

Study Skills Guide Series

STUDY SKILL 5: Understanding and answering 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'll 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

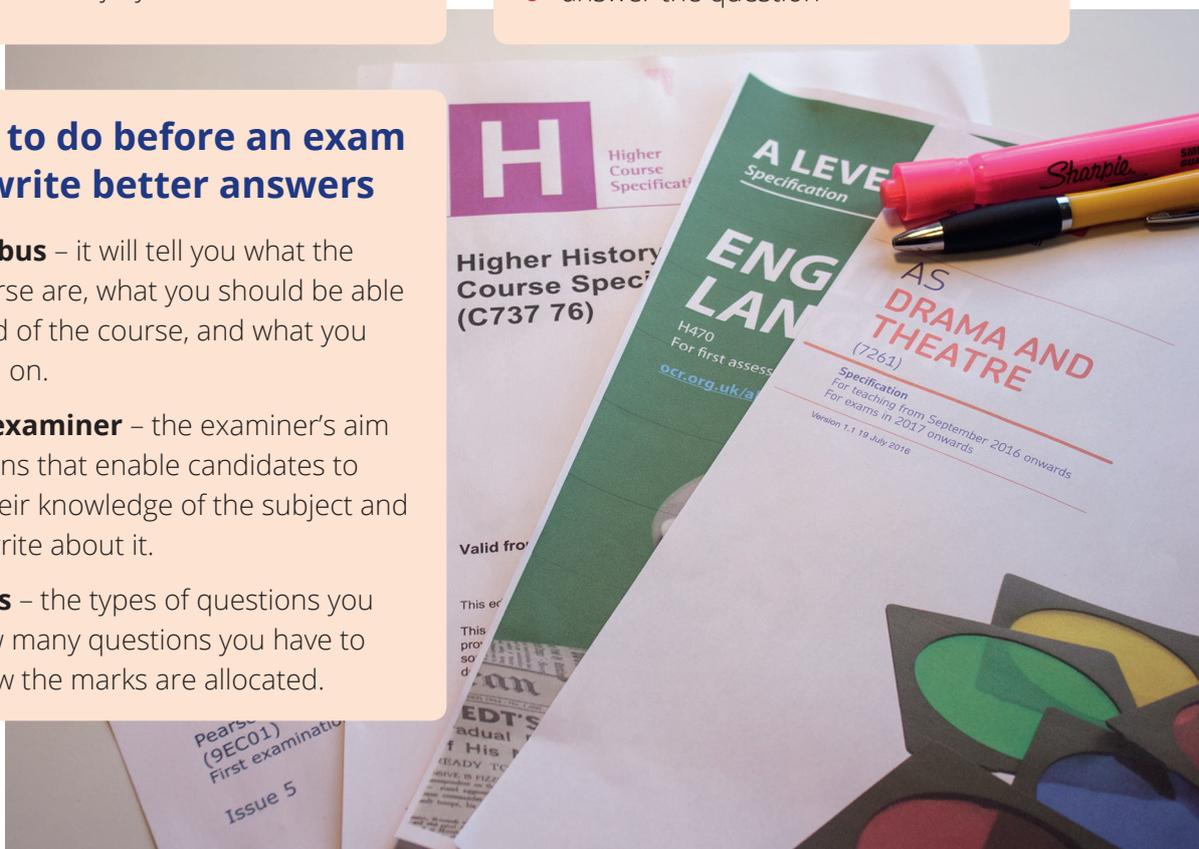
What you need to show the examiner

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 to help you write better answers

- **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.

- 1 Not answering the question**, here's an example – in an English literature question in which you are asked to comment on Shakespeare's use of classical mythology in his plays and sonnets, you will not have answered the question if you write about Shakespeare's debt to Ovid as demonstrated in his plays and sonnets.
- 2 Not recognising the meaning of specialist or technical terms central to the subject, or not demonstrating an understanding of them by defining them**, here's an example – 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.

