

Essay-writing in the exam context

- What constitutes a good essay in the exam context?
- Is it ok to answer exam questions on topics covered in coursework essays?
- Do the criteria for judging a good essay differ between those submitted in term time and those submitted as exam responses?
- If so, how does the marking of exam responses reflect these differences?
- How do students typically under-perform in exams?

What constitutes a good essay in the exam context?

Examinations test the ability to formulate a coherent argument and analysis; to produce an answer which is clearly structured and directly relevant to the question; to show knowledge of the module, some evidence of further reading and critical ability; and to do so concisely and in a restricted period of time.

A good exam response therefore:

- Directly addresses the question
- Develops a logical and clearly structured argument in relation to the question.
- Draws on and applies what has been learnt within the module.
- Demonstrates critical thinking (not purely descriptive)
- Supports and illustrates its argument with explicit acknowledgement of published sources
- Shows an ability to manage exam time

Really good exam papers do all this, and show some independence of thought. Note: the criteria of what is expected from a script for each degree class are given in the Department Handbook.

Is it ok to answer exam questions on topics covered in essays?

Yes, with a note of caution! It is fine to use in exams material you've studied in connection with your coursework (even where you've written essays on the topic), providing you make absolutely sure you **AVOID** using the *actual content of essays*, i.e. reproducing (whether precisely or overly closely) sentences or paragraphs already written, because:

- This would constitute 'submitting the same work twice' which is regarded as a form of plagiarism under the university regulations (see guidance on university website): <http://www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism/types1.html>.
- The exams should never include questions which have previously been set as coursework assignments. You may find a question that draws on broadly similar content, but it will nonetheless be a *different* question, and will require a *different*

answer. If you find yourself reverting to a version of an essay question you've written previously, it is very likely you will fail to answer the new question appropriately or well. And again, you may also find yourself guilty of plagiarism.

Remember: a strong exam response, like a strong term-time essay, is all about how you *apply* your knowledge to the task of addressing a specific question.

Do the criteria for a good essay differ between term-time & exams?

To a large extent, the criteria for judging a good exam essay are the same as for those submitted during term-time. The one notable difference is THE TIME FACTOR.

The time factor means that some elements of the term-time essay are necessarily compromised in the exam context. However, the exam essay is not just an abbreviated version of the conventional essay because, in the context of limited time, some aspects offer more scope for compromise than others.

So, which aspects can be compromised and which not?

1. ANSWERING THE QUESTION

This is the first and most important rule in all of your written work; exactly the same in an exam response as in a term-time essay. In both, a strong response is not about how much you know, but all about how you *apply* your knowledge to the task of answering *a specific question*.

This means making choices. Think of everything you know on the chosen exam topic as *a reservoir of information* from which you will need to draw and utilise *only the parts are relevant* to the question you have chosen. You can't know which parts these will be in advance. This often means leaving behind some well-revised material, which can be painful! But your honed-down, carefully applied answer will be all the better for it.

Note that this is not about *time* or *length*; it is about understanding precisely what is asked of you, and then doing just that and nothing more.

2. IDENTIFYING & FOCUSING ON KEY POINTS/ARGUMENTS

In an exam, you will not have time to cover all of the points and expand on all of the arguments that you may have included in a term-time response. Concentrate your efforts instead on identifying a limited number of relevant key points and arguing these well. It can be helpful to indicate that you are doing this i.e. implying at the outset that, although there is more to be said, you are - of necessity - prioritising.

3. STRUCTURING YOUR RESPONSE

In the context of time pressure and nerves, structure is often what suffers. There can be a tendency to begin writing with little advance thought; to 'bash out' thoughts in the

order that they first occur. Important points may be neglected or marginalised, while less relevant material may consume a disproportionate amount of space.

Structure is therefore in fact never more important than in the exam setting, where a large volume of learnt material requires sifting, applying and organising into a coherent, concise response.

A few TIPS on structure:

- a) *A 5-minute essay plan* may seem an ill-afforded luxury in an exam, but will ensure more effective use of your remaining time and help you produce work that flows logically, avoids waffle, and is concise but sufficiently comprehensive (note: the completion of 'test' 5-minute essay plans as a revision strategy, strictly timed, will help greatly here).
- b) *Prioritise your argument*: in a limited time period, it is essential that you move reasonably swiftly into the main body of your answer, prioritising this 'middle' section.
- c) *Introductions and conclusions* should not be lost entirely; a good exam response will still contain a sense of being a rounded piece of work. However they may take a more limited form. You will have little time to 'unpick' an exam question in any detail. Some well-chosen sentences however, engaging directly with the question and demonstrating your understanding of it, elaborating on any significant terms, and indicating briefly how you intend to structure your response, will make for a strong opening (again, a 5-minute essay plan will help greatly).

Inevitably when time is short, conclusions are the part of an exam response most likely to suffer. You may find you have little time remaining to review your arguments, but a short paragraph returning to the question and concentrating on some key concluding comments will still give your work a sense of completion. Remember, it is the last word on the subject that your examiner will read!

- d) *Signposting* i.e. indicating the direction of your argument (at the outset and/or as your work progresses), is an important component of structuring and should not be lost entirely in the exam essay. However, it can be kept brief. In particular, if you are short of time:
 - Avoid outlining your arguments in advance of expanding upon them
 - Avoid summarising them afterwards

Both are repetitions of a sort and in the exam context offer scope for saving time. Where you do have time to include them keep them *brief*; prioritise the main body of your response where you will be making these arguments anyway.

4. REFERENCING

Acknowledging sources remains important in the exam context, not least in that it helps demonstrate your familiarity with the topic material and reading. Clearly however, it is not possible to provide the same level of detail as in an essay. Our expectations are as follows:

- It is not necessary to include direct (i.e. “word for word”) quotations.
- When presenting or paraphrasing an argument, **the minimum referencing requirement** is author’s name.
- Include any additional information that you know (e.g. dates and titles of publications). If you are uncertain of such details though it is advisable not to guess. Put down the information you’re sure of.
- Further details such as title subtexts, page numbers and journal volume numbers are not necessary.
- No reference list is needed at the end of your answer.

5. HANDWRITING

Keep it legible! At best, you will undermine your revision work and best thinking if your writing is unclear. At worst, your work may fail (what can’t be read, can’t be marked).

How does the marking of exam responses reflect these differences?

Exam marking criteria can be broadly summarised as follows:

1. Relevance (does it answer the question?)
2. Engagement with the module
3. Reference to key texts
4. Knowledge and depth of reading
5. Organisation of work (structure of argument)

Again, these criteria are similar to those employed when marking term-time essays. In addition however, exam marking takes account of the modified expectations detailed previously. Importantly though, it is not a question of *lesser* expectations.

Within this context it is therefore equally possible for students to achieve excellence in their exam-based work. In addition, students can find that the very constraints of time and physical removal from their books foster greater objectivity, and enhance clarity and freedom of thought. Marking criteria must have scope to reflect the fact that whilst some students under-perform in exams, others excel.

How do students typically under-perform in exams?

For all of these reasons, under-performance in exams (by comparison with term-time work) cannot be viewed simply as the inevitable consequence of limited time. Exam responses are typically weakened by:

- Failure to answer the question
- Failure to engage with the content of the module and module readings
- Little evidence of further independent reading
- Inclusion of irrelevant material
- Failure to allocate time appropriately

These reasons (1 & 2 in particular) account for the majority of occasions where disparity exists between a student's assessment of their own performance in an exam and the mark they ultimately receive.