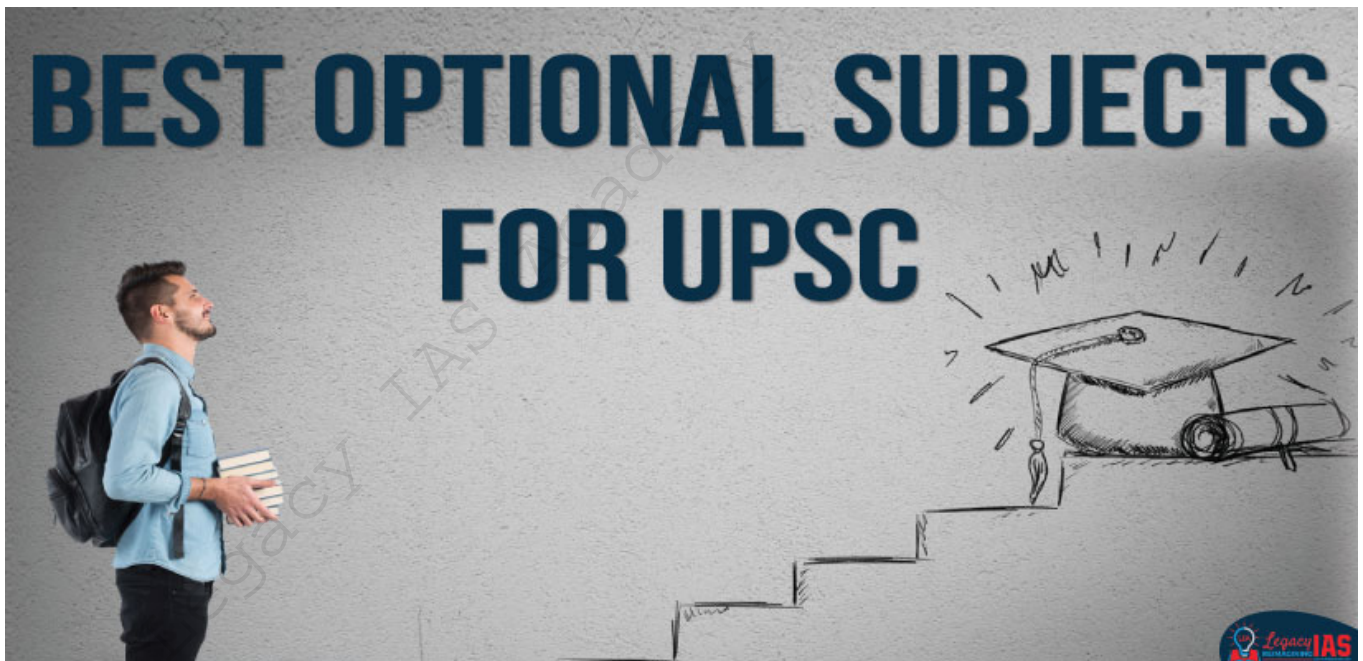




Best Optional Subject for UPSC

How to Select the Best Optional Subject for UPSC Civil Services Exam – Step by Step Guideline for selecting the Right Optional Subject.



The Optional Subject in UPSC CSE Mains is indubitably the most critical component that acts as a deciding factor in, not only the success potential of the candidate but also the level of success regarding the rank that an aspirant can achieve.

We are so confident when we say that the optional subject holds a very important position in the exam because – there are 2 papers to be attempted in the UPSC CSE Main Examination for the Optional Subject of your choice, each carrying 250 marks (a total of 500/1750 would mean 28.5% of the marks in the Main exam). In comparison, the General Studies (GS) papers carry only 250 marks even though each paper includes more than 3 static subjects.

- It is important to note that – although the weightage of the optional paper is 500 marks



out of the 1750 marks are located for the main examination of the UPSC CSE (i.e., about 28% the total marks in Mains), most of the candidates at times score more than 35 to 40% of their total marks obtained in the optional subject papers alone.

- Also, the contribution of Optional marks in the total score obtained in the Main Examination relative to marks obtained in the General Studies (GS) papers is higher. It means, on an average a successful candidate scores 35%-45% of the maximum marks in GS papers, while they score 55%-65% (280-310 out of 500 marks) in the Optional Paper. This variation is probably due to the fact that the knowledge base for GS is the same for all students who have cleared Preliminary exam.
- Since the impact of the optional subject on selection is skewed, it becomes extremely important to select the right optional subject for you after careful consideration.