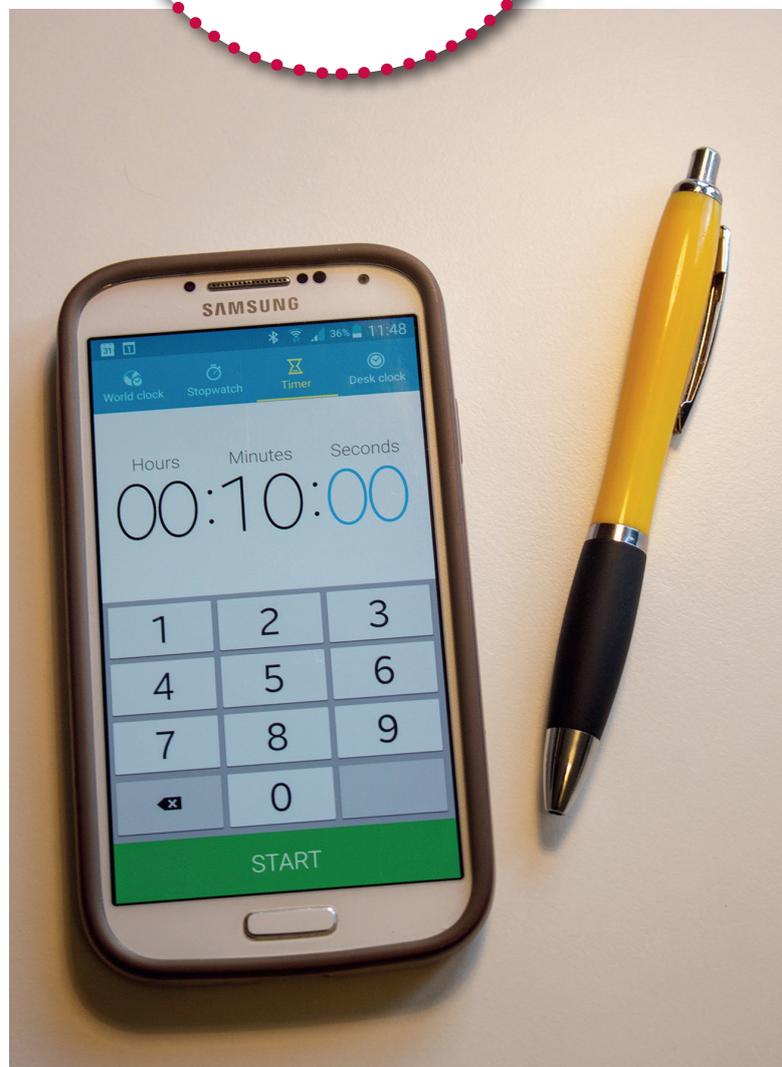
- 3 Not writing answers in the form specified in the question**, here's an example – in a history exam, if you are asked to make a case for or against Elizabeth I establishing England as a European power, you will gain fewer marks if you put down what you know about the monarch's foreign policy but do not say what your position is on England's role in Europe at the end of Elizabeth's reign.

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

In exams, you need to focus your energy on gaining the maximum marks you can for each question in the time you have available. 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:

- 1** read through the exam paper from beginning to end
- 2** make notes on the instructions. How many questions do you have to answer? Which of them (if any) are compulsory?
- 3** 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
- 4** 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
- 5** 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 one subject you're studying for A level, Scottish Higher, Pre U, or the International Baccalaureate, and a second you're considering studying at uni. Then find three past papers for each of the subjects. 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 A level, Scottish Higher, Pre U, and International Baccalaureate papers from exam boards' websites, free of charge.

