



Edexcel A Level Psychology Exam Feedback Training: Extended Response Questions – November 2022 Q & A

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Time pressure

What advice would you give to students who struggle to write enough in the time available, especially on Paper 1?

Paper 1 is challenging due to the number of extended response questions (ERQs). There is no 'best way' for a student to divide their time between questions, but as a guide based on the time available per mark across the paper, they have 11 minutes for each 8 marker. They will run out of time if they spend significantly longer on them, which is easily done. Practising answering this type of question in this time (relatively easy to do in lessons as it doesn't take long) will help them to judge how quickly they can write and how long their answers can be. They will write faster and more clearly with practice, so students may benefit from initially practising with 'extra time' which can be gradually reduced as they approach their final exams.

They then need to practise interpreting questions so that they don't include unnecessary material, and writing really concisely so that they pack as much into each paragraph as possible.

Depending on their writing and thinking speeds, some students may be better off spending longer per mark on ERQs than on shorter answer questions, but this guide based purely on minutes-per-mark across each paper may be useful. As is common with final 'synoptic' papers, there is more time per mark on Paper 3 as it is out of a total of 80 marks rather than 90.

Question	Papers 1 and 2	Paper 3
8 marks	11 minutes	12 minutes
12 marks	16 minutes	18 minutes
16 marks	21 minutes	24 minutes
20 marks	27 minutes	30 minutes

How many evaluation points?

How many evaluation points are expected in an 8 mark question (or how many do the best answers usually include)? To get full marks on an 8 mark question do students need 4 AO1 points and 4 AO3s? Do they need 12 different AO3 points for a 20 marker? How many evaluation points would you be expecting in an 8 mark question (or how many do the best answers usually include)?

The mark schemes for questions with 8 marks or more are levels based, not points based. This means that bullet points on the mark scheme are 'indicative content' – they give an indication of what could be included but marks are **not** awarded for each point.

Mark schemes do not specify any number of points. For higher mark bands they **do** specify 'chains of reasoning' for AO3 – this means that the linking of ideas to develop arguments and reach conclusions matters, not the number of different points



presented. There is no 'one way' to top marks. Very different approaches can achieve full marks, if they address the question fully.

AO1/AO3 taxonomy words

What is the difference in requirements between 'Evaluate', 'Assess' and 'To what extent'? How is "Evaluate the extent to which" different from "To what extent"? Is an 'assess' response supposed to be imbalanced? Or should it be a balanced essay with the conclusion coming down on one side or the other?

These command / taxonomy words assess the same Assessment Objectives and the differences between the mark schemes are subtle. All require balanced conclusions of some type, which show awareness of competing arguments (contrasting points of view). Note that conclusions can be presented throughout the response and do not need to be a 'summative statement' at the end. 'Assess' and 'To what extent' are used when one argument, theory or explanation is presented by the question and a 'judgement' or 'decision' is therefore required in the conclusion.

Although conclusions need to show 'balance' in that they show awareness of competing arguments, there is no requirement for any response to any question to have an equal number of positive and negative points, or for that matter an overall balance of positive and negative arguments. ERQs on Paper 1 require responses that show 'balance' between AO1 and either AO2 (for 'Discuss' questions) or AO3 as they are always 4+4 or 6+6 marks). In contrast 16 and 20 mark questions on Papers 2 and 3 require 'imbalance' in terms of AOs e.g. 6 AO1 + 10 AO3.

	Evaluate*	Assess	To what extent
Top level AO3 descriptor	Displays a well-developed and logical evaluation , containing logical chains of reasoning throughout.	Displays a well-developed and logical assessment , containing logical chains of reasoning throughout.	Displays a well-developed and logical argument , containing logical chains of reasoning throughout.
	Demonstrates an awareness of competing arguments†,	Demonstrates an awareness of competing arguments/factors†,	Demonstrates an awareness of competing arguments,
	presenting a balanced conclusion .	leading to a balanced judgement .	leading to a balanced judgement/decision .

*'Evaluate the extent to which...' or 'Evaluate how far...' have the same level descriptors as 'simple evaluate questions' – these phrases have been used in Paper 3 for 12 mark Issues & Debates questions recently which have concerned ways of explaining behaviour and have assessed AO1, AO2 and AO3 with application to context.

†Demonstrates a full understanding and awareness of the significance of competing arguments/factors – for 20 mark questions with a fifth level on the mark scheme.



Balanced conclusions

What does 'balanced' mean? Does this mean there needs to be an equal number of strengths and weaknesses? Does a balanced conclusion need to come at the end? Is it true that you can't get more than 2/8 marks if there is no conclusion?

'Balanced' means that awareness is shown of arguments for and against, strengths and limitations, and alternative explanations – but these do not need to be given equal space or prominence. An equal number of points being made for and against is definitely not needed. When marking, a holistic judgement is made based on the answer as a whole, and the depth as well as the number of points made.

Conclusions do not necessarily need to come at the end of the answer, as 'mini-conclusions' can be presented throughout. It is not good use of time to simply repeat arguments in a final paragraph, and an answer which has no final concluding paragraph can gain full marks. A final paragraph that does not simply repeat previous ideas but which draws fresh conclusions is of course creditworthy.

