

How to Answer Essay and Exam Questions

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A Good Introduction

- State the answer you will give up-front. This is not a murder mystery novel!
- Give an unequivocal answer. Do not simply list objections or conclude “maybe, maybe not”
- Make it clear what steps you will take to establish your conclusion.
- Explain why *these* steps will establish *your* conclusion

By stating your answer and plan early on you make it easy for the examiner to follow your argument.

It is fine to start the essay with “In this essay I will argue that...”

Think of your introduction as a promise to the examiner about what to expect. Then all you have to do is keep that promise. This will help you to avoid digression and irrelevancies later on.

A Good Conclusion

- Summarise the main points of your argument. Leave the examiner in no doubt that you have established your conclusion (and therefore kept your promise)
- Do not introduce new material in the conclusion. You will not have time to give this material proper consideration and so any time/words will have been wasted

The Argument

- Focus on the question and the way that it is worded. Ask, “what would have to be true for my conclusion to be true?” Then show that those things are true.

If the question is: “Does Jones provide a strong argument for Principle X” you must state principle ‘X’ and Jones’ argument, preferably in your own words using citations.

- Test the strength of the argument you reconstructed. Ask, “What would have to be true for this to be a strong/weak argument?”

You show that an argument is strong either by defending it against objections in the literature or by showing that it is more intuitively plausible than the best alternative(s). Likewise, you can show that an argument is weak either by showing that it is vulnerable to good objections or by showing that it is more intuitively implausible than the best alternative(s), including those in the literature.

- Do not just agree with the literature. Give your own reasons even if these are reasons for agreeing with some thinker whose work you have read.
- Do not merely assert that an argument is implausible. Find a counter-example. Show that those who reject your conclusion are committed to deeply implausible views.

You will have to respond to some of the arguments in the literature so...

- Charitably reconstruct the objections that you do consider from the literature.
- Only consider the strongest/most relevant objection(s) and justify your choice of objection(s) in the introduction.

A good reconstruction of the view you argue against demonstrates a good understanding, and your willingness to consider the strongest arguments makes your own argument stronger.

Throughout the answer you should anticipate objections that will arise in the examiners mind and respond to them

The best essays are *interesting* as well as convincing, clearly written and well-structured. Interesting essays show independent thought. Think for yourself beyond the literature.

Easy ways to improve your marks by proof-reading, ask yourself 5 questions:

1. Have I made any simple errors?

Simple errors will make your answer appear sloppy and will distract the examiner from the good bits of your answer. Identify them and correct them.

2. Could I have expressed myself more clearly?

Proof reading is not just about searching for spelling mistakes. The most important reason to proof-read is to ensure that you have expressed yourself as clearly as possible. Good arguments and ideas are undetectable if unclear. No one expresses themselves clearly in a first draft so everyone should proof-read several times.

3. Have I distinguished myself from someone who doesn't understand this topic?

Examiners will mark according to the impression your essay gives them of you. You distinguish yourself from those who do not know what they are talking about by providing strong arguments for your conclusion. Even those who do not understand a topic can assert a conclusion and copy and paste quotes.

4. Does my answer meet the marking criteria?

When proof-reading, read the descriptors next to your desired mark on the mark scheme (undergraduate handbook). Work on the essay until the desired description fits.

5. Are my references and bibliography accurate?

Everyone should get top marks for their bibliography; just copy the exact style of a good journal. Always cite wherever you attribute a claim to a thinker. Your diligence when checking your citations will help you to avoid misinterpreting or misattributing an argument. If you attribute to Jones an argument that he does not make it will come across as if your essay was written by someone **who does not know what they are talking about**. Moreover, you will have missed the argument she does make.

Proof-reading isn't FUN but it will boost your marks. Don't be lazy!