About the Optional Subject Paper in UPSC Civil Services Examination

- Of the three stages of the UPSC Civil Services Examination, the Main examination carries maximum weightage in deciding the success of the candidate (1750 marks out of the 2025 considered for final ranking). In the Main examination itself, 2 out of the 9 Subjective papers that a candidate has to attempt, will be on an Optional Subject that the Candidate gets to choose (at the time of applying for the Prelims examination itself).
- Unlike the earlier times (pre-2013 changes), candidates have to now choose just one optional subject for both the papers.
- Each of the 2 papers on the Optional Subject will be held for 250 marks and the duration for each paper is 3 hours.
- The scope of the syllabus for Optional Subject papers (Paper VI and Paper VII) for the examination is roughly of the Honours degree level i.e., a level higher than the bachelors' degree and lower than the masters' degree. In the case of Engineering, Medical Science and law, the level corresponds to the bachelors' degree.

Candidates may choose any one of the optional subjects from the following list:

1. Agriculture
2. Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Science
3. Anthropology
4. Botany
5. Chemistry
6. Civil Engineering
7. Commerce and Accountancy
8. Economics
9. Electrical Engineering



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10. Geography
 11. Geology
 12. History
 13. Law
 14. Management
 15. Mathematics
 16. Mechanical Engineering
 17. Medical Science
 18. Philosophy
 19. Physics
 20. Political Science and International Relations
 21. Psychology
 22. Public Administration
 23. Sociology
 24. Statistics
 25. Zoology
 26. Literature of any one of the following languages: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu and English.
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[Click Here to go through the Syllabus of the Optional Subjects](#)

Optional Subjects that are generally considered as the Best Optional for UPSC

Top Optional Subjects based on Success rate

The Table Below will provide you with the LATEST SUCCESS RATE DATA (UPSC CSE 2018) (from the 70th Annual Report released by UPSC as of January 2022)

LATEST SUCCESS RATES OF OPTIONAL SUBJECTS IN UPSC CSE 2018 (excluding

**Literature)**

Optional Subject	Candidates Appeared	Candidates Recommended	Success Rate in %
Agriculture	102	3	2.9%
Animal husbandry and veterinary science	15	1	6.7%
Anthropology	797	65	8.2%
Botany	21	1	4.8%
Chemistry	114	12	10.5%
Civil Engineering	115	6	5.2%
Commerce & Accountancy	186	27	14.5%
Economics	200	23	11.5%
Electrical Engineering	164	17	10.4%
Geography	1993	101	5.2%
Geology	41	1	2.4%
History	848	52	6.1%
Law	201	27	13.4%
Management	59	8	13.6%
Mathematics	344	28	8.1%
Mechanical Engineering	152	9	5.9%
Medical Science	220	24	10.9%
Philosophy	463	42	9.1%
Physics	120	13	10.8%
Political Science and International Relations	1317	105	8.0%
Psychology	128	9	7.0%
Public Administration	726	67	9.2%
Sociology	1072	107	10.0%
Statistics	2	0	0%
Zoology	43	6	14.0%

Success rates in Literature Optional Subjects – data for UPSC CSE 2018.

Literature Optional Subject	Candidates Appeared	Candidates Recommended	Success Rate
Assamese	3	0	0
Bengali	4	0	0
Punjabi	19	3	15.8
Gujarati	91	6	6.6
Kannada	79	4	5.1



Marathi	7	0	0
English	21	3	14.3
Urdu	16	3	18.8
Tamil	73	8	11.0
Sanskrit	54	2	3.7
Malayalam	85	9	10.6
Maithili	41	1	2.4
Telugu	57	3	5.3
Hindi	236	15	6.4
Manipuri	11	1	9.1
Oriya	4	0	0
Sindhi (Devanagari script)	2	0	0

- Based on the data of the Civil Services Examination 2018, given in the 70th annual report released by UPSC, it can be seen that Geography was the most preferred subject among the optional subjects chosen by the candidates. Political Science and International Relations was the second most opted for subject, followed by Sociology.
- Among the subjects opted for by 100 or more candidates, the highest percentage of success can be seen in Commerce and Accountancy Optional (14.5%), followed by Law (13.4%) and Economics (11.5%).
- As far as the academic background of the recommended candidates are concerned, the majority of them were from engineering background (62.7%).
- **It is also evident that most of the candidates have made a cross-domain shift from their original stream and opted for humanities subjects (such as Anthropology, Sociology) despite being from Engineering and Science backgrounds.**