For ERQs with 'evaluate', 'assess' or 'to what extent', if a student has not included mini conclusions / conclusion at the end do they drop to level 1? If AO3 is limited in the response what is the highest level they can get?

For level 2 AO3 'superficial conclusions' are required so yes AO3 will be level 1 at most without any conclusions, but conclusions do not need separate paragraphs at the end of a response and are likely to be present in reasonably effective evaluative writing.

A 'best fit' approach is applied to levels based marking. So for example if the AO3 is limited and awarded level 1, but the AO1 is very strong and awarded level 4, then a mark of 4/8 or 5/8 might be awarded.

What would you recommend what to put in a conclusion for an evaluate question apart from applications of the research? Can you clarify conclusions? You said that they should not repeat information, I thought they should only mention what has been written before.

'Evaluate' questions require a balanced conclusion for top level AO3. One way of doing so is to draw together lines of argument and 'close the discussion without closing it off' at the end of the answer. It is therefore often helpful to mention previous arguments, but a conclusion should do more than simply repeat previous points. There should be a 'weighing-up' of the arguments which may include anything relevant to the question: applications, alternative explanations, and links to issues and/or debates for example. For a question about a study the conclusion should address how useful the study is when it comes to addressing the question or theory it investigated.

What is a competing argument?

For example, following supporting evidence, a limitation of a theory or study which calls its value into question is a competing argument.



Is it true that marks can only be awarded for ethical weaknesses – not ethical strengths (guidelines which WHERE adhered to)?

This depends on the question asked, so no – this is not always true and for some questions evaluation concerning ethics could include ways in which a study can be considered ethical, in addition to ethical problems.

AO1/AO2 'Discuss' questions

In an AO2 question do you need to always have an alternative view point? What does it mean by competing argument in AO2 questions? Do Discuss questions require a counter argument as the mark schemes suggest?

The level descriptors for mark schemes are generic for A level psychology, so for an 8 mark 'Discuss' question they are always the same. There are benefits to this in terms of consistency, but it means that often the 'competing arguments' requirement in the mark scheme is not actually needed for performance to be at that level. In an AO2 'Discuss' question a 'competing argument' could be an alternative explanation (e.g. how an alternative theory explains a scenario) or could be a different way a method could be used to satisfy the study aims, but answers which do not include these could still be awarded full marks. Marking is holistic and positive and students can be reassured that alternatives arguments/methods should be considered but are only necessary if it makes sense in terms of the question.

Is it good advice to do AO1 and AO2 separately in ERQs with context?

There is no 'one way' to write a full-marks ERQ response. Some questions will lend themselves more to a 'separated' approach and others to a more 'integrated' approach. However students should be aware that in 'discuss' questions examiners are looking for AO1 (knowledge and understanding) as well as AO2 (application to the context) so they should ensure that their answer shows they know and understand the theory or method separately from the context, as well as being able to apply it.

Positive marking and accuracy

What does "positive marking" mean for AO1 if the levels require it to be "accurate"? On the 8 mark question's mark scheme, in level 2 it says 'mostly accurate' - does this mean if they make a mistake in their knowledge they can't get more than level 2?

The examiner won't automatically dock marks for factual errors but will make a holistic judgement about the accuracy of the AO1. A mistake may be interpreted as revealing a lack of understanding, or it may be that the candidate's understanding is judged to be accurate despite an error. So no, a mistake doesn't necessarily limit the AO1 mark to level 2 on the mark scheme – it depends on the overall accuracy of the knowledge shown in the answer as a whole.



Accessing top band marks

For the 16 and 20 mark questions it seems very difficult to get more than half marks – what guidance can we give students who want to know how to get full marks?

Exams, for all subjects and exam boards, are designed to discriminate between the students sitting them. To achieve this there need to be questions which are very difficult to achieve full marks on. By design there is no formula for writing a 20/20 answer. There are different ways of writing a full-marks answer to any question set, and what matters is whether candidates really understand, think about and address the question thoroughly.

Details to include on studies

Regarding advice that students should focus on findings when presenting research evidence to support their answers, if the question is on ethical issues would it be more relevant to give the procedures of studies rather than the findings?

Yes, when evaluating studies in terms of ethical issues their procedures are more relevant, and this may be true of some other issues & debates questions. In many cases however it is the results that are of interest, for example when evaluating explanations for behaviour. Students should be encouraged to think about what aspect of a study is relevant to the question and avoid including unnecessary detail (be it aims, procedures, or findings) which do not help them to address it.

Names of researchers

Is it necessary for students to give the names of researchers for top band responses?

What matters is that the examiner can identify specific research from the candidate's answer. Naming the researcher helps them to do this, but as long as the description of the study is sufficiently detailed no names (nor dates) are not required for top band marks. Credit is awarded for the accuracy and detail of relevant information for the question.

Structure of extended response

For ERQs does it matter if the students write all their AO1 at the top and then follow with evaluation with chains of reasoning (AO3) or do they have to mix AO1 and AO3 throughout the essay?

Either approach can work well and the best choice will depend on the question and the candidate's preference. However 'chains of reasoning' (which need to start with the AO1) are often easier to construct, and easier for examiners to identