UPSC OPTIONAL SUBJECTS – COMPLETE GUIDE FOR ASPIRANTS

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The **Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) Civil Services Examination (CSE)** is one of the most prestigious competitive exams in India. The exam is conducted in three stages – **Prelims, Mains, and Interview**. In the **Mains Examination**, aspirants have to choose one **optional subject** in addition to the General Studies papers and Essay.

Selecting the right optional subject is a **game-changer**. It can significantly boost your overall score and determine your final rank in the UPSC CSE. This article provides a **comprehensive guide on UPSC optional subjects**, including the list, selection strategy, scoring trends, and FAQs.

Importance of Optional Subjects in UPSC Mains

1. **Weightage in Mains**
    - The optional subject carries **500 marks** (two papers of 250 marks each).
    - This is nearly **25% of the total Mains marks**, making it a deciding factor in final results.
2. **Opportunity to Maximize Score**
    - Aspirants who choose wisely can score 270–320+ in optional, giving a huge edge in the merit list.
3. **Overlap with General Studies (GS)**
    - Some optionals like **History, Geography, Political Science, Sociology, and Public Administration** have significant overlap with GS, which reduces preparation time.

Complete List of UPSC Optional Subjects

The UPSC offers a wide range of optional subjects covering different disciplines. Below is the **list of UPSC optional subjects**:

Literature Subjects (23)

- Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, English.

Other Optional Subjects (25)

- Agriculture
- Animal Husbandry & Veterinary Science
- Anthropology
- Botany
- Chemistry
- Civil Engineering
- Commerce & Accountancy
- Economics
- Electrical Engineering
- Geography
- Geology
- History
- Law
- Management
- Mathematics
- Mechanical Engineering
- Medical Science
- Philosophy
- Physics
- Political Science & International Relations
- Psychology
- Public Administration
- Sociology
- Statistics
- Zoology

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Total = 48 Optional Subjects (25 core + 23 literature).

How to Choose the Right Optional Subject

Selecting the best optional subject depends on multiple factors. Consider the following:

1. Interest and Background

- Choose a subject you genuinely enjoy studying.
- Academic background (e.g., engineers may prefer Mathematics, Science, or Engineering subjects).

2. Syllabus Length

- Some subjects (like Geography, History, and Political Science) have **vast syllabi**, while others (like Philosophy or Anthropology) are relatively concise.

3. Overlap with GS and Essay

- Public Administration, Political Science, History, Sociology, and Geography overlap heavily with GS and Essay.

4. Availability of Resources & Guidance

- Ensure there are standard books, test series, and experienced faculty for the subject.

5. Scoring Trends & Past Performance

- Analyze past UPSC results and toppers' choices. For example:
    - Popular scoring optionals: **Anthropology, Sociology, Public Administration, Geography, PSIR (Political Science & IR)**.

Popular Optional Subjects Chosen by Toppers

- **Anthropology** – Short syllabus, scientific approach, good scoring potential.
- **Public Administration** – Overlaps with Polity and Governance, useful in Interview.
- **Political Science & IR (PSIR)** – Overlap with GS-II and essay, dynamic subject.

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- **Sociology** – Concise syllabus, helps in essay and interview.
- **Geography** – Strong GS overlap, but syllabus is vast.
- **History** – Useful for GS-I, though syllabus is lengthy.

Tips for Scoring High in Optional Subjects

1. **Complete the Syllabus Thoroughly** – Cover NCERTs, standard books, and UPSC-specific guides.
2. **Practice Answer Writing** – Follow UPSC Mains style with introduction-body-conclusion (IBC).
3. **Use Diagrams, Maps, and Examples** – Especially for Geography, Anthropology, and Sociology.
4. **Link with Current Affairs** – Add reports, judgments, and government schemes.
5. **Join Test Series** – Helps in time management and structuring answers.

FAQs on UPSC Optional Subjects

Q1. How many optional subjects are there in UPSC?
There are **48 optionals in total** (25 core subjects and 23 literature subjects).

Q2. How many optional papers are there in UPSC Mains?
Two papers of the same optional subject – **Paper I & Paper II**, each 250 marks (total 500).

Q3. Which is the most scoring optional subject in UPSC?
Subjects like **Anthropology, Sociology, Public Administration, PSIR, and Geography** are considered scoring, but success depends on preparation and answer writing.

Q4. Can I choose a subject different from my graduation stream?
Yes. Many toppers have cleared UPSC with optionals different from their academic background.

Q5. Which optional has the shortest syllabus?
Subjects like **Philosophy, Sociology, and Anthropology** are considered concise compared to History or Geography.

Q6. Can I change my optional subject later?
Yes, you can change your optional for the next attempt when filling the UPSC application form.

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Q7. Should engineers and doctors take their core subjects as optional?
It depends. Some engineers score well in Mathematics/Engineering subjects, but many prefer Humanities optionals due to overlap with GS. Similarly, medical students often take **Medical Science** but also succeed with Anthropology or Sociology.

Final Words

The **optional subject can make or break your UPSC attempt**. Instead of following trends blindly, choose a subject based on **interest, overlap, scoring potential, and availability of resources**. With the right strategy, even a less popular subject can help you secure a top rank in the Civil Services Examination.

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