

Introduction

This paper presents ten ‘top tips’ for candidates taking the written examinations for the Business Systems Development (BSD) Diplomas offered by the Information Systems Examinations Board (ISEB). These tips are based on our experience of marking these papers over several years and noticing the main mistakes candidates make in tackling them.

Tip 1: Prepare

Study your notes thoroughly before the exam and use ‘Post-Its’[®] or similar to tag the most important pages. Although the BSD exams are ‘open book’, there is some time pressure involved and there really isn’t enough time to find your way around an unfamiliar set of notes during the exam.

Tip 2: Allocate your time appropriately

Make sure you allocate the right amount of time for a question based on the number of marks available. If, say, you spend half of your hour on a question that carries only 25% of the marks, you will have compromised your chances of getting the remaining 75%. All of Assist KD’s exams carry 50 marks (those from other training providers or central ISEB exams may be different) so, as a rough guide, allocate one minute per mark; when the time is up for a question, move on. This approach should leave you 10 minutes at the end of the exam to go back and complete any unfinished questions and also to look through your answers before the exam ends.

Tip 3: Read the questions, then the scenario

If you read the scenario first, you’ll be looking at each sentence and wondering about its significance. If you read the questions first, then you can mentally assess the relevance of each part of the scenario to those questions.

Tip 4: Answer the questions actually posed

Make sure to read each question over a few times and to ensure you know exactly what it is asking. Many marks are lost by candidates who provide answers that just miss the ‘bullseye’ and that don’t exactly address the question.

Tip 5: Relate your answers to the scenario

The BSD exams are tests of your ability to apply your knowledge and techniques rather than to recall knowledge. So, all your answers should be clearly linked to the scenario and should demonstrate how you are applying a technique in *this* situation.

Tip 6: Don’t apply techniques and templates blindly!

Don’t apply any tool, technique or template indiscriminately. Always consider its significance to the exam scenario and show clearly why you are using it, and how, in this case.

Tip 7: Write concisely

The BSD exams are not tests of your ability to craft beautiful English prose. So, if you can answer a question effectively using bullet points, do so. It will save you time and it will probably also ease the marker's task in seeing quickly the points you are trying to make.

Tip 8: Identify techniques used as necessary

Don't assume that the marker will instantly recognise from its context any tool or technique that you use. So, for example, when analysing the external business environment of a scenario, you might write 'Using a PESTLE analysis, the following factors are relevant...'

Tip 9: State any assumptions

If you need to make any assumptions about a scenario, state what they are in your answer. But don't try to reframe the question using assumptions.

Tip 10: Don't use a 'scattergun' approach

Don't just 'dump' ideas in your answers in the hope that some of them might be relevant. For instance, if a question asks you to recommend three requirements elicitation techniques for use in a scenario, and you offered six, this might have either of the following outcomes:

- The marker would consider only the first three (as that was all that was requested), even if some of the later ones would be a better choice.
- Negative marking might be employed, with the marker awarding marks for relevant techniques but deducting them for irrelevant ones.

Example question and answers

The following question relates to a scenario (not given here):

Explain three advantages to XYZ and Co. of purchasing a software package to fulfil the requirements for their fixed asset system. (6 marks)

Fail answer

- The software package would represent a cheaper solution for XYZ. Software packages are sold to many customers and so the cost of development can be spread across those sales. This brings down the unit price. However, the cost of the package would increase if any tailoring of the system is undertaken to fulfil the organisation's requirement.
- The software package represents a quick solution. It is ready now, and can be bought off the shelf. All that XYZ have to do is enter their data and undergo appropriate training. Data conversion will also have to take place and this may raise some issues of incompatibility. For example, different field lengths.
- The software package represents a quality solution. It will be used by many other companies who will have found most of the bugs in the system. Hence, XYZ will be receiving a tried and tested solution. Software packages only have to go through *user acceptance testing* as the other stages of testing have already been undertaken by the software house.

[All of these statements, though true, are 'generic' and could be applied to any situation and not specifically to the XYZ company referred to in the scenario.]

Pass answer

- The scenario suggests that very few tangible benefits will result from implementing the fixed asset system. Consequently it will be difficult to justify the cost of developing a bespoke solution. Software packages are relatively cheap to buy, particularly for common organisational applications such as a fixed assets system.
- The scenario suggests that the system must be operational in four month's time to assist in the revaluation of the company's assets. The IT department is currently very busy implementing and fixing the Human Resources (HR) system and the IT manager is already complaining 'about the lack of skilled resources in the department'. It seems very unlikely that IT will be able to develop a bespoke solution in time and so a readily available software package seems a more appropriate solution.
- Finally, the problems associated with the HR system suggest that the IT department is having difficulty in developing reliable systems for its users. The scenario gives an example of part of the system being down for over a week. The fixed asset system that XYZ are considering buying has over one hundred users. Reliability problems should have been ironed out by now.

[Note how, in this answer, the issues about packages have been specifically related to the scenario including some references and quotations from the scenario.]

Conclusion

Many candidates do not answer scenario-related descriptive questions very well. Make sure that your answers are relevant in the context of the scenario and support them with relevant references and quotations from the scenario.