

## Most common silly mistakes in prelims & how to avoid them

Hi,

It's going to be a slightly longer post, apologies in advance. (Relevant for candidates appearing in Prelims 2025)

Prelims is barely a week away. At this moment, I want to talk about something that may not be at the top of your mind right now, but, trust me on this, will haunt you for weeks after the exam: silly mistakes.

I've now been part of more UPSC exam cycles than I care to admit. From 2013 to 2016, I cleared four consecutive Prelims. In 2017, I didn't because of silly mistakes. Since then, I've been mentoring aspirants, and year after year, I've seen many people lose out due to entirely avoidable errors.

This year too, and I guarantee it, many will make silly mistakes. Some will know the answer but mark the wrong bubble. Others will panic under time pressure and mess up the basics. These small errors will haunt you in the weeks to come.

While I don't think it's possible to completely eliminate silly mistakes, being aware of where and how they happen can make you more alert. That awareness alone might help you make fewer mistakes and as you know, clearing Prelims often comes down to the smallest margins. Just one less mistake could get you over the line.

With this in mind, I'll try to list the most common reasons for silly mistakes, based on my own experiences, and offer some suggestions on how to minimize them. This is advice I've gathered over years, and I hope you find something useful here.

### Most Common Reasons for Silly Mistakes

(I've tried to list them from most common to least common.)

#### 1. Overthinking

Yes, I'm ranking overthinking even before misreading the question. Why? Because UPSC aspirants are a bright bunch. You're used to analyzing deeply and using your brain. While I'm not asking you to dumb yourself down, it's important to remember that UPSC is a generalist exam. Most of the time, your first instinct is correct.

But what often happens is, you overthink, second-guess yourself, and change your answer, based on some rare, theoretical possibility. Whenever you're torn between two options, your first instinct and the one you arrived at after overanalyzing, stick with your first instinct.

Let me give you a couple of examples (though there are many):

PYQ 1: If a commodity is provided free to the public by the Government, then:

- A. The opportunity cost is zero.
- B. The opportunity cost is ignored.
- C. The opportunity cost is transferred from the consumers of the product to the tax-paying public.
- D. The opportunity cost is transferred from the consumers of the product to the Government.

- First instinct: Clearly, opportunity cost isn't zero. Someone bears it. Tax-paying public seems correct. So, C looks right.
- Overthinking brain: "Wait... what if this is some theoretical country that doesn't collect taxes at all? Then maybe the Government bears the cost directly. Must be D."
- Result: You switch to D.

Official UPSC answer: C

You just got it wrong, because you overthought.

PYQ 2: A decrease in the tax-to-GDP ratio of a country indicates which of the following?

1. Slowing economic growth rates
2. Less equitable distribution of national income

- A. 1 only
- B. 2 only
- C. Both 1 and 2
- D. Neither 1 nor 2

- First instinct: Statement 1 seems correct, lower taxes could mean lower growth. Statement 2 feels off, how does tax-to-GDP say anything about income distribution?
- Overthinking brain: "Wait. What if GDP is growing fast, but tax collections aren't keeping up? That would mean higher growth despite a falling tax-to-GDP ratio, so 1 is wrong. But redistribution happens through taxes, so maybe 2 is right."
- Result: You pick B or C, against your gut feeling.

Official UPSC answer: A

So please don't overthink.

UPSC is not trying to trick you with obscure exceptions. It's testing broad understanding and application. In my experience (and from official UPSC answer keys over the past decade), your first instinct is right more often than not.

This isn't a guarantee but it's a strong observation I hope you'll keep in mind as you enter the exam hall.

## 2. Misreading the Question / Overlooking Keywords

You're in the exam hall. You've studied the entire year for this one day. There's urgency in the air, adrenaline is pumping and in that moment, you miss reading a key word.

It happens to a lot of people.

How many of you have marked the correct answer to a question, only to realize later that the question had asked for the incorrect one? Or missed a crucial detail that completely changed the meaning of the question?

Let's take an example:

PYQ 3. Consider the following properties included in the World Heritage List released by UNESCO:

1. Shantiniketan
2. Rani-ki-Vav
3. Sacred Ensembles of the Hoysalas
4. Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodhgaya

How many of the above properties were included in 2023?

- A. Only one
- B. Only two
- C. Only three
- D. All four

You know the World Heritage sites. You've revised them. And in your enthusiasm of recognizing familiar names, you don't read the entire question carefully.

You miss the key phrase: "included in 2023."

You confidently mark D thinking all are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

But the correct answer is B.

My Advice: Be calm. In the exam hall, you should be in a state of relaxed alertness.

Read every question carefully. Underline or circle the key words, especially words like:

- Correct/Incorrect
- Not / May/ Some
- Recently / Newly added
- Most appropriate / Not necessarily true

These small details change everything.

Don't let urgency undo a year's worth of effort. Slow down just enough to read with focus, it will make all the difference.

### 3. Second-Guessing / Doubting Your Knowledge

I can guarantee that during the exam, you will encounter questions that contain names, terms, or areas you've never heard of.

In that moment, a sinking feeling might set in, you'll start to believe you haven't prepared enough, that there are major gaps in your preparation.

But remember:

You've studied for this day for over a year. The exam hall is not the place to second-guess yourself or doubt your preparation.

Let's take a PYQ:

Q. Consider the following statements regarding the World Toilet Organization:

1. It is one of the agencies of the United Nations.
2. World Toilet Summit, World Toilet Day, and World Toilet College are initiatives of this organization to inspire action to tackle the global sanitation crisis.
3. The main focus of its function is to grant funds to the least developed and developing countries to help end open defecation.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 2 only
- B. 3 only
- C. 1 and 2
- D. 2 and 3

Now, many of you may not have heard of the World Toilet Organization before reading this question. That's okay.

But you have read about the agencies of the United Nations.

So you're faced with a choice:

- Either you trust your knowledge and think:  
"I've studied UN agencies in detail and never came across this one. So, statement 1 must be incorrect."
- Or you second-guess yourself and think:  
"Maybe I missed something in my preparation. Maybe it actually is a UN agency."

But guess what? It's not a UN agency.

And if you had trusted your preparation, you'd have gotten it right.

My Advice: Trust your preparation. If you haven't heard of something, there's a high chance it's not correct.

You've spent months building your knowledge. Don't let self-doubt creep in during the final moment. Stay confident. That makes all the difference.

#### 4. Time Scramble / Lack of Concentration / Panic

Many aspirants make silly mistakes in the final moments due to time pressure. You may know the answer but still fill the wrong bubble. It can happen to anyone. You lose concentration, read something, and your mind interprets it differently.

Advice: The only real solution is to avoid putting yourself in such situations through good time management.

You should ideally be able to go through the paper three times:

- First round: Attempt all sure-shot / known questions.
- Second round: Tackle questions where you've eliminated some options. Take calculated risks, trust your instinct, and avoid doubting your knowledge.
- Third round: Attempt questions where you have some hunch or vague idea. Here again you can take a few risks if your number of attempts is too low.

If you manage your time well, you will increase your overall accuracy.

I also strongly recommend filling bubbles in batches as you go. For example, finish one page (which typically has 4–5 questions), and then fill in those bubbles. This reduces the chances of marking answers in the wrong rows.

Important: If you do mistakenly fill the wrong bubble, do not panic. Accept the loss and move on. At no point should you tamper with your OMR sheet using a whitener, blade, or your nail. It's not worth the risk.

#### 5. Overconfidence / Overexcitement

Some aspirants walk in overconfident, thinking they're better prepared than others and that clearing Prelims will be a breeze. In my experience, this is most common among first-time candidates. In that overconfidence, your mind can play tricks on you, leading to avoidable mistakes.

Advice: Be confident, but stay humble.

This exam has humbled even the very best. Respect it.

#### 6. Being Absent-Minded

This can happen to anyone. Your mind may start to wander, you begin thinking about something from your personal life or an unrelated issue. This leads to loss of focus, and you end up misreading or misinterpreting even familiar questions.

Advice: Maintain relaxed alertness.

Stay hydrated. Take a sip of water when needed.

Everything else can wait. In that moment, this exam is all that matters.

## 7. Luck

I won't deny it, like everything else in life, luck also plays a role in UPSC.

All your preparation is geared toward minimizing the role of luck. But some days, you're just unlucky.

Advice: Don't worry about what you can't control. Focus on what you can.

Give your best. The rest will fall into place.

## Final Words

I hope this serves as a timely reminder and helps you in some way.

In these last few days:

- Take care of your health
- Get enough rest
- Avoid stress

On exam day, your goal should be to achieve a state of relaxed alertness.

A sound body will help you maintain a sound mind.

Finally, I'll leave you with something my high school maths teacher once said, something I've applied far beyond just solving math problems:

“When you can't solve something on the first go, look at the question again, this time with a little more love. Smile at it. Ask it to give you hints. And you'll see, the question itself will begin to reveal the answer.”

Sure, this advice works best for math problems, but I've found it incredibly helpful in other exams and even in life.

Maybe you'll find it useful too.

All the best!

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