:** the psychological literature on nature exposure and mental health; forest bathing; the observed effect of urban green space on wellbeing.

Openings and closings you can adapt

Opening: "Try to describe grief without a natural image. You will reach for weight, for darkness, for a storm, for something that has withered. Emerson noticed this in 1836 and drew the obvious conclusion: nature is the symbol of spirit, because it is the only vocabulary the spirit has ever had."

Closing: "We will protect what means something to us and spend what does not. That is the practical reason to insist that nature is more than inventory, and it is also, if Emerson was right, the truth."

What kills this essay

- Writing an environmental-degradation essay with statistics on pollution. The topic is philosophical and the ecology must arrive as a consequence, not as the subject.
- Attributing the line to the wrong author or leaving it unattributed. It is Emerson, *Nature*, 1836.
- Ignoring the materialist objection, which leaves the essay looking devotional rather than argued.

VALUE ADDITION THAT EARNS MARKS

- Correct attribution to Emerson's *Nature* (1836), Chapter IV on Language, in the opening paragraph, with the three-step formulation he actually uses.
- The linguistic proof — that abstract thought borrows its entire vocabulary from physical images — is the strongest evidence for the topic and is self-demonstrating in front of the examiner.
- The observation that the sacred and the ecological have historically issued the same instruction, so meaning did conservation work before economics did, is the essay's central argument.
- Naming the honest tension between conservation and forest rights under the FRA, 2006 prevents the essay from becoming a romantic defence of untouched wilderness.

WHERE ANSWERS LOST MARKS

- Turning it into a pollution and climate-statistics essay.
- Romanticising nature as uniformly benign, when it is also earthquake, famine and disease.
- Skipping the objection, which makes the essay one-sided.

SOURCES · EACH LABELLED PRIMARY OR SECONDARY

SECONDARY Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 1836, Chapter IV: Language

<https://emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses-lectures/nature2/language/>

BOOK Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949 — the land ethic

PRIMARY Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change — Mission LIFE and biodiversity conservation

<https://moef.gov.in>

CURRENT AFFAIRS BEHIND THIS QUESTION · UJIYARI

Concept page — Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
<https://ujiyari.com/terms/kmgbf-kunming-montreal-biodiversity-framework/>

REVISE THE CONCEPT ON BHARATNOTES

Environment and ecology — chapters

bharatnotes.com/subjects/environment/ecology-environment/

Ethics, technology and environment

bharatnotes.com/subjects/ethics/ethics-aptitude/ethics-technology-environment/

6

Section B

125 marks

~1200 words

Section B — education and epistemology

A well-educated mind will always have more questions than answers.

Syllabus: Essay, Section B

WHAT THE EXAMINER IS ASKING FOR

A claim about what education is **for**. The measure of a good education is not the accumulation of answers but the refinement of questions. A warning on attribution: this line circulates widely as Helen Keller's, but no primary source is traceable for it, so do not attribute it in the exam. Write it as a proposition, not as a quotation.

- Distinguish information, knowledge, understanding and wisdom in the opening section; the essay's argument depends on it.
- Show why questions multiply with learning, using the expanding-boundary idea and the actual behaviour of scientific research.
- Bring it to Indian education policy, which is where an essay becomes a Mains essay rather than a general one.

ESSAY BLUEPRINT

1123 words · paper allows 1200

What the topic is really asking

Whether education should be measured by what a mind can **retrieve** or by what it can **interrogate**. The claim is that questions are the output of learning, not a sign of its failure, and that a mind full of settled answers is more likely to be trained than educated.

A note before you write

This sentence is widely circulated as Helen Keller's, and it appears on quotation sites without any citation to her writings, letters or speeches. **Do not attribute it.** Treat it as a proposition to be argued. If you want an attributable line on the same idea, Socrates' "I know that I know nothing" and the Isha Upanishad's warning against the arrogance of the learned are both safe.

A structure that works

Opening (150 words). Options:

- *The paradox of the expanding boundary.* Knowledge is a circle; its interior is what we know and its circumference is our contact with what we do not. The more we learn, the larger the interior — and the longer the circumference. Ignorance grows faster than knowledge, and only the educated can see it.
- *A contrast.* A student who has memorised the periodic table and one who asks why the table has that shape. The second is at the beginning of chemistry; the first is at the end of a syllabus.
- *Socrates.* The oracle called him the wisest man in Athens, and he concluded that this must be because he alone knew that he knew nothing.

