

WHERE THIS PAPER CAME FROM

Mains 2026 · Essay

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

We are not saying that every question could be completely answered from old UPSC papers or from DAW and the Sherlocking Simulators. That is not possible, and we will not pretend it is.

What we are showing is this: most of this paper came from familiar ground. A student who had gone through past-year questions, read the basic books, and practised answer writing had already met most of what this paper asks, only in different words.

This is why we keep repeating the same four things:

- Past-year questions show you what UPSC likes to ask, and how it asks.
- Basic sources give you the material.
- Answer-writing practice, DAW and the Simulators, trains you to brainstorm and structure an answer within time.
- The last piece is mindset. Go in expecting new words on familiar ground. Do not let a new-looking question shake you.

Where a link is only partial, we have said so on that page. Where a topic was simply new, we have said that too. No link here has been stretched.

Every quoted question is word for word from the actual papers and booklets. Compiled on 23 August 2026.

HOW MUCH OF EACH ANSWER WAS WITHIN REACH

These numbers are rough estimates, not measurements. For each question we asked one thing: a student who studied past-year questions, read the basic sources, and practised with DAW and the Simulators, how much of a full answer could that student build? The rest is execution: turning what you know into a written answer, within time, in the exam hall. That too is a skill, and practice builds it.

We have kept every number conservative, and none goes above 80 percent, because even a familiar question still has to be written well in the exam hall.

For essay topics, the number means how much of the theme and its material was familiar ground. The essay itself is always written fresh in the hall.

QUESTION	TOPIC	WITHIN REACH
A1	Oxymorons and life's ironies	about 75%
A2	A grateful mind	about 75%
A3	A thorn is a changed bud	about 60%
A4	Two elephants and the grass	about 65%
B5	Nature as the spirit's symbol	about 60%
B6	More questions than answers	about 80%
B7	Shelving hard decisions	about 80%
B8	The leader who follows	about 65%

TOPIC A1 · 125 MARKS

Oxymorons reflect the ironies of life.

WHAT THIS TOPIC IS ABOUT An oxymoron joins two opposite words, like 'sweet sorrow'. The topic asks you to show how life itself keeps joining opposites: joy with pain, plenty with hunger, progress with loss.

IN SHORT We practised this style of topic, and UPSC has set it before.

UPSC ASKED THIS BEFORE

2022 *"A smile is the chosen vehicle for all ambiguities."*

HOW IT CONNECTS A smile is one thing that can carry two opposite feelings at once. That is exactly what an oxymoron does with words. The same idea in different clothing.

2018 *"Reality does not conform to the ideal, but confirms it."*

HOW IT CONNECTS Two opposites, the real and the ideal, shown to depend on each other. Writing that essay was practice for this one.

WE PRACTISED THIS AT UNLOCK IAS

DAW 2025 · W7D3 *"Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."*

HOW IT CONNECTS This practice topic is itself an oxymoron. Writing it teaches the exact skill this essay needs: hold two opposite truths together and argue both.

Simulator Essay · Set B · Q6 *"India's granaries overflow even as its children grow up too short for their age."*

HOW IT CONNECTS A ready example of life's irony: godowns full, children hungry.

Simulator Essay · Set A · Q5 *"India counts its cities by their skylines, but they are built by those who cannot afford to live in them."*

HOW IT CONNECTS Another: the people who build the city cannot afford to live in it.

Simulator Essay · Set A · Q7 *"India writes new laws faster than it can deliver old verdicts."*

HOW IT CONNECTS And another: new laws arrive faster than old cases get judged.

TOPIC A2 · 125 MARKS

A grateful mind is very beautiful.

WHAT THIS TOPIC IS ABOUT A grateful mind counts what it has, not what it lacks. The topic asks why such a mind is beautiful, meaning calm, content and kind.

IN SHORT UPSC set almost the same topic in 2017.

UPSC ASKED THIS BEFORE

2017 “Joy is the simplest form of gratitude.”

HOW IT CONNECTS Joy and gratitude were paired then. Beauty and gratitude are paired now. The virtue is the same.

WE PRACTISED THIS AT UNLOCK IAS

Simulator Essay · Set A · Q3 “Envy measures our lives by a ruler that is not our own.”

HOW IT CONNECTS Envy is the exact opposite of a grateful mind: it measures life with someone else's ruler. Our answer named the cure, contentment. An essay on gratitude is the same essay from the bright side.

Simulator Essay · Set B · Q4 “We forgive others as a favour to ourselves.”

HOW IT CONNECTS The same family of topic: a quality inside us that rewards us first.

For balance, our DAW 2026 ethics cases showed gratitude going wrong: repaying a personal debt with a public favour.

TOPIC A3 · 125 MARKS

A thorn is a changed bud.

WHAT THIS TOPIC IS ABOUT A bud is soft. A thorn is sharp. Both grow on the same plant. The topic says what life does to us decides which one we become.

IN SHORT Last year's paper carried the same thought.

UPSC ASKED THIS BEFORE

2025 *"The best lessons are learnt through bitter experiences."*

HOW IT CONNECTS It said plainly what 2026 says through a plant: hard experiences change us and teach us.

WE PRACTISED THIS AT UNLOCKIAS

DAW 2026 · Essay 2(b) *"Tradition tells us who we are, change tells us who we may yet become."*

HOW IT CONNECTS The same ground: what we were, and what we may become.

DAW 2025 · W3D3 *"What you think, you become; but who you are determines what you think."*

HOW IT CONNECTS Also about how a person is shaped and reshaped. The exact thorn line was not set. These two built the same muscle.

TOPIC A4 · 125 MARKS

When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.

WHAT THIS TOPIC IS ABOUT An old proverb: when the big fight, the small suffer. Today it means big-power rivalry, and the small countries and ordinary people crushed in between.

IN SHORT The arguments were practised in our IR questions. The proverb form was new.

UPSC ASKED THIS BEFORE

2025 *“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS War and power came as an essay just last year. 2026 asks about power from the side of its victims.

World affairs keep appearing on the essay paper: technology in international relations in 2020, border disputes in 2018.

WE PRACTISED THIS AT UNLOCK IAS

DAW 2026 · W7 Tue Q1 *“A foot in every camp can become a leg in none. As the world hardens into blocs, is multi-alignment India's shrewdest strategy or a comfort it can no longer afford?”*

HOW IT CONNECTS India's own answer to fighting elephants: keep a foot in every camp. Anyone who prepared this question had the essay's spine ready.

DAW 2026 · W7 Mon Q2 *“India presents itself as the voice of the Global South, yet as it grows richer its interests on carbon, trade and debt part ways with the poorest nations.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS The grass itself: the poorest countries squeezed between rich blocs on trade, debt and climate.

TOPIC B5 · 125 MARKS

Nature is the symbol of the spirit.

WHAT THIS TOPIC IS ABOUT Nature as something sacred, not just a resource. Rivers as mothers, forests as gods, mountains as temples. The topic asks what this way of seeing gives us, and what we lose when we forget it.

IN SHORT Nature keeps returning on this paper.

UPSC ASKED THIS BEFORE

2017 *"We may brave human laws but cannot resist natural laws."*

HOW IT CONNECTS The closest earlier line: nature stands above human will.

2024 *"Forests precede civilizations and deserts follow them."*

HOW IT CONNECTS Civilisation rises from nature and falls when it destroys her. Asked two years ago.

2022 *"Forests are the best-case studies for economic excellence."*

HOW IT CONNECTS Forests again, this time as a teacher.

WE PRACTISED THIS AT UNLOCK IAS

Simulator Essay · Set B · Q7 *"When the harvest depends on the sky, no farmer is truly free."*

HOW IT CONNECTS The same relationship from a farmer's side: the sky decides, man adjusts.

The sacred groves and the Bishnois, communities protecting nature as an act of faith, were in our practice answer keys. The spiritual wording itself was not set.

TOPIC B6 · 125 MARKS

A well-educated mind will always have more questions than answers.

WHAT THIS TOPIC IS ABOUT Real education does not close questions. It opens them. The more you learn, the more you see how much you do not know.

IN SHORT Our Simulator carried almost the same line.

UPSC ASKED THIS BEFORE

2024 *“The doubter is a true man of science.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS The doubter and the questioner are the same person. Doubt in science then, questions in education now.

2023 *“Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS Also about what education truly is, beyond marks and syllabus.