Interpretation of success rates:

- It should be noted that despite a lack of overlap with the GS syllabus, the highest success rate is seen in Commerce and Accountancy optional.
- It is also important to note that a large number of candidates (i.e., greater than 1000) opt for subjects such as Geography, PSIR and Sociology irrespective of the higher success rates seen in subjects such as Law, Management and Commerce and Accountancy.
- This goes on to show that a candidate can take up subjects which are not commonly opted for, and still be successful in clearing the exam. It also shows that higher success rates do not mean that you should choose that optional - as it is quite obvious that the smaller number of students who cleared with subjects such as Commerce and Accountancy had a well-established knowledge base and background on these subjects and it may not be the right choice for the 1000+ students who opted for Geography/PSIR.



Best Optional Subject based on Overlap of Syllabus

Many aspirants consider that selecting an optional subject which has a significant amount of its syllabus overlapping with that of the General Studies subjects in the GS papers (like History and Geography in GS-1, Polity and Governance in GS-2 etc.,) will prove to be a big score-differentiator in the Main exam by improving the overall score. Top Optionals for UPSC that are considered to be the best based on this factor of syllabus overlap are discussed below.

I. Geography

Geography is one of the most opted-for subjects when it comes to optional paper, owing to the significant overlap of the syllabus with that of the GS-1 paper in Mains and a portion of the GS-3 paper as well. The level of understanding that an aspirant acquires in various topics such as Physical geography, Indian geography, Human and Economic geography, etc., while preparing for Geography optional is much higher than what is required for the GS-1 and GS-3 papers. This added to the fact that Geography as a subject is quite rigid and the standard is the cause for many students to view the preparation for Geography optional as a significant booster of their scores in GS 1 paper. Preparation for the Geography optional will also benefit students in the Prelims exam due to the depth in which information is covered.

II. History

History is another subject that is considered to be a good optional due to the overlap of its syllabus with the GS-1 paper. Along with that, preparing for history as an optional would also be significantly helpful in the Prelims exam (relative to other optionals). Due to this, in a manner similar to Geography optional, a large number of aspirants opt for History as their optional.

III. Political Science and International Relations

Preparation for Political Science and International Relations (PSIR) as an optional, sets up a significantly advanced level of understanding and familiarity when it comes to topics covered in the GS-2 paper such as International Relations. This is the cause for PSIR to be considered amongst the best optional subjects for UPSC CSE by many aspirants.



IV. Public Administration

Public Administration as an optional has the advantage of covering many concepts under the topic of Governance in GS-2. Along with this factor, there is also the perceived notion that preparation for the Public Administration paper will be quite useful during the training period at LBSNAA and during service, after clearing the exam.

V. Sociology

Various topics under Society in GS-1, Social Justice in GS-2, as well as the common topics to be covered for the Essay paper, will all be covered in-depth as part of the Sociology optional syllabus. Since the Essay paper is considered to be a significant deciding factor for the total marks obtained, many aspirants choose Sociology as their optional subject to help them score well in the Essay paper.