Body one: the ladder from information to wisdom.

- **Information** is data. It can be looked up, and increasingly it can be generated on demand.
- **Knowledge** is information organised and retained.
- **Understanding** is knowing why, which is what allows transfer to a new situation.
- **Wisdom** is knowing what is worth asking, and when to act despite uncertainty. Questions belong to the upper rungs. Answers can be bought; questions have to be built.

Body two: why questions multiply with learning. Every answer is a door into a room with more doors. Newton explained the motion of the planets and opened the question of what gravity *is*, which Einstein reopened and quantum gravity has still not closed. Genomics gave us the sequence and multiplied the questions about expression and regulation. Medicine cures a disease and inherits the ethics of who gets the cure. *Analytical point:* this is not a failure of knowledge. It is the definition of a **live** field, and a discipline that has stopped generating questions is a dead one.

Body three: the closed mind. Its symptoms are certainty, intolerance of ambiguity, and hostility to being questioned. Fundamentalism of every kind is a set of answers that has forbidden questions. The educated failure is worse than the uneducated one, because it comes with credentials. Ideology, dogma and propaganda all work by supplying answers ahead of questions. *Historical illustration:* every episode of scientific suppression, from Galileo to Lysenko, was an administration protecting answers.

Body four: the Indian education question. This is where the essay must land.

- A system historically organised around the examination reproduces answers rather than questions. Coaching optimises for the answer key, which is a rational response to how selection works.
- The **National Education Policy 2020** explicitly targets this, with critical thinking, inquiry-based and experiential learning, reduced curricular content for deeper understanding, and multidisciplinary structures. The honest addition: policy documents have said this since the Kothari Commission of 1964-66, and the constraint has always been implementation, teacher capacity and the incentive created by high-stakes examinations.
- **Learning outcomes.** ASER and national achievement surveys have persistently found that enrolment gains have not produced comprehension gains. A child who cannot read a text cannot question it, so foundational literacy is a **precondition for critical thinking**, not an alternative to it.
- The Indian tradition supports the questioning model rather than contradicting it: the Upanishads are structured as dialogue; the *Nasadiya Sukta* of the Rig Veda ends by wondering whether even the highest seer knows how creation came about; Buddhist and Nyaya traditions are built on formal debate; Amartya Sen's argument about the argumentative Indian is a historical claim, not a compliment.

Body five: the age of instant answers. Search engines and generative AI have made answers nearly free. That changes what education is for, decisively. If retrieval is a commodity, then the residual value of a human mind lies in **framing the problem, judging the answer and deciding what matters** — all of which are question-work. An education that continues to train retrieval is training for a job that has already been automated.

The necessary qualification. Questions are not self-justifying. A question asked without foundational knowledge is not curiosity but confusion, and the internet has demonstrated at scale that scepticism without discipline becomes conspiracy. Endless questioning can also be a way of avoiding commitment: at some point a doctor must operate, an officer must sign, a citizen must vote. **The educated mind holds questions and still acts**, which is the practical form of wisdom.

Conclusion (150 words). Return to the circle. Close on the consequence: a society that rewards answers gets efficient administrators of the present, and a society that rewards questions gets people capable of a different future. End with the specific Indian implication: *the reform India needs is not more information in the syllabus, but examinations that reward a good question.*

Illustration bank

- **Indian:** the Nasadiya Sukta's final doubt; the Upanishadic guru-shishya dialogue; Nachiketa's questions to Yama in the Katha Upanishad; C. V. Raman's question about the colour of the sea; Ramanujan's unschooled questioning of received results.
- **Western:** Socratic method; Feynman's "the first principle is that you must not fool yourself"; Popper on falsifiability, which makes questioning the engine of science.
- **Contemporary:** the design of the UPSC examination itself, which increasingly rewards judgement over recall, and is worth a self-aware sentence.

Openings and closings you can adapt

Opening: "Picture knowledge as a circle. Learning enlarges the interior, but it also lengthens the circumference, which is where we touch what we do not know. This is why the educated find more to ask, not less. Ignorance grows faster than knowledge, and only the educated can see it growing."

Closing: "India does not need syllabi with more in them. It needs examinations in which a good question is worth more than a correct answer, because that single change would alter what every teacher and every student does the next morning."