2021 *“What is research, but a blind date with knowledge!”*

HOW IT CONNECTS Research means walking toward what you do not know. The same idea in playful words.

WE PRACTISED THIS AT UNLOCKIAS

Simulator Essay · Set B · Q1 *“To question well is harder than to answer quickly.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS The same claim, almost the same sentence. Our answer carried Nachiketa questioning Yama, the Buddha telling followers to test his words, Nalanda's debates, scientific temper, and today's exam culture that rewards ready answers.

DAW 2026 · Essay 1(b) *“The humble mind is the one still able to learn.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS The other half of an educated mind: humble enough to keep learning. Our key also carried the balance: at some point, questions must end in a decision.

TOPIC B7 · 125 MARKS

Shelving hard decisions is the least ethical course.

WHAT THIS TOPIC IS ABOUT Putting off a hard decision feels safe. The topic says it is the most harmful choice of all, for a person and for a government.

IN SHORT UPSC said the same thing in 2024. Our DAW 2025 model essay carried this topic's core line.

UPSC ASKED THIS BEFORE

2024 *"The cost of being wrong is less than the cost of doing nothing."*

HOW IT CONNECTS The same idea in other words: doing nothing costs more than deciding wrongly.

WE PRACTISED THIS AT UNLOCK IAS

DAW 2025 · Essay W6D3 *"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."*

HOW IT CONNECTS Our model essay's breakdown said it plainly: decisions must be taken with incomplete information, and action needs courage. That is this topic's whole argument.

DAW 2025 · GS4 W4D1 *"Discuss the ethical consequences of indifference or apathy in human actions, particularly in social situations that demand moral courage."*

HOW IT CONNECTS Staying silent when a situation demands courage is itself a moral failure. Practised as an ethics question.

DAW 2025 · GS4 W6D1 *"How does a culture of 'zero tolerance for mistakes' in a bureaucracy negatively impact an officer's dedication to taking innovative and bold decisions?"*

HOW IT CONNECTS The government side: an office that punishes every mistake teaches officers to postpone every decision.

TOPIC B8 · 125 MARKS

A good leader is one who follows the followers.

WHAT THIS TOPIC IS ABOUT We think leaders walk in front. The topic turns it around: a good leader walks behind his people, listens, learns their needs, and serves.

IN SHORT Leadership keeps coming on the essay paper.

UPSC ASKED THIS BEFORE

2015 *“Character of an institution is reflected in its leader.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS Leadership itself as an essay, asked from the top down. 2026 turns it upside down.

2024 *“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but to test the character, give him power.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS Power shows a leader's real character. The same ground.

WE PRACTISED THIS AT UNLOCK IAS

Simulator Essay · Set A · Q2 *“A promise is easy to make and hard to be worthy of.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS A leader's promise to the people, and the duty to be worthy of it. Half of what following the followers means.

Simulator Essay · Set B · Q3 *“The smallest kindness outlives the largest monument.”*

HOW IT CONNECTS Our answer carried Ashoka, the emperor who turned from conquest to serving his people. The best Indian example this essay can use. The exact servant-leader line was not set.

FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

Mains is never 'moderate' or 'tough' or 'easy'. Those words belong to next-day reviews, not to this exam.

Year after year, Mains is theme repetition. This year said it loudly. Even then, it is not simple. The marks go to those who have internalised the basic content, practised answer writing enough, and walked in with self-belief.

And remember one thing about the cutoff: it is decided by relative performance. Everyone in that hall faced the same paper you did. If it felt hard, it felt hard to everyone. Your preparation decides where you stand, not the paper's mood. So let no one frighten you about it. Whenever fear spreads, someone appears selling a shortcut. You do not need a shortcut. You need the basics, practice, and patience.

If these three lines settle in early, the road becomes calm:

PYQs are the key.

Answer writing is the art.

Relative performance decides the outcome.

We wish you the very best for your result, and for everything ahead.

FREE GUIDANCE

Every free resource is at unlockias.in.

Stuck somewhere, or need direction? Ask on our Telegram channel [UPSCneil](https://t.me/UPSCneil).

MODULE QUERIES

Ping us directly at [@helpdeskupsc](https://t.me/helpdeskupsc) on Telegram, or call or message [+91 91130 79224](tel:+919113079224).

With best wishes,

Team UnlockIAS