

My approach to the first part exam – Nathaniel Hiscock

There will be plenty of people with plenty of advice, and everyone studies differently, so please don't take this as gospel. I first wrote this for a few close mates who got on to anaesthetics before my written results were out, and so despite some editing at times it is a little rough around the edges and probably gives a little bit of insight into my psyche at the time. I hope this can set the scene for your year ahead and provide a practical guide to getting started, pushing through and passing first time.

The exam is stressful but, as a bit of perspective from someone who wasn't on a training scheme when studying for the exam, I found the job insecurity you faced before getting on, or are currently experiencing, much more taxing.

Mindset

It takes 1000 hours

- True. On a quick back of the hand calculation I did well over 1000 hours of dedicated study and tutorials before the written
 - Don't set a timer like I heard someone did. There is no magic number to pass. And this seems like a really good way to get depressed...
- Importantly you have to motivate yourself to do 3-4 hours of applied, effective study on most days after work and 6-8 hours of the same on your days off, for the next year. It is really hard to do this when you're living in the same house as your partner.
 - Bringing dinner to work and staying back until 1030-11 is a great way to find some space to study
- Speak to your loved ones and non-medical friends early, and set their expectations for the year to come
- Sadly, you will have to miss many social events, but crucially make sure that you plan to attend the ones that matter (Xmas catch ups, big birthdays), and also make sure that you don't go too long (>3-4 weeks) without catching up with your good friends
 - I read a great saying about how resilience is not about how tough you are but determined by how you recover and the supports you have at your disposal. This is very true.

Breadth and depth

- The breadth and depth of knowledge required is incredibly daunting at first
- It reminded of the first few months of clinical medicine in med school, where you're drowning and thinking how the hell am I supposed to know all of this?
- Eventually, like throwing chicken shit at chicken wire, things begin to stick and build up. Have faith, it will happen, but maybe not until next year (for those sitting in the second sitting of your first year, which I highly recommend).
 - Giving yourself, and your loved ones, 18 months off before final exam study begins is a priceless gift. As is not dragging out first part study for longer than a year.

Stay on top

- Set a schedule in MAK95 and stick to it or get ahead when events are on the horizon that will interfere with your plans. Be disciplined. Do not fall behind. **Do not go back and formally revise topics until you've covered every last piece of content.** Save the revision for the 3 months before the exam.

The goal

- You want to walk into the written and honestly believe that there is nothing that they can ask that you couldn't give an (pass) answer for. This is very achievable and a great place to be in, but it takes effort and application.
- Your goal is to pass well, not just pass. Don't aim for the Renton, but if you aim for the stars you'll fall in the clouds...
- You only want to sit this once. Therefore you need to be confident that even if you have a bad day you'll pass.
- Also, it's actually super interesting

"But it's not fair", examiners are unreasonable/ hypocritical, "this knowledge is pointless"

- Yes, there are many contradicting examiners reports. Sometimes they want things they didn't ask for. Sometimes there are no marks for things that you were sure they wanted.
- Everyone sitting the exam is in the same boat. Just read all of the examiner's reports, learn the game and accept it for what it is. Complaining about this is wasted energy. In the exam, answer the SAQ and then if you've got time write down stuff that you may or may not get bonus marks for.
 - Answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question. And only then if you have time add your five cents.
 - YOBOs – Young, old, bariatric, obstetric and sick. Writing about a couple of these must be worth at least ten cents.
- Despite what people say, I did not learn a single thing for this exam that didn't contribute to my understanding and/or practice. If you engage with the content you'll have a much more enjoyable year.

Essential resources

Primer for the primary

- Written by one of the examiners it lists all the LOs by topic and the chapters they recommend reading
- If you don't read what the examiners tell you to read you're mad
- This only came out a few years ago and is a godsend. The process of studying for this exam is far easier for us now than the poor souls who sat it just a few years ago.
- The document is constantly updated and available from this website. Also has some general advice at the start.
- For each LO it has a list of TF questions (which are the same as the PLOOD email ones), with a reference to where they are from
- <https://primarydailylo.wordpress.com/2018/03/09/a-primer-for-the-primary-examination/>

- Whoever made this is our saviour. We all owe them a hug/ beer. It's the best money you will ever spend.
- Put simply it is your curriculum, learning planner and primary study resource
- It has every past SAQ with examiners report and links to many of the user generated model answers and you tick them off as you go
- Occasionally it has errors/ doesn't perform as well as you'd like but it's an absolute godsend. Take user submitted responses with a grain of salt.
- <https://www.mak95.com/>

PLOOD

- Sign up for their almost daily email. I didn't read it religiously but their special posts analysing the exams are very valuable, and the cynicism will bring a smile to your dial.
- If anything the emails nudge you to keep studying and have the odd mental health day built in.