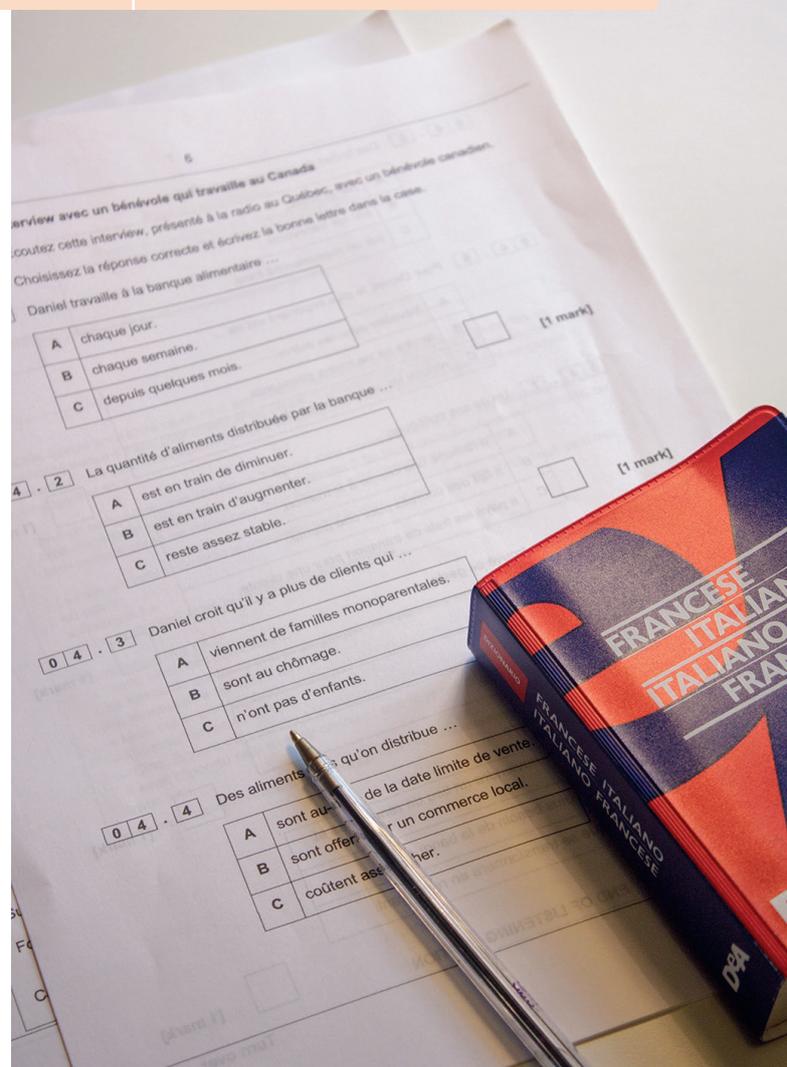
Exam board	Website	What you'll find
AQA	www.aqa.org.uk	A levels – England
CCEA	ccea.org.uk	A levels – Northern Ireland
CIE	www.cie.org.uk	Pre U
Edexcel	qualifications.pearson.com	A levels – England
IB	www.ibo.org	International Baccalaureate
OCR	www.ocr.org.uk	A levels – England
SQA	www.sqa.org.uk	Scottish Highers
WJEC	www.wjec.co.uk/students/past-papers	A levels – Wales

Once you're at uni, you may be able to access undergraduate past papers through the student area of the university's website.

EXAM TOP TIP

Practise your handwriting by writing sample exam answers under timed conditions as part of your revision.

It's vital that examiners can read what you've written without difficulty when they mark your papers. If you usually use a tablet or laptop, you can easily get out of the habit of writing legibly and quickly.



Analysing exam questions: verbs and concepts

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 QUESTION VERBS

Here are 20 of the most common verbs used in essay questions for A levels (and equivalents) and beyond. 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:

'It was the development of the railways that enabled Britain to experience an economic boom in the middle years of the nineteenth century.' Assess the validity of this view.
(From AQA A level history, Industrialisation and the People: Britain, c1783–1885.)

- 1 First, you might focus on the key concepts of 'the development of the railways' and 'economic boom'.
- 2 Next, you would need to think about the period of time you understand to be covered by the term 'middle years of the nineteenth century'. Was there an economic boom? If you agree there was, how do you know?
- 3 At this point, your thinking might be focused by drawing up two lists: one with evidence for the development of the railways being behind the economic boom (if you agree there was one), and another putting forward alternative points of view, e.g. that the railways developed as a response to the industrial revolution and the need to move goods around the country.