Top Optionals for UPSC based on Number of candidates opting for them

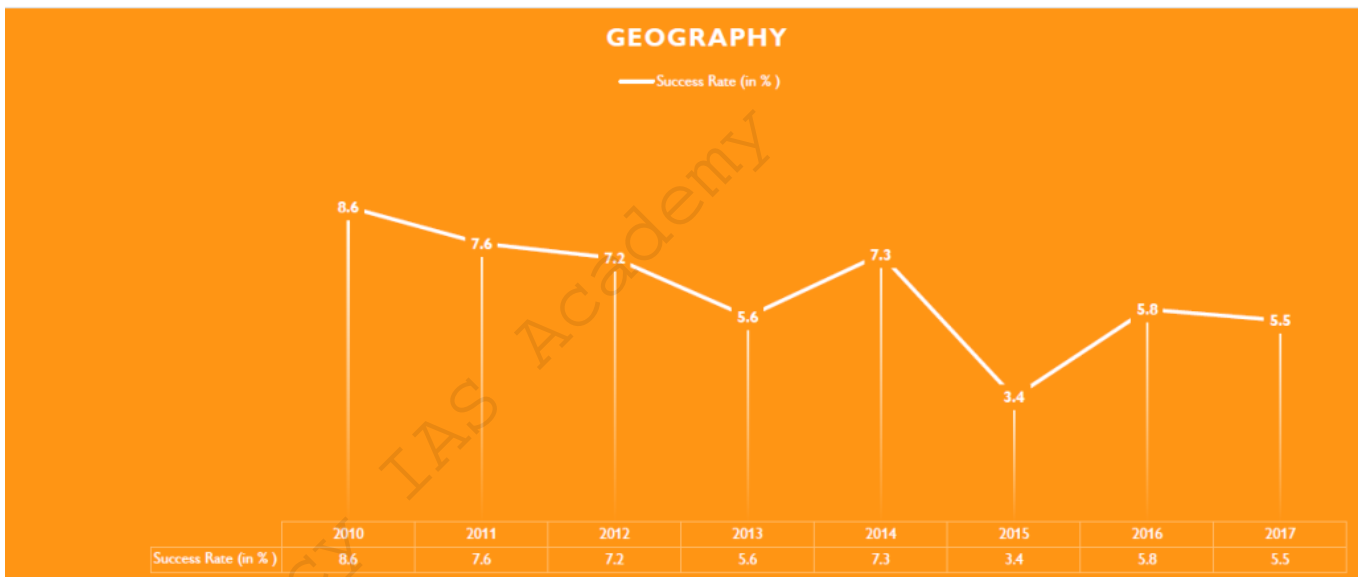
- Based on data, it is quite evident that there are certain subjects which are chosen by a large number of aspirants consistently over the years.
- The popularity of these subjects is primarily owed to the fact that there is a significant amount of syllabus overlap with the GS subjects. We can tell this conclusively because History, Geography, Political Science and International Relations and Sociology are amongst the optional opted for by a large number of candidates consistently.
- However, the success rates of these optionals are not consistent enough for drawing any inferences on the feasibility of choosing these optionals to expect a higher chance of success.

Optional Subject	Approximate Number of Aspirants
History	3500
Geography	3500
Public Administration	3000
Political Science	1800
Sociology	1800
Philosophy	1000