Textbooks

- Besides Magee Tooley all the curriculum texts are available through the ANZCA library once you register (so formalise your registration now and get access to the library before you start in Feb).
- That said learning difficult concepts/ huge amounts of content from a screen is suboptimal and the textbooks are tax deductible
- The online resources are great for the odd chapters in books that you don't have
- Yes, you need multiple physiology and pharm textbooks. Books often do one topic really well and are poor on others. Sometimes there are seminal chapters that you must read (there's a few in Millers but don't buy Millers, especially when the next edition is out in a few months)

Courses

- Book a spot on a course as soon as you can. They all have their pros and cons.
- Two weeks of dedicated study leave (Waikato or ANZCA Victorian) is better than one (Monash).

Study groups

- Essential for camaraderie, motivation and support
- Not good for getting through the content
- Good for discussing/ explaining the odd tricky topics
- Come revision time you just need one or two people to sit down with most days of the week and pump out 7-8 SAQs (half and exam) to time. Learn from each others knowledge and technique. Same goes for VIVAs

Trainee made resources

- Ketamine nightmares – Stuart Watson's SAQ answers are incredible.
- Jake Barlow's Part One notes
- Adam Hollingsworth's Diagrams or Die and Definitions Dictionary

Books to buy now (most recent versions/ the ones in the primer)

- West resp physiology
- Chambers basic physiology for anaesthetists
- Power and Kam Physiology
- Hemmings and Egan pharmacology and physiology for anaesthetists
- Peck and Hill pharmacology for anaesthesia and intensive care
- Cross and Plunkett physics pharmacology and physiology for anaesthetists
- Scarth and Smith Oxford drugs in anaesthesia and intensive care
- Petkov essential pharmacology for the ANZCA primary (Made by Aussie anaesthetist, self published)
- Brandis physiology VIVA – self published, you have to send him an email

Getting started

Start now (beginning of October)

Formulating a study plan

- Use the automatic one from MAK95. Physiology, then pharm, then physics. I argue against doing related phys and pharm topics at the same time, because when you come to cover the pharm separately 3 months later it builds in an element of revision.
- Set your study calendar so that you complete the entire course 2 weeks before the dates of the Victorian ANZCA course (even if you're attending a different one)
- This means you need to have pretty much covered all of physiology before you start work as a registrar in February.
- Don't worry about revising for your hospital run tutes. They are either great revision or an introduction/ taste of a topic that you haven't covered yet. It makes for cyclical learning and helps reinforce the content.
- You must understand the first section of Peck and Hill intimately
- Equipment, measurement and physics will take much longer than you think/ what MAK95 gives

Doing the work

- At first, it's very hard to study for 3-4 hours a day as you haven't done it for years. Short bursts, regular breaks. It gets easier...
- It will take you a few months to find your groove, you'll chop and change your method. That's fine.
- You need to make notes that you can easily revise from come May next year. I created about 800 very detailed index cards (one per SAQ or important topic). Others used one note. **You must make your own notes to revise off**, do not rely on someone else's.

My eventual refined approach to a topic was:

1. Go to the primer page for the topic and read the chapters/ texts they suggest
2. Go to MAK95 and formulate an ideal answer for every SAQ, these were my study notes. More detail is always better, even if it couldn't be written in the time given. Read all the examiners reports as you go. There are many repeats and but read the examiners reports for each time it was asked previously. Make a mental note of poorly answered SAQs.
3. Go back to the LOs and make sure you have written down detailed notes on every topic by doing the SAQs. If topics haven't been covered by the SAQ answers prepare your own notes from the texts above.
4. Go to the MCQ section of MAK95 and do all the MCQs, add things you've missed to your notes.
5. Go to the PLOOD/ primer TF Qs and do them all (noting the references), add things you've missed to your notes.
6. Repeat on next topic and churn...

