

# Preparing for the MRCS examination: a simple guide

## Introduction

Successful completion of the Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS) examination is an essential requirement for proceeding to the ST3 stage of any surgical specialty. With increasing competition for core surgical and higher surgical training posts, candidates are sitting the exam at an earlier stage than in previous years. This article offers a structured guide to approaching the MRCS examination.

## Know the process

### General information

All the information you need about the exam can be accessed online at [www.intercollegiatemrcs.org.uk](http://www.intercollegiatemrcs.org.uk). The syllabus for all parts of the exam is available, so print it off and use it as a checklist for your revision.

There are four royal colleges of surgeons: England, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Ireland. In the past, each college held their own examinations using a common syllabus. However, in 2004, all four colleges became streamlined to provide a common examination process: the intercollegiate MRCS. Thus, the format and nature of the examination is the same for all colleges. Pick a college and apply through their website. As it is a standardized process, there is no obvious reason to choose one college over another. However, candidates may opt for a college for reasons of geography or if their place of work or deanery has links with certain colleges. Regardless of the college, the qualification will be the same.

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### Costs

The exams are costly. You may need to budget for the exam a long time before you take it. Check whether your hospital will reimburse some or all of the fees associated with the exam from your study budget. Part A costs £440 and part B costs £800. This fee also applies to re-sit examinations.

### Format

Details of the format of each exam are provided on the website. Part A is a 4-hour multiple choice question exam consisting of two papers (each 2 hours long) taken on the same day. Paper 1 covers applied basic sciences and consists of 135 single best answer questions. Paper 2 covers principles of surgery in general and consists of 135 extended matching questions. There is no limit to how many times you can attempt pass A. Part B can only be taken if part A has been successfully completed.

Part B is an objective structured clinical examination and only a maximum of four attempts are allowed. However, there is no time limit on passing it. Therefore, you should only really attempt the exam if you feel you are adequately prepared.

The objective structured clinical examination consists of 18 stations, each of 9 minutes' duration, assessing a number of 'broad content' areas:

- Anatomy and surgical pathology

- Applied surgical science and critical care
- Communication skills and history taking
- Clinical and procedural skills (*Figure 1*).

Twelve stations will be taken by all candidates while the remaining six will be based on the choice of three specialty areas from four in order of preference:

1. Head and neck
2. Trunk and thorax
3. Limbs (including spine)
4. Neuroscience.

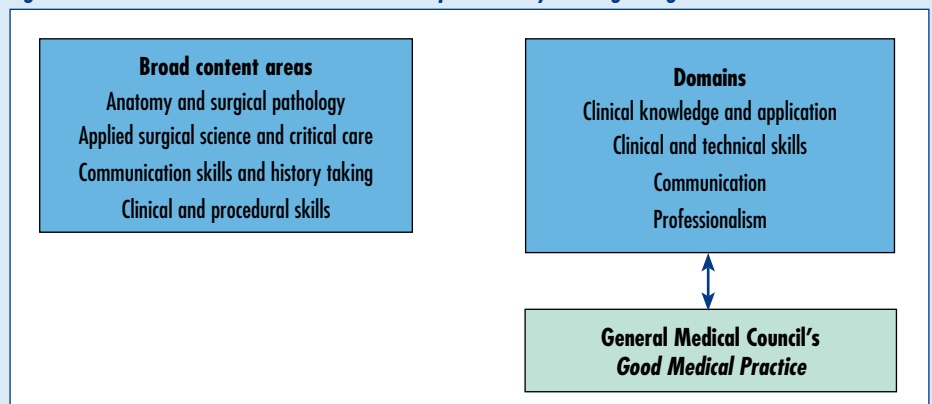
The first speciality choice will be examined in three stations, the second in two and the third in one. You must specify your three specialty areas from this list at the time of application.

In addition to the broad content areas described above, the examiners will be assessing four domains. These 'encompass the knowledge, skills, competencies and professional characteristics of the competent surgeon' (Intercollegiate MRCS, 2010) and are linked to the General Medical Council's (2009) *Good Medical Practice*. These are clinical knowledge and its application, clinical and technical skills, communication and professionalism (*Figure 1*).

## Start early

It is never too early to start your revision. It gives you the best possible opportunity to tackle the sheer breadth of knowledge required to pass the exam.

**Figure 1. Areas of assessment for the Membership of the Royal College Surgeons Part B exam.**



Draw up a revision timetable highlighting the topics from the syllabus that need to be covered.

It is worth noting that certain topics may come up which candidates have had little exposure to previously in their clinical careers. Therefore, it is important to have a broad knowledge base in addition to a sound and detailed knowledge of the core subjects.

## Seek advice

Speak to colleagues and seniors about their experiences of the exam – they can be a valuable source of information, advice and support.

## Practice, practice, practice

In the case of the written examination, there are plenty of books and websites, which cater specifically for the multiple choice question part of the exam. Work through as many questions as you can – both as a test of your knowledge and to improve your examination technique. Often, if you don't know the answer, it can be worked out through a process of elimination, but don't spend too much time doing this at the expense of getting through the rest of the paper. *Table 1* lists some online revision sources, some of which require payment to access a bank of revision questions.