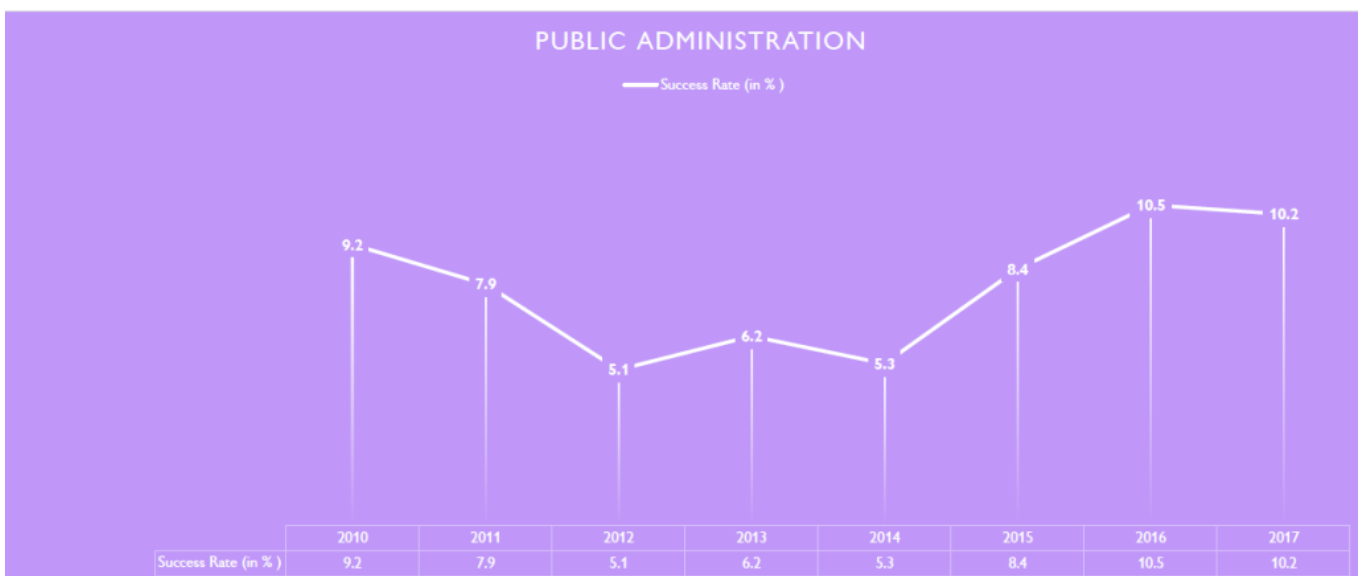


Fluctuating Success Rates of Popular Optional Subjects

Geography



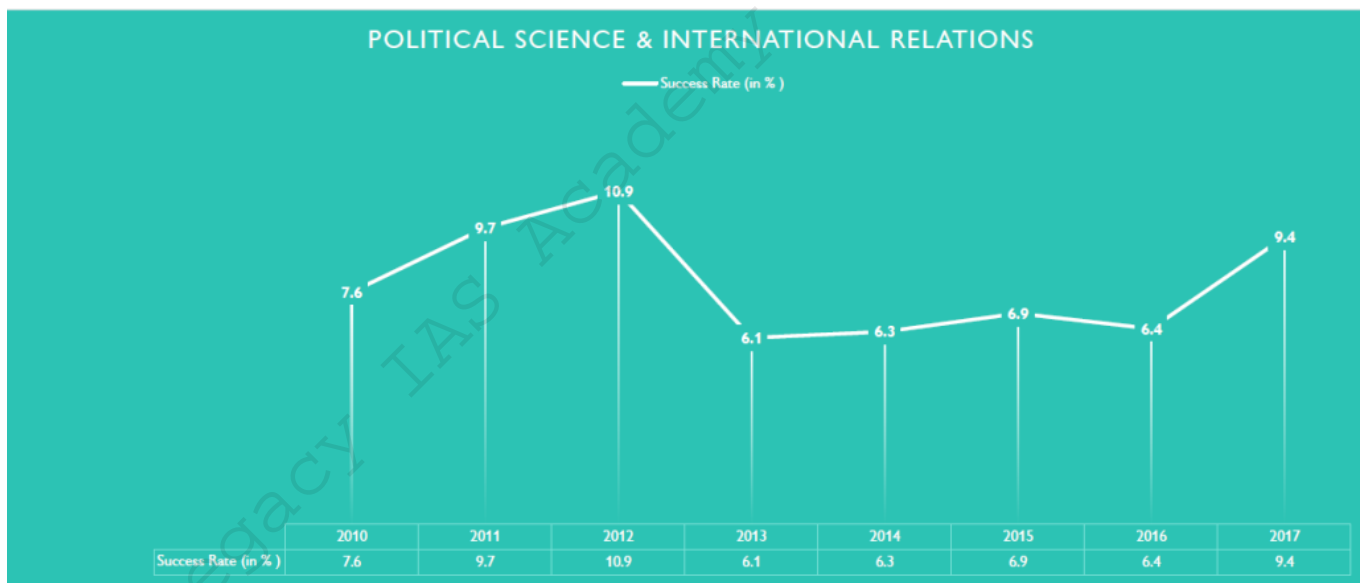
Public Administration





[Public Administration Optional Strategy for UPSC and Books to Read](#)

PSIR





Sociology Success rate



Best Optional Subject based on Toppers and their Optional choice

- There are several candidates who also so look at Optional subjects that are opted for by toppers during each year in order to take a decision on what is the right optional for themselves.
- However, there is no consistency in this regard, as there have been toppers (Rank 1) in 6 consecutive years (2013-18) who have opted for - Mathematics, Anthropology, Kannada literature, PSIR, Geography and Economics.