What kills this essay

- Attributing the line to Helen Keller. It is not traceable to her, and a confident misattribution is exactly the error a well-read examiner notices.
- Romanticising doubt to the point of paralysis, without the qualification that decisions must still be made.
- Writing an education-policy answer with NEP provisions listed. The policy belongs in one section, as evidence.

VALUE ADDITION THAT EARNS MARKS

- The warning against attributing the line to Helen Keller is itself the sharpest thing you can do with this topic, and the alternatives — Socrates and the Nasadiya Sukta — are safely attributable.
- The expanding-circle image, where learning lengthens the circumference of contact with the unknown, is a compact and memorable organising metaphor.
- The argument that free, instant answers relocate the value of education to question-framing and judgement is the most contemporary case available and connects to the AI questions elsewhere on the paper.
- The qualification that questioning without foundational knowledge becomes conspiracy, and that the educated mind must still act, prevents the essay from collapsing into celebration of doubt.

WHERE ANSWERS LOST MARKS

- Confidently attributing an unverifiable quotation.
- Treating all questioning as valuable regardless of grounding.
- Ignoring Indian education realities, which is where the essay becomes specific rather than generic.

SOURCES · EACH LABELLED PRIMARY OR SECONDARY

PRIMARY National Education Policy 2020 — Ministry of Education

<https://www.education.gov.in/nep/about-nep>

BOOK Rig Veda, Nasadiya Sukta (10.129) — the hymn of creation and its closing doubt

BOOK Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian, Penguin, 2005

CURRENT AFFAIRS BEHIND THIS QUESTION · UJIYARI

NEP, the three-language formula and the status of English

<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/07/th-nep-three-language-english-status-2026/>

REVISE THE CONCEPT ON BHARATNOTES

Education and the NEP

bharatnotes.com/subjects/social-justice/welfare-social-sector/education-nep/

7

Section B

125 marks

~1200 words

Section B — ethics of decision-making

Shelving hard decisions is the least ethical course.

Syllabus: Essay, Section B

WHAT THE EXAMINER IS ASKING FOR

A strong claim: not that avoiding hard decisions is unwise, but that it is the **least ethical** course, worse than deciding wrongly. The essay must defend that ranking, which means arguing that indecision is itself a decision, taken covertly, with its costs borne by others.

- Establish the claim's logic early: delay allocates outcomes just as a decision does, but without accountability, reasons or the possibility of appeal.
- Give the psychology of why people shelve, which explains rather than merely condemns.
- Take the counter-argument seriously — sometimes waiting is right — and draw the line between deliberation and evasion. That line is the essay's central contribution.

ESSAY BLUEPRINT

1154 words · paper allows 1200

What the topic is really asking

Why shelving is the *least* ethical course, rather than merely a weak one. The argument runs: a wrong decision is visible, attributable, reviewable and reversible. A shelved decision is none of these. **It produces an outcome while evading responsibility for it**, and that combination is what makes it worse than an honest mistake.

A structure that works**Opening (150 words). Options:**

- *The file*. A proposal that has travelled between three desks for two years, on which nobody has written no. Somewhere a person's pension, licence or land title is inside it.
- *The framing*. Not deciding is not the absence of a decision. It is a decision to let the current arrangement continue, taken by someone who does not want to sign it.
- *Dante*. In the *Inferno*, the ante-hell is reserved for those who lived without blame and without praise, who took no side — refused by heaven and by hell alike. Dante placed the neutral outside even judgement.

Body one: why inaction is a decision. The status quo is not neutral; it is a distribution of advantage. To delay is to rule for whoever is currently benefiting. In administration, delay is the most common form of corruption precisely because it is deniable: the file does not move, no rule is broken, and the applicant learns what to do about it.

Body two: why it is the *least* ethical option. Develop the comparison carefully, because this is the essay's thesis.

- **A wrong decision is accountable.** It has a name, a date and a reason recorded. It can be appealed, reviewed and reversed, and its author can be held to it.
- **A shelved decision is unaccountable.** There is no order to appeal against, no reasons to test, no one to hold responsible. It is harm without an author.
- **It transfers cost to the powerless.** The person waiting is almost always the one with less power; the one who can afford to wait is the one who benefits from waiting.
- **It compounds.** Problems left alone rarely stay the same size. A communal tension unaddressed becomes a riot; a bad loan unrecognised becomes a systemic crisis; a leaking dam unrepaired becomes a disaster.
- **It corrupts the institution.** Once evasion is seen to be safe, it becomes the norm, and the organisation loses the capacity to decide anything difficult.

