

How to study properly - Jim Burton

There is probably only one thing that all gymnastics judges will agree on and that is how much we hate taking judging exams and the obligatory study preparation involved. I have great empathy for those judges who are extremely knowledgeable and well prepared who often struggle to reach the next achievement level because the examination becomes an overwhelming obstacle. Ask these individuals questions, deductions and rules, the answers are returned in quick succession. Place those same questions in a written form marked JCI, and the wealth of information seems to evaporate. Working in the civil service arena where most examinations have absolutely nothing to do with your job, I found the key to passing these exams is proper study methods and streamlining preparation.

There is certainly no singular method that's applicable to everyone, but the core principles are a constant. First, determine what you feel is your favorite method of preparation. Some people live by flip cards especially for element identification because it simulates judging. Others prefer straight memorization because of the repetitious nature. Certain individuals demand quiet surroundings with zero interruptions. Many use acronyms and rhyming schemes. Yet others enjoy listening to audio tape recordings or using online practice exams. Create your study plan based on the method, or combination of methods you are most comfortable with to enhance your learning and confidence.

We are aware of how gymnasts develop muscle memory to acquire new skills and consistency. The muscles learn by repetition to react automatically. As judges, we need to develop our 'memory muscle'. Here are some suggestions:

- Prepare your study information [cards, outlines, charts] exactly the way you do when judging. Simply input the appropriate data and deductions for the exam level you are studying for. Avoid the temptation to overload your study guides with minutia and information that you would normally need to look up in Rules & Policies. Keep it precise, focused and simple.
- If you are studying alone, change the starting position on the answer key. For example, if memorizing compulsory deductions, go bottom/up during one session, top/down another and random the next session. It's just like judging, gymnasts don't make mistakes in the order they appear in the book. If you only memorize in one format, during the exam you will be prone to think beyond what the questions are really asking.
- Avoid overloading! When exercising, your body requires rest periods. When studying, so does your brain. There is only so much information you can absorb in one sitting. Experts for civil service exam preparation strongly recommend stopping every 20 minutes to keep the mind fresh and focused. Several smaller study sessions versus one or two long sessions will ultimately result in greater recall retention. If you begin making multiple mistakes or start questioning yourself during a session, it's time for a study break.
- Change the format every time you study. The first day: V, UB, BB & FX. The next day, reverse or mix the order. The third day, only review the general deductions and element values and so on. If you are studying with a friend, have them mix the order of how they ask questions. Remember, the goal is increasing your memory muscle through a variety of mental exercises.
- If you are struggling with specific memorization, write out element lists and deductions the same way you would script a routine. The key is correlating elements and deductions just as you do while judging.
- If you are only taking the film, be sure to practice judge with other people. Utilize films that have routines one notch above what you expect to see on the test. This eliminates the surprise factor. Remember to change your format, one session only do start values, the next session, concentrate on execution and composition.
- Always avoid studying with people who are hyper and negative. This behavior only creates self-doubt. You must repeatedly tell yourself, "I am a good judge, I am prepared and I will be successful on this exam."
- Temper the rate of study to allow yourself to 'peak' at the exam. I've witnessed many judges who overload too early in the process only to experience blanking out during the exam. A steady pace will always yield an effectively trained memory muscle.
- Reach out to experienced, higher rated judges for assistance. Their explanations may offer the simple adjustment needed to conquer areas you traditionally struggle with or repeatedly get wrong on exams.

Never accept the premise that a poor test result is indicative of your knowledge or abilities. Rather, it is an opportunity to identify problem areas and a myriad of study methods exist to help you attain future success.