

How to bell the CAT

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You can find an infinite amount of information about preparing for CAT from various sources. However all that info is generally aimed at the average junta. This piece is just for IITians.

So what makes CAT difficult? Even for people who've cracked JEE, there is something about CAT. I see several reasons for this: insufficient preparation, changing pattern, lack of focus, ego hassles.

To begin with, there is a sense of complacency after 3 years in the system. You know your place in class, work just as much as is needed to maintain it, and relax. Coming back into the cut-throat arena after a gap is difficult. Forgotten is the constant, in-the-background tension of JEE days. WAKE UP! You need to work hard, real hard, however smart you maybe.

That brings us to the central issue. What to work hard at? Again the choice is immense. IMS material is good, CL is more gas than solid, baki sab bakwaas. Nice tricks are OK for impressing colleagues, but they put too much burden on your system during the 2 hrs. Better an 8-inch shell bang on target than a 10-inch one gone astray.

Getting the material is usually not a problem. Now what to do with it. Of course working through it cover to cover does not promise to be very efficient. It is better to try out a few test papers in the beginning and see where you are weak. And work on areas in which you are mediocre. Yes, mediocre, not bad. If you feel you are outright bad in some area it is better to chuck it in favor of a substitute. For example if jumbled paragraphs stun you into a zombie state while reading goes smoothly, it's fine: concentrate on your reading speed. Obviously you can't chuck whole English section for data interpretation: there are separate cutoffs for each section.

A very potent weapon paper setters have is changing the pattern. We (JEE-98) guys felt it face-on though now JEE has almost given up the practice of surprise changes. It is still the norm in CAT. This time (2001) English had whole new question types. Ironically the only sure bet against changes is being *unprepared*: if you expect nothing you expect everything. That being unfeasible the way out could be to have a lot of unstructured practice in the initial phase. This is a delicate point. Timed tests are necessary, but too much of them will leave you feeling anchorless in case the pattern undergoes a sudden twist. A balance is needed here. What I would suggest is while you are working on specific skills just try to do things as fast as possible; later when you reach the full length test stage get a clock.

Let's move to specifics about sections now. The easiest first: Maths. Oops...this might be the toughest too!! Trouble is, here there are no short cuts like word lists or speed-reading exercises. Plus this is the most unnerving one: here I am, an IITian, best of the best, and I

can't solve this stupid problem about a kid going around a circle on a bike. Shit! Thoughts like this can lead to instant disaster. The remedy is to suppress your ego, take off your coat and dirty your hands. Practice everything. Believe me, today you'll take more time in multiplying two 4-digit numbers than you did in Class X. Even Tyson needs to exercise. And just jumping into the ring and banging away will only give you sore biceps. Work your way up. Don't skip the easier exercises as being a waste of time. And mug multiplication tables up to 19. (Some go up to 25 but I don't see the point.)

One troublesome area in this part is number theory. Like "If a, b, c are all odd, no root of $ax^2 + bx + c$ can be real." If you know how to do this, it takes <15 seconds (consider $b^2 - 4ac$ modulo 8), but if you don't it can trap you in an infinite loop or, worse, cause an error. Best is to read something about congruences from a basic number theory book like Niven & Zuckerman. Very few people do this but if you still have >3 months to go the investment of effort makes sense. Else forget it.

On to English now. The two main divisions are: one, the passages and two, the rest. Unless you are from Jhumritalaiya "the rest" should be doable. After the word-list is all mugged up of course. Now which wordlist to use? IMS has a wordlist but I feel it has a lot of slag surrounding the ore (i.e. a lot of easy words too). Better use Barron's GRE wordlist. A warning here: if you think your vocabulary is real weak go for IMS. But if you can comfortably read the editorial in the Hindu don't waste your time. And then practice. And work out strategies, your own strategies, for the main question types. Like how to set jumbled sentences in order. Mine was to read all sentences in the order given very quickly but with understanding. If the paragraph is not too convoluted in content you will usually get the story it is telling. Two possible pitfalls in this strategy: one, if you don't get the idea in the first reading you really don't know what to do. And two, very rarely, you might get the wrong idea. Arguments can often be reversed. Both make sense: "Night has fallen. The sun has gone down." and "The sun has gone down. Night has fallen." But this is rare. The other strategy people use is to skim through all the sentences in 3-5 seconds without understanding but looking for key words. Key words often give away the first sentence. And then you can unravel the whole story. This is an $O(n^2)$ time algorithm though. For those looking just to clear the cutoff in this section a third fool-proof strategy is to try out all the choices.

Other things like sentence completion, matching words with meanings (introduced in CAT-2001) etc are easy when (and only when) you have the word list in your memory bank. That leaves the passages now. For this part the good news is that a little focused practice can take you very far. The bad news is that it is difficult to focus. There are, again, many different strategies possible, all with their own supporters. The biggest debate is whether the questions should be read before or after the passage itself. Decide either way but decide fast. And practice only the way you want to go. Both ideas have their merits: it really is up to you which way you feel comfortable. I can't point down a path here because when it comes to talking about it reading the questions first makes a lot of sense. But I never did that myself. So there.

Concentrate consciously. This part needs maximum patience because you need to invest a lot of time (4-5 minutes) with no apparent returns. Be cool, and push it into your mind that this takes time and there is no way you can get out of this. Keep asking yourself: what am I learning from what I am reading. This makes sure you don't wander off. This can easily be made into a regular (and very useful) habit by doing this on newspaper articles everyday (the Hindu is excellent for this).

Finally we come to Data Interpretation. Here the only rule is that there are no rules. Flexibility and agility in your thinking process is likely to be your biggest asset for this part of the game. Reading graphs and bar-charts and stuff like that is something even Class VII kids know how to do, you just have to do it fast. To do it fast you need to be quick in arriving at estimates. You never need to divide or multiply accurately and sometimes even additions can be done approximately to get the right choice. Using the answer choices is very important for things like finding the fraction or percentage of a set of data with a particular property. Doing these things exactly is very deadly trap one can fall into: after the rigors of reading passages here is finally something you can do mechanically. Doing it mechanically will give you the right answer but will extract a heavy price in terms of time.

That's more or less it. Come September it will be time to give tests. Tests in your own room are ok for most part but to get the real feel of how it is going to be it is imperative to give a few on -the-spot ones. IMS tests are great (though they were in Lucknow only in my time), CL ones are ok. Trouble with CL is you also get a lot of fundas from a person hardly qualified to give them. When running a fever, better gulp a pill yourself than go to a quack.

Finally some general suggestions. Do not take the whole exercise lightly. Preparing for CAT is going to be vastly different from JEE days, simply because CAT is primarily a skill test whereas JEE is more about knowledge. So at times you are likely to feel that the net addition in your ability even after a week of study and practice is nil. It won't be nil, it will only be intangible. So don't lose heart and keep slogging. After CAT there is more than sufficient time to spruce up your resume and get set for GD/interview, so no point wasting time on that before December. Discussions with friends and colleagues about your preparation seem to be, to me at least, a lose-lose scenario. If you are better than the other guy you are wasting your time; if he is better you will lose confidence. It is better to bolt your door and just do your own thing.

These were all my personal ideas and opinions. They worked well enough for me to get me calls from all IIMs but they just might not suite you. Use at your own risk. No liability if you flunk. Any queries/doubts/comments are welcome. Mail me at "sshekharb@yahoo.co.uk". If something seems not right with all I have said above, you are probably right. I usually keep to the left.