Body three: why people shelve. Explanation, not just condemnation.

- **Loss aversion and blame asymmetry.** Officials are punished for wrong decisions and rarely for delayed ones, so the incentive is precisely aligned towards inaction. This is a **system design failure**, not merely a character defect.
- **Analysis paralysis** and the pursuit of certainty that will never arrive.
- **Committees and consultations** used as instruments of postponement rather than of deliberation.
- **Political convenience:** deferring a decision past an election, or past one's own tenure.
- **Moral discomfort:** the hardest decisions are hard because both options impose real harm, and the mind avoids that.

Body four: the counter-argument, taken seriously. Sometimes waiting is right: when information is genuinely incomplete and will improve; when tempers must cool; when a decision is not yours to take; when the cost of an irreversible error exceeds the cost of delay; when consultation will materially improve the outcome. **The precautionary principle is a legitimate reason to wait.**

The distinguishing test. This is the section that makes the essay. Deliberation and evasion can be told apart:

1. **Is there a deadline?** Deliberation is bounded; evasion is open-ended.
2. **Is the reason recorded?** A deliberator writes down what he is waiting for; an evader writes nothing.
3. **What exactly are you waiting for?** If you cannot name the information, you are not waiting for it.
4. **Who bears the cost of the delay?** If it is you, it is probably deliberation. If it is someone else, it is probably evasion.
5. **Would you defend the delay publicly?** The answer is usually immediate.

Body five: the public dimension. Judicial pendency, where justice delayed is justice denied is not a slogan but an accurate description of a rights failure. Deferred infrastructure maintenance and the disasters that follow. Climate action postponed by every generation onto the next, which is the largest instance of shelving in human history. Contrast with decisions taken under uncertainty that were right to take: the 1991 reforms, taken in crisis with incomplete information; the decision to hold the first general election in a poor, newly partitioned, largely illiterate country when caution counselled delay.

Body six: what makes decisive action possible. Not courage alone.

- **Institutional protection** for honest decisions: Section 13 of the Prevention of Corruption Act as amended in 2018 requires proof of improper motive rather than merely a wrong outcome, which is precisely intended to unfreeze decision-making.
- **Recorded reasons**, which convert a risky decision into a defensible one.
- **Time limits**, through Right to Public Services Acts and the deemed-approval principle.
- **A culture that distinguishes an error from a wrong**, and reviews the first without punishing it.
- **Reversibility by design:** pilot, review, scale. Many decisions look terrifying only because they are being treated as permanent.

Conclusion (150 words). Return to the file. Close on the ethical asymmetry: *the person who decides wrongly has at least done the work of deciding and can be corrected. The person who shelves has done the harm and left no one to correct.* End with the standard for an officer: decide, record why, and remain open to being shown wrong.

Illustration bank

- **Indian administration:** the phrase "policy paralysis" and its cost; judicial pendency figures, described as a trend rather than an invented number; the deliberate design of the 2018 amendment to the Prevention of Corruption Act to protect honest decision-making.
- **History:** appeasement in the 1930s as the classic case of deferral raising the eventual price. Contrast with the Cuban missile crisis, decided under extreme uncertainty and time pressure.
- **Ethics:** Dante's ante-hell; Edmund Burke's frequently cited line that all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing, which should be flagged as attributed rather than verified.
- **Disaster management:** every post-disaster inquiry that finds the warning was on a desk.

Openings and closings you can adapt

Opening: "There is a file somewhere with three signatures on it and no decision. Nobody has refused it, and that is the point: a refusal could be appealed. Not deciding is the only way to harm someone and leave no one to blame."

Closing: "Decide, record why you decided, and stay open to correction. That sequence is not a formula for being right. It is the only way of being answerable, and answerability is what shelving is designed to escape."

What kills this essay

- Arguing that all decisions must be taken immediately, which ignores the legitimate case for deliberation.
- Failing to give a test that distinguishes deliberation from evasion, which leaves the essay without its central contribution.
- Blaming individual officials without noticing that the incentive structure punishes wrong decisions and rewards delay.