Year	UPSC Topper Name (Rank 1)	Optional Subject Chosen	Service Opted
2019	Pradeep Singh	Public Administration	IAS
2018	Kanishak Kataria	Mathematics	IAS
2017	Anudeep Durishetty	Anthropology	IAS
2016	Nandini K. R.	Kannada Literature	IAS
2015	Tina Dabi	Political Science	IAS
2014	Ira Singhal	Geography	IAS
2013	Gaurav Aggarwal	Economics	IAS
2012	Haritha V. Kumar	Economics & Malayalam Literature	IAS
2011	Shena Aggarwal	Medical Science and Psychology	IAS
2010	S Divyadharshini	Public Administration & Law	IAS
2009	Shah Faesal	Public Administration & Urdu Literature	IAS
2008	Shubhra Saxena	Psychology & Public Administration	IAS
2007	Adapa Karthik	Zoology & Psychology	IAS
2006	Mutyalaraju Revu	Electrical Engineering & Maths	IAS
2005	Mona Pruthi	English Literature & Sociology	IAS
2004	S. Nagarajan	Geography & Sociology	IAS
2003	Roopa Mishra	Psychology & Public Administration	IAS
2002	Ankur Garg	Physics & Chemistry	IAS
2001	Alok Ranjan Jha	Geography	IFS
2000	Vijaylakshmi Bidari	Kannada Literature	IAS

Top Optionals based on the perception of 'Scoring Subjects'

- Aspirants of the UPSC Civil Services Exam sometimes look for what are called 'scoring subjects' or 'scoring optionals' to opt for them. The idea behind this concept is that these subjects are perceived to be easier to get a higher score with, relative to other subjects.
- It is considered that with subjects such as Mathematics and Science subjects, students can get a higher score if they are able to overcome the difficulties such as vastness of the syllabus, complexity of concepts, lack of overlap of syllabus, need of background



knowledge on the subject etc. This is because technical subjects can theoretically fetch you higher marks as the 'subjectivity quotient' is limited.

- Certain humanities subjects such as Anthropology, PSIR and Sociology are also perceived to be scoring subjects for reasons such as- ease of completion of the syllabus, overlap with GS syllabus, lower levels of complexity in concepts, ease of understanding and answering etc.
- Literature optionals are also considered as 'scoring subjects' for those candidate who have a strong background in their respective regional languages / mother tongue. However, it is difficult to conclusively make inferences on the scoring nature of literature subjects based on data, as there aren't sufficient number of candidates.

Conclusion – “There is NO ‘best’ in Optional Subjects in general”.

There is absolutely no way in which one can tell that a particular optional subject is the best choice for UPSC aspirants in general! Selecting an Optional is a highly subjective and individualistic exercise that requires careful analysis and rational thinking by each and every aspirant independently.

There are innumerable misgivings and myths regarding some subjects which are bound to confuse an aspirant rather than provide clarity. In fact, such misconceptions can cause an aspirant to trap themselves with the 'Wrong' optional for them – as the humongous effort and time that has been invested in preparing for it will make it difficult to prepare for a new subject altogether and dropping the one which he/she has studied already.

There is no standard formula to solve this conundrum, but there is definitely a way to single out the right optional for you by following a logical method in a well-informed manner.

The Right Parameters to select the Best optional for YOU!

1. Your interest in a subject should be the first parameter that you consider for deciding your optional subject in UPSC civil services exam. Without the right level of interest, it becomes a futile attempt to reach the depth of understanding and the put in the amount of hard-work that is required for successfully scoring more than 50% of the marks in the optional paper.
2. The extent of the syllabus is the next parameter that is to be considered in close consideration with the available length of time for your preparation. One should consider



the vastness of the syllabus, the extent of overlap with the general studies subjects and the level of difficulty in sufficiently completing the the preparation for the optional subject in the time that is available for the student.

3. The discipline of graduation degree is another factor that can help in choosing the right optional for the candidate. For a candidate who chooses the same subject as that of his/her graduation for the Optional subject of choice in Mains, preparation becomes much easier. However, it is to be kept in mind that you have to choose your graduation subject as the optional subject only if it evokes interest in you and you are confident in the level and quality of expertise that you have achieved in the subject through your graduation degree.
4. The nature of the subject another parameter that can be considered as well. For this exercise, a student needs to go through the previous years' question papers and answer sheets of toppers along with the syllabus, and perhaps, even one or two standard books that are recommended for the optional subject. The aim of considering this parameter is to determine whether the student is going to be comfortable with his or her preparation in terms of the level of understanding, memorization, analytical thinking etc., that is required for the optional subject.
5. The availability of study material and mentorship is another factor to be considered. Without the right guidance and reliable sources of information it becomes an uphill task to begin preparation for the optional subject in the right direction.

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