Now try it out for one of the six exam questions you have already identified. 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 A level (and equivalent) and beyond, 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 understands how I reached it'

Here's how to structure an essay using each of the two approaches:

Section	Advocate	Jury	Paragraphs
Beginning	Your verdict	Clarifying and analysing the issue	3
Middle	Presenting the 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 2. 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.

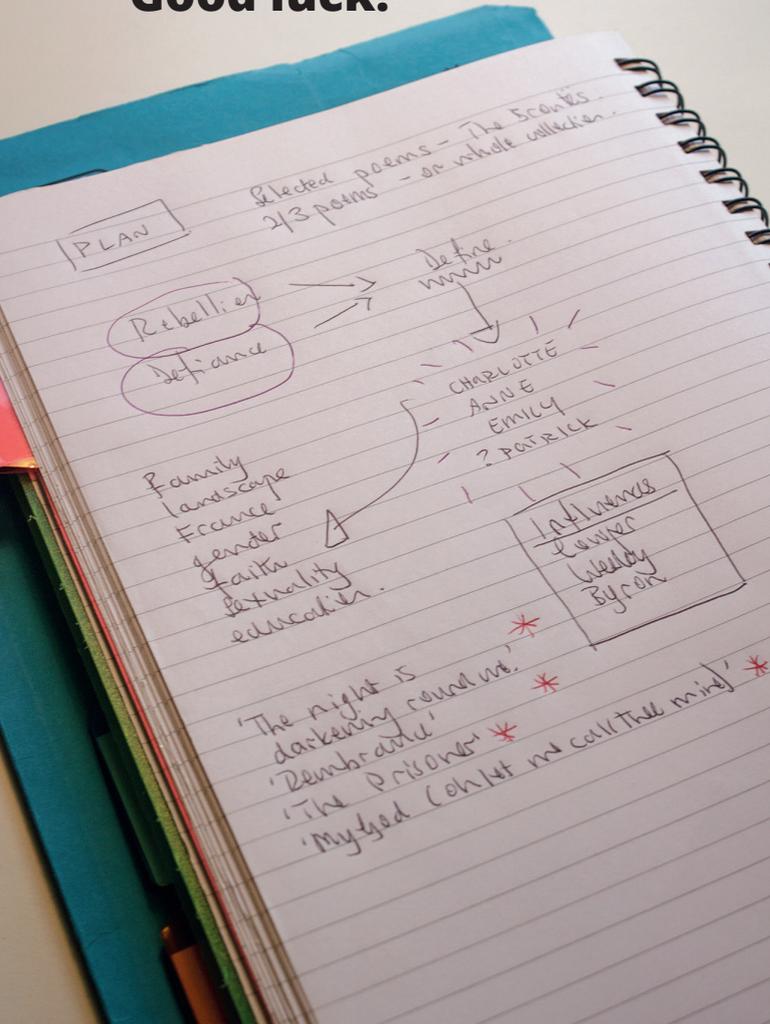
When you've finished, do you feel more comfortable with one approach than another? Which aspects of the planning process do you find the easiest and which the most difficult? What can you do to get on top of the things you find difficult?

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.

Good luck!



Reviewing your answers

In an exam, asking these four questions for each of your answers is a quick way of assessing whether you have done all you can to gain marks:

- 1 Have you shown you understand what the question is about?
- 2 Have you shown what you know in your answer?
- 3 Is there any other information you need to add?
- 4 Is your presentation logical, clear, and persuasive?

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

Resources to help you

Oxford Dictionaries and Cambridge Dictionaries both offer a free online combined dictionary and thesaurus.

This study guide was written for UCAS by the National Extension College (NEC), the UK's only not-for-profit provider of intermediate level qualifications, including A level, GCSE, and IGCSE. Visit www.nec.ac.uk to find out more.



NEC is the trading name of The Open School Trust, an independent registered charity. Charity number: 328414.