VALUE ADDITION THAT EARNS MARKS

- The accountability asymmetry — a wrong decision has an author and an appeal, a shelved one has neither — is the thesis, and stating it explicitly is what defends the word *least*.
- The five-part test distinguishing deliberation from evasion is a genuinely original contribution to a familiar topic and is portable to GS4 case studies.
- Naming the 2018 amendment to the Prevention of Corruption Act as a deliberate legislative attempt to unfreeze decision-making shows the essay understands the institutional cause, not just the moral failing.
- Dante's ante-hell for those who took no side is a memorable and accurate literary anchor.

WHERE ANSWERS LOST MARKS

- Writing a management essay on decisiveness with no ethical argument.
- Ignoring the precautionary principle and the genuine cases for waiting.
- Quoting the Burke line as verified. It is widely attributed and poorly sourced; flag it if you use it.

SOURCES · EACH LABELLED PRIMARY OR SECONDARY

PRIMARY The Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, as amended in 2018 — bare Act (India Code)
<https://www.indiacode.nic.in/>

PRIMARY Second Administrative Reforms Commission, 4th Report — Ethics in Governance, on decision-making and risk aversion
<https://darpg.gov.in/arc-reports>

BOOK Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Canto III — the ante-hell of those who took no side

REVISE THE CONCEPT ON BHARATNOTES

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8

Section B

125 marks

~1200 words

Section B — leadership

A good leader is one who follows the followers.

Syllabus: Essay, Section B

WHAT THE EXAMINER IS ASKING FOR

A deliberate paradox. It is not saying a leader should be a weathervane. It is asking what *following the followers* actually means — listening, deriving legitimacy from consent, serving rather than commanding — and where that principle stops, because a leader who only follows is not leading. The essay's quality lies in locating that boundary.

- Open by disarming the obvious misreading: this is not populism, and say so early.
- Build the case for follower-centred leadership through servant leadership, democratic legitimacy and practical effectiveness.
- Then draw the limit hard, with real cases where a leader had to go against the followers, and end with the synthesis.

ESSAY BLUEPRINT

1059 words · paper allows 1200

What the topic is really asking

The paradox is the point. Read carelessly, the statement endorses the leader who checks which way the crowd is going and runs to the front. Read properly, it says that **authority flows from those led**, that leadership is a relationship rather than a position, and that a leader who does not know his people cannot take them anywhere. The essay must hold both: leadership rooted in the led, and leadership that sometimes must resist them.

A structure that works

Opening (150 words). Options:

- *The paradox stated and immediately complicated.* "There go my people. I must follow them, for I am their leader" is usually offered as wisdom and is more often quoted than sourced; it is commonly attributed to Ledru-Rollin and the attribution is uncertain, so use it as an aphorism, not a citation. Then ask the harder question: what if the people are going somewhere wrong?
- *Lao Tzu.* In the *Tao Te Ching*, the best leader is the one of whom the people, when the work is done, say: we did this ourselves.
- *Contrast.* Two leaders in a crisis: one announces, the other asks. Which one is obeyed after the crisis passes?

Body one: in what sense a leader follows.

- **Listening as method.** A leader who does not know what people actually want cannot design anything that will be used. Gandhi's year of travelling India on Gokhale's advice before entering politics is the classic instance: he followed the country before leading it.
- **Consent as the source of authority.** In a democracy, authority is delegated and revocable. The leader is an agent, and forgetting that is the beginning of every abuse of office.
- **Servant leadership.** Robert Greenleaf's formulation in *The Servant as Leader* (1970): the leader's first question is whether those served grow as persons, become freer, more autonomous and more likely themselves to serve.
- **Leadership from behind.** Mandela's image of the shepherd who stays at the rear and lets the nimblest go ahead, with the flock following without knowing they are being directed.
- **Effectiveness.** A directive that ignores the ground is not implemented. Every scheme that failed for want of community ownership is evidence for the topic.

Body two: the Indian public administration application. An officer who consults the Gram Sabha, sits in the village rather than summoning it, uses social audit and grievance data as instruments rather than obligations. The Odisha cyclone system works because the community was made the first responder rather than the object of rescue. Participatory budgeting and Kerala's People's Plan Campaign are the same principle at scale. **Following the followers, in administration, is called participation, and it is the difference between a scheme delivered and a scheme used.**

Body three: where the principle stops. This is the essay's most important section, and most candidates will neglect it.

