Learning Development

Writing a good exam essay

1. Spend a few minutes analysing the question

- This will help you to ensure that you answer all parts of the question (and stay on topic). Identify the topic words and any words that constrain or narrow down the topic. Clarify the meaning of the instruction words (e.g. discuss, analyse, illustrate, evaluate).

2. Make a plan

- On spare paper, do a mini-brainstorm and quickly write down some ideas you could use to answer the question

- Think about each point you might make – in an exam essay, you still need to back up your ideas with evidence and examples - can you think of examples or evidence to support your point of view? Can you remember any theories, key facts, or key scholars associated with each point?

- Now prioritise – each main point or topic could be a paragraph in your answer. How many paragraphs will you include? Which order would be most logical for these points?

- Some people make a list and then number the points. Other people make a mind map or diagram.

3. Write

- The overall structure of an exam essay is just the same as a regular essay. You need a brief introduction, several distinct body paragraphs, and a short conclusion.

Tips for structuring exam essays

- Keep the introduction short – just two or three sentences. Try to use key words from the essay question, but don’t just repeat it. Instead, indicate how you plan to answer it. This will show that you have understood the question and will tell the reader roughly what to expect in your essay.
• Each paragraph should be about one topic /aspect of the topic. Try to write a general, introductory sentence (a topic sentence) to introduce the topic of the whole paragraph. Then add supporting details and evidence about that topic. Be as specific as you can and give examples to illustrate the points that you make. Discussion and analysis is still needed in an exam essay, so avoid simply listing things - develop your point well before you move on.

• You are not expected to do detailed referencing in an exam, but if you can include some in-text references (with an author’s surname and date) this will add authority to your essay.

• Try to use transition phrases such as “One way in which the internet has affected recruitment practices is ....” and “Similarly, firms can recruit and select employees with the aid of websites such as....” to help the reader to see the connection between different paragraphs. In these transition phrases, use key words from the exam question. This will help your reader to see how each paragraph contributes towards answering the question.

• Try to leave enough time to write a short conclusion that sums up your main arguments, using a signposting expression such as “In conclusion, ...”