



STUDY GUIDE

ANSWERING EXAM QUESTIONS

HOW TO ANSWER EXAM QUESTIONS

In an exam, you must work within strict time constraints, stick to the point, define your terms, and back up your opinions with evidence. In this study guide, you will find tips and techniques to help you understand exactly what the exam question is asking you to do, and how to make the most of the time you have available to write good answers that will gain you marks.

When you reach the end of this guide, you will:

- Know why doing well in exams is down to good management and not good luck
- Understand the importance of planning your time in an exam to maximise your chances of getting good marks
- Be able to analyse the verbs and concepts in exam questions so you understand exactly what they are asking you to do
- Be able to plan an answer to an exam question using the advocate and jury methods

What you need to show the examiner

You will show the examiner you have understood and answered the exam questions if you:

- define your terms
- make yourself clear
- be persuasive
- back up your points with evidence
- keep to the point
- answer the question

Three things to do before an exam:

- **Read the syllabus** – it will tell you what the aims of the course are, what you should be able to do by the end of the course, and what you will be assessed on.

- **Think like an examiner** – the examiner's aim is to set questions that enable candidates to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject and their ability to write about it.
- **Know the rules** – the types of questions you can expect, how many questions you have to answer, and how the marks are allocated.

WHY DO STUDENTS FAIL TO GAIN MARKS IN EXAMS

According to examiners, these are the three most common reasons students fail to gain marks.

Not answering the question, e.g. in an business leadership question in which you are asked to comment on how personality influences styles of leadership, you will not have answered the question if you only write about cultural influences on styles of leadership as demonstrated in Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory.

Not recognising the meaning of specialist or technical terms central to the subject, or not demonstrating an understanding of them by defining them, e.g. in a biology exam, you need to state that photosynthesis is the process by which plants

and some bacteria use the energy from sunlight to produce glucose from carbon dioxide and water.

Not writing answers in the form specified in the question, e.g. in an environment and tourism exam, if you are asked to make a case for or against rewilding the British countryside as a way of encouraging ecotourism, you will gain fewer marks if you put down what you know about rewilding, but do not say what your position is on its role in encouraging ecotourism.

Five things to do in the first ten minutes of an exam:

Take ten minutes before you start writing to plan your approach, this will help to improve your final mark. Ten minutes gives you time to:

- Read through the exam paper from beginning to end
- Make notes on the instructions. How many questions do you have to answer. Which of them (if any) are compulsory
- Make a list of the questions you plan to answer, those that are compulsory (if any) and the ones you have opted for where there is a choice
- When you make your final choice about which questions to answer, make sure you understand exactly what is being asked of you for each question, see **Analysing exam questions - verbs and concepts** later in this study guide
- Draw up a timetable to show how long you should spend on each of the questions, including time at the end of the exam to read through all your answers

EXAM TOP TIP

Quality versus quantity: it's the quality of the argument that counts more than the number of words you use.

ACTIVITY 1: LOOK AT PAST EXAM PAPERS

Choose an area within your degree to focus on and find three past papers for each of these areas. Now go back to **Five things to do in the first ten minutes of an exam** on the previous page of this study guide, and use the papers you have chosen to work through the recommended steps.

You can download past exam papers from the Open University here:
oustudents.com/past-exam-papers

EXAM TOP TIP

When revising - practise your writing speed and style by writing sample exam answers under timed conditions. It's vital that examiners can easily read what you've written when they mark your papers. Using a tablet or laptop, you can easily get out of the habit of writing with speed and style.

ANALYSING VERBS AND CONCEPTS IN QUESTIONS

You can develop your skills in answering exam questions by focussing on:

- **the verb** used in the question
- **the concepts** used in the question

The next two activities will make you more familiar with verbs and concepts and give you techniques for getting to grips with them.

ACTIVITY 2: 20 EXAM VERBS

Here are 20 of the most common verbs used in essay questions. Put your own definition next to each one then check it in a dictionary. Two definitions have been completed for you.

VERB	DEFINITION
1. Analyse	
2. Assess	
3. Compare	
4. Contrast	
5. Define	
6. Demonstrate	
7. Describe	
8. Discuss	
9. Distinguish between	
10. Evaluate	
11. Examine	
12. Explain	
13. Explore	Examine thoroughly, and consider from a variety of viewpoints.
14. Interpret	
15. Justify	
16. Outline	
17. Relate	Show how things are connected to each other, and to what extent they are like or affect each other.
18. State	
19. Summarise	
20. Trace	

Now add any other verbs you notice from the past exam papers you reviewed in **activity 1**.

ACTIVITY 3: ANALYSING EXAM QUESTIONS

Underlining key concepts or ideas in an exam question before you start writing is a way of defining and analysing them. Asking yourself questions about the meaning of these provides you with the beginning of your answer.

Example:

Home schooling is increasing in popularity, but there are worries and fears about: the quality of teaching; resources; vulnerability of children; lack of transparency and regulatory supervision. Critically discuss this situation.

First, you might focus on the key concepts of 'the worries and fears around home schooling' and its growing popularity

Next, you would need to think about why it is increasing in popularity, what are the reasons and cause for its growth. You will need to provide statistics, opinions and evidence in your writing about a growth in home schooling.

At this point, your thinking might be focused by drawing up two lists: one with evidence for the benefits of home schooling and another putting forward the issues, evidence that they exist and the impact of these issues on children. You need then to evaluate the benefits as opposed to the issues and make recommendations how issues might be reduced, e.g. inspect of home schooling.

Now try it out for one of the six exam questions from the exam papers you used in **activity 1**. First, underline the key concepts in the question. Then put together a list of questions to make the meaning of the question clear.

WRITING YOUR ANSWERS: THE ADVOCATE AND JURY METHODS

At Degree level, essay questions often invite a case to be made for or against a specific statement. The examiner will expect you to back up your opinion with a reasoned argument. You should examine the evidence for both sides of your case, and then justify your support for one side or the other. The reviewing of evidence to create an argument is a key skill which is being tested. A conclusion which merely says there are points to be made on both sides will not get you many marks.

There are two main approaches to presenting your case when writing an essay in an exam:

- **The advocate method:** 'this is what I think and this is why I think it'
- **The jury method:** 'I am building up to my conclusion by working through the evidence, so my reader

SECTION	ADVOCATE	JURY	PARAGRAPH
Beginning	Your verdict	Clarifying and analysing the issue	3
Middle	Presenting your evidence	Presenting the evidence	7
End	The wider issues	Your verdict	1

ACTIVITY 4: ESSAY PLANNING

Choose one of the six exam questions you selected for **activity 1**. You may want to do more work with the question you chose for **activity 3**, or you could try one of the other questions.

Now take a piece of paper and fold it in half. On one half, write notes on how you would argue the case in response to your chosen question using the advocate

method. On the other half, argue the same case using the jury method.

When you have finished, do you feel more comfortable with one approach than another. Which aspects of the planning process do you find the easiest and which the most difficult. What can you do to get on top of the things you find difficult.

REVIEWING YOUR ANSWERS:

In an exam, you can assess whether your answers will achieve maximum marks by checking that you have:

- Shown you understand what the question is about.
- Shown what you know in your answer.
- Added any other relevant information.
- Presented your answer in a logical, clear, and persuasive way.

Try it with the two essay plans you wrote for **activity 4** to see how it works.

EXAM TOP TIP

If you run out of time, check the verb in the essay question. Five minutes is enough time for you to add a final paragraph showing the relevance to the essay question of the evidence you have included so far.

Resources to help you

[Oxford Dictionaries](#) and [Cambridge Dictionaries](#) both offer a free online combined dictionary and thesaurus.



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