- **Ambedkar and caste.** He led against the overwhelming sentiment of the majority. A leader who had followed the followers on untouchability would have preserved it.
- **Nehru on the Hindu Code Bill,** pressed against substantial opposition within his own party and constituency.
- **Lincoln on emancipation.** Followership would have counselled delay.
- **Every public health decision** taken against popular preference: vaccination, quarantine, seat belts, tobacco control.
- **Constitutional morality** is precisely the idea that some things are not subject to majority sentiment. Rights exist to be protected *from* the followers.
- **Crises** demand speed that consultation cannot supply, and the leader must then act and be answerable afterwards. **The mob problem:** a leader who follows an inflamed crowd is not leading,

and the twentieth century's worst leaders were extraordinarily attentive to what their followers wanted.

The synthesis. Distinguish three things that are routinely confused:

- **Following the followers' *judgement*** is populism. It surrenders the leader's function.
- **Following the followers' *interests*** is service. It is what the topic means.
- **Following the followers' *momentary sentiment*** is cowardice dressed as democracy. The resolution is that a leader **follows the people's interests and leads their opinion**, taking the trouble to persuade rather than either obeying or overriding. Persuasion is the work that distinguishes democratic leadership from both populism and authoritarianism, and it is slow, unglamorous and unavoidable.

Body four: what makes this possible. Humility and the willingness to be told one is wrong; feedback mechanisms that carry bad news upward; emotional intelligence, since a leader who cannot read people cannot represent them; institutions that constrain the leader, which protect followers from a leader and a leader from himself; and succession, since the servant leader's test is what survives him.

Conclusion (150 words). Return to the paradox and dissolve it. *The good leader follows the followers in the sense that a doctor follows the patient: attending closely, deriving the whole purpose from them, and yet obliged sometimes to prescribe what they do not want.* Close on the democratic form: leadership is a conversation in which the leader speaks second and acts first.

Illustration bank

- **Indian:** Gandhi's year of travel before Champaran, and his ability to withdraw a mass movement against the wishes of his followers after Chauri Chaura, which is following and refusing to follow in the same career. Ambedkar. Sardar Patel's integration of the princely states through persuasion backed by resolve. Verghese Kurien and Amul, where the leader's entire structure was ownership by the followers. Kalam.
- **Global:** Mandela on leading from behind. Lincoln. Lee Kuan Yew as the counter-example, effective and consciously unpersuaded by popular opinion, which is worth including for balance.
- **Theory:** Greenleaf's servant leadership; Burns and Bass on transformational leadership; Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 17.

Openings and closings you can adapt

Opening: "Lao Tzu wrote that the best leader is the one of whom the people say, when the work is finished, that they did it themselves. That is not modesty. It is a description of what leadership is for: not to be seen leading, but to leave behind people who no longer need to be led."

Closing: "A leader follows the followers the way a doctor follows the patient: attending to them completely, deriving the entire purpose from them, and prescribing, sometimes, what they would rather not take."

What kills this essay

- Reading the statement as an endorsement of populism and writing an essay on responsiveness with no limiting principle.
- Rejecting it outright as weakness, which ignores everything true in it.
- A parade of leadership qualities with no engagement with the paradox the topic sets.

VALUE ADDITION THAT EARNS MARKS

- Separating the followers' judgement, interests and momentary sentiment is the analytical move that resolves the paradox, and it is the spine of the essay.
- Gandhi both following the country for a year before leading it and withdrawing Non-Cooperation against his followers' wishes is a single career containing both halves of the argument.
- Greenleaf's servant leadership test, whether those served grow freer and more autonomous, is attributable and precise, unlike most leadership aphorisms.
- Flagging that the 'there go my people' line is of uncertain attribution protects you from a confident misattribution and quietly demonstrates scholarly care.

WHERE ANSWERS LOST MARKS

- Writing a management essay listing leadership traits.
- Missing the limiting section on when a leader must go against the followers, which is where the essay's judgement is displayed.
- Attributing the Ledru-Rollin aphorism confidently; it is uncertain.

SOURCES · EACH LABELLED PRIMARY OR SECONDARY

- BOOK** Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 1970
- BOOK** Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 17
- BOOK** Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Little Brown, 1994

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