Revision

- **Finish every last bit of content before the Victorian ANZCA course.** It is tough to do and I don't believe many people actually achieve this, but it sets you up better than anything else. I would love to see how high the pass rate is for people who did this, and it shows at the course if you haven't covered the material.
- It's hard to motivate yourself to revise... The first two weeks before the course you're trying to find your vibe again, doing your first painful SAQs to time and have an existential crisis about everything you've forgotten. Have faith, it will come back.

The written

I broke my written revision plan into content, SAQ and MCQ revision

Content

1. The course is your first global revision, each night I went home and revised the topics/ fleshed out my notes from the lectures of the day. After covering every topic as above there were only a handful of niche points in the course that I'd never come across.
2. Go back through all of your notes and preformed SAQ answers (write out key concepts, definitions, graphs etc) in depth over two months (in addition to the SAQ and MCQ practice below).
3. Go back through nearly all of your notes in the week and a half before the exam (taking one week of annual leave...)
 - During this time get a book and write down all the core, hard to remember and peripheral topic details/ equations etc. Re-read this book each day in the two days before the SAQ.
- During this time the occasional diagrams or die and definitions list session was worthwhile
 - That said, I never wrote learned most definitions. If you understand a concept you can make up a correct definition on the fly

SAQs

Each day

- 5-8 SAQs to time a day, 1-minute reading time and 10 minutes writing time per question, with or without a partner
 - My approach to the SAQ exam was to get 5 minutes ahead of the clock in the first hour, and then spend strictly 10 minutes per question from then on in. Don't look back. Use the five minutes left at the end to add details to only the last few SAQs that are fresh in your head.

OR

- Alternatively, 15 x 2 min SAQ structures is an excellent, less gruelling exercise, for when you're knackered, and allows you to cover more content
- Get as many SAQ half or full papers corrected as you can by people who've passed
- Never look at the most recent SAQ paper. Do it under exam conditions one month out. Get this corrected by a past examiner if you can.
- Whenever you can, do SAQs with a friend. You need the motivation and it's a great opportunity to feed off each other's knowledge, see how their approach works (or doesn't) and keeps you somewhat sane.

MCQs

- In the last 6 weeks do every past MCQ you can get your hands on
- That's the only preparation you need for the MCQs if you've studied properly for the SAQ, including doing all the PLOOD statements and MAK95 MCQs

The VIVA

1. Take a week off after the written, play a lot of Xbox.
2. Revise your notes on the big topics over the course of the six weeks
3. Regularly use the book you created in the week before the SAQ to commit the hard to remember stuff and core details to memory
4. Draw diagram or die out a couple of times
5. Do VIVAs
 - Get a place at the hospital run VIVA nights
 - VIVAs at work
 - VIVAs after work
 - VIVAs with your mates

Any VIVA practice is good VIVA practice

- Core topics
- Peripheral topics
- In vogue topics
- Historical examiner favourites
- Crazy hard VIVAs and question sessions
- Learn how to draw and talk
- Learn how to apply your knowledge on the fly to answer questions you've never heard of/ considered

How to stand out

Know a lot, which requires a lot of study

Revise effectively, so that you know a lot on the day

Answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question. Then add your five cents.

- If you can give a sound and comprehensive answer and then at the end add a piece of information that has a bit of a wow factor associated with it, you'll set yourself apart

Write a lot, write fast and write legibly*

- *They must have been fairly committed to decipher some of my handwriting, but please try to make their job as easy as you can

In the VIVA speak quickly, clearly and precisely.

- After VIVAs people often gave me feedback like, "you should think about speaking slower," but if the examiner understands you and doesn't ask you to repeat your answer then just keep going at the rate you're going.
 - Both the SAQ and the VIVA are "marks per unit time" exams, there is never enough time to get 100%.
 - If they don't understand you, definitely slow down and rephrase as required
- You have two options for each question, and you need to fluidly move between the two approaches:
 - Answer the question and shut up. Wait for the next question.
 - Answer the question and rapidly tell them what you think they're going to ask next/ flesh out your answer with fancy details.
- It's an art that you will learn, with the trade-off being between a stop-start, jarring VIVA vs potentially wasting time on things that won't get you marks.

The first steps

1. Buy everything and set up your MAK95 study calendar
2. Read West's cover to cover and then the Chambers' respiratory chapters, taking notes. West's is a rite of passage and Chambers gives an anaesthetic viewpoint and very easy to understand.
3. You have to know pretty much everything in these books and a bit more stuff that you'll pick up from Nunn's (the anaesthetic chapter in particular)

Work hard and look forward to life on the other side,

Nathaniel