

Passing the Final FRCA – a guide

Steve Lord - 2016

Overall

Obviously it's a hard exam, testing both breadth and depth of knowledge. With on call commitments and family life it is understandably easy to let weeks go by without looking at a book or an article. Make a revision plan and stick to it. Schedule breaks and certain days off. I made it a rule never to read on a Friday or Saturday evening. A tip to me given by a friend. You need these breaks to keep yourself refreshed. Then, when you return to the books you are rested, but also have something to look forward to at the weekend. Use your time at work wisely. For instance, if you are doing a cardiac module, read the CEACCP articles at the same time. It gives the articles context and gives you a chance to ask the appropriate specialists any questions you have at the time. Schedule time in your plan to go over topics more than once, and aim to finish your revision 2 weeks before the date of the exam so you can start to wind down. I did not go on any specific courses, but some come highly recommended by some of the trainees I have spoken to. It took me 6 month's revision to pass the final at first attempt. The most important thing is important to commit yourself properly to it, be single minded and get it over with.

Timing

It is tempting after passing your primary to sit back and relax during your ST3 year, and take a well-earned break. However, a staggering amount of primary knowledge comes up in both the written and SOE components of the final. So the sooner you do it the better whilst it is still relatively fresh in your mind. I took the written exam in March of my ST4 year. It was not easy revisiting old topics 2 years after passing the primary.

Structure

What I found hardest about the final was the breadth of expected knowledge, and trying to format a revision structure. It is common knowledge that the CEACCP articles provide an excellent knowledge bank, however there are so many of them that it is easy to get lost trying to read them all. I created a new folder on my computer and organised the CEACCP articles according to body systems. I read them all back to 2001. Some of the articles appear very irrelevant, however many random topics appear in the exam so it is difficult to filter them out of your revision. There is also an excellent book called 'Advanced Training in Anaesthesia – Oxford Speciality Training'. This book appears to be loosely mapped to the curriculum, and although solely not in enough detail to pass, it does help to structure your revision. You also need to dedicate time in your revision plan to revisit your primary topics. Do not neglect these topics.

Written

SBA: This takes practice. Most people haven't written essays since college, let alone 12 in 3 hours. It takes practice to build up the stamina required to complete this exam. Dedicate a day a week practicing under exam conditions. Build up slowly. Answer two questions, then three, then four.

Build up to a full exam under exam conditions. There are several courses available, but are not mandatory in order to pass. You need to develop your own technique at answering the questions effectively in the timeframe given. The examiner's report consistently mentions about how many marks are lost due to poor handwriting. This is why practice is so important. Practice writing at speed and legibly. Be economical with your time. There is no advantage in writing every answer full prose when bullet points may do. Read the questions thoroughly. Year after year people fail to answer the question being asked, or miss out parts of questions simply because they have misread it. It is easy to do but very costly. The CEACCP articles are a goldmine of information, and in my opinion they are very tailored to the exam. If you know the content of these articles well then you should not struggle to answer the questions being asked.

MCQ: For both the primary and the final I used 'onexamination'. This coupled with the e-learning questions you should get plenty of practice. The real exam is a little bit harder than the onexamination questions. I took the exam when I was consistently getting 85% and over in the practice tests. Other books I used:

Final FRCA: 300 SBAs by Kariem El-Boghdadly and Imran Ahmad

SAQs for the Final FRCA by James Shorthouse

Get through Final FRCA: MCQs by Nawal Bahal

SBAs and MCQs for the Final FRCA by Rakesh Tandon

There are very few SBA's available to practice with, but the above books should provide you with some exposure.

Structured Oral Examination

From a practical point of view try to look as though you are enjoying it. The examiners have been asking the same questions all afternoon and are probably bored. If you appear engaging, then it is likely to go in your favour. You will likely have an hour or two to pass between the clinical and science vivas. I advise you to take someone with you to London who can take your mind off things in between. I have heard people doing all sorts of things at half time, going to the zoo, for a meal or even the cinema. It is important to try to destress between the exams.

Overall I found the final SOE much more straight forward than the primary SOE. It is hard for you to forget a poorly answered question, but people rarely fail because of one badly answered question. Try to put it behind you and move on. There are plenty of marks up for grabs.

Clinical VIVA: By the time you get here you have done most of the hard work. You have accumulated enough knowledge to pass this exam easily. Again all this exam takes is practice. Put yourself in Viva situations on a daily basis with consultants. Let them choose the topic, so you learn to have to think on your feet. Get used to answering questions about any topic under pressure.

The clinical questions are very straight forward. Try to show your experience in your answers. There is rarely a right or wrong answer, so as long as you can justify your answer then you should be fine.

For the clinical questions I mainly used the following books (along with the CEACCP articles):

The Clinical Anaesthesia Viva Book by Barker, Mills & Maguire – a fantastic book

Structured Oral Examination in Clinical Anaesthesia by Cyprian Mendonca and Carl Hillerman

Basic Science: I was very nervous about being asked the minutiae of basic science in this viva. They do want a certain level of knowledge, but it is used mainly as a lead in to more clinically orientated questions. The Anaesthesia Science Viva Book by Simon Bricker was the main text I used for this exam. It has many relevant chapters. Supplemented with the 'Dr Podcast Scripts for the Primary FRCA', 'Physics, Pharmacology and Physiology for Anaesthetists' and 'The Primary FRCA Structured Oral Examination Study Guide 1 & 2' I felt relatively prepared for the exam.

All-in-all the exam is straight forward so long as you have committed yourself towards passing it at first attempt. It is well worth the effort required to pass.

Best of Luck

Steve