In the case of the objective structured clinical examination, practice the various system examinations until they become second nature. It is obvious to an examiner when a candidate has to think about the next step when he/she comes to examine a patient. This can give the impression of an unstructured approach and could detract from the good points of the examination.

## Find a study buddy

Most of the time, revision can be boring and difficult, particularly if you have to combine it with a stressful and busy job, as most doctors do. However, one of the most beneficial and effective ways to revise is to find someone to work with. Take turns to assess each other and use the opportunity to learn from each other – a valuable way of plugging any knowledge gaps you may have.

Using an internet-based webcam program such as Skype or MSN Messenger

may help if you are unable to meet up in person or wish to facilitate a large group discussion.

For some candidates, videoing themselves during examination practice is a useful way of assessing their performance and identifying areas for improvement.

## Use your seniors

Your seniors at work are a plentiful source of knowledge and information and there is usually someone who is very keen on teaching. Grab them at the earliest opportunity and use them as much as possible. They will have gone through the experience previously and know exactly what is required in the exams.

Ask them to watch you examine patients and present your findings to them, and to quiz you on the management of various clinical conditions. Importantly, get as much critical feedback from them as possible regarding your performance. This will be instrumental in shaping and refining your examination performance and attitudes.

## Do a course

There are plenty of courses that cater for the MRCS usually nearing the time of the examination itself. These should not serve as platforms to fill your head with the necessary theory, but instead should consolidate your knowledge, highlight major points and perfect your examination technique.

If you have done sufficient revision up to this point, you should find that these courses show you how much you do know

rather than how much you do not know as well give you a platform for organizing your thoughts. The authors found these courses most useful for learning examination technique, something you cannot easily pick up from books.

Speak to colleagues and search the web for recommendations of good courses. *Table 2* lists some of the most popular MRCS courses according to surgical trainees at one of the authors' institutions.

## Leading up to the examination

### General tips

- Double-check the details of the examination venue and timings. It is easy to leave these details until later while engulfed in the stress and tension of revision in the weeks leading up to the exam.
- If the examination venue is a distance away, consider making the journey the day before, if possible, to avoid the unnecessary stress of travelling on the day of the examination.
- Get to the venue in good time to allow you to find out where the examination is taking place.
- For the clinical examination, follow the guidelines regarding appropriate attire from the website. This includes arms bare below the elbows and no jewellery on hands or wrists.
- For the clinical examination, act confident even if you do not feel it. The examiners want to see someone who is not only safe and competent, but is also confident about their answers and able to justify them.

### Table 1. Online resources for MRCS part A

The intercollegiate MRCS provides a few sample questions with answers – <a href="http://www.intercollegiatemrcs.org.uk">www.intercollegiatemrcs.org.uk</a>
Pastest – <a href="http://www.pastest.co.uk">www.pastest.co.uk</a>
123doc – <a href="http://www.123doc.com/onlinecourses.php">www.123doc.com/onlinecourses.php</a>
OnExamination – <a href="http://www.onexamination.com/surgery/mrcs-part-a-papers-1-and-2">www.onexamination.com/surgery/mrcs-part-a-papers-1-and-2</a>

### Table 2. Popular MRCS part B courses

Pastest – <a href="http://www.pastest.co.uk/public/MRCS-B-Courses-82-89-t4.aspx">www.pastest.co.uk/public/MRCS-B-Courses-82-89-t4.aspx</a>
Insider Medical – <a href="http://www.insidermedical.co.uk/mrcs-part-b-osce-courses">www.insidermedical.co.uk/mrcs-part-b-osce-courses</a>
St Thomas' MRCS Revision Course – <a href="http://www.kcl.ac.uk/medicine/research/divisions/cardio/study/mrcs.aspx">www.kcl.ac.uk/medicine/research/divisions/cardio/study/mrcs.aspx</a>
Royal College of Surgeons of England (Applied Basic Surgical Sciences for the Intercollegiate MRCS OSCE) – <a href="http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/education/courses/applied-basic-surgical-sciences-for-imrcs-osce">www.rcseng.ac.uk/education/courses/applied-basic-surgical-sciences-for-imrcs-osce</a>

- If you have a bad station, do not dwell on it. The examination is a long process requiring focus and concentration throughout. Therefore, it is important that you do not allow any negative experiences to cloud subsequent stations.
- Make sure you use the alcohol hand gel where appropriate.

## And lastly...

Good luck! **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

General Medical Council (2009) *Good Medical Practice*. General Medical Council, London  
Intercollegiate MRCS (2010) *Candidate Instructions and Guidance Notes MRCS Part B Objective*

*Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE)*. [www.intercollegiatemrcs.org.uk/new/pdf/candidate\\_guidance\\_notes\\_partB.pdf](http://www.intercollegiatemrcs.org.uk/new/pdf/candidate_guidance_notes_partB.pdf) (accessed 2 December 2011)

## KEY POINTS

- Passing the Membership of the Royal College Surgeons examination is an essential requirement for progressing to higher surgical training for all the surgical specialties.
- Know the format. Make sure you have read all the necessary information and guidance regarding the examination.
- Use your seniors and colleagues for advice, assessing your performance and examination practice.
- Practice, practice, practice.
- Think about doing a course – this helps to consolidate knowledge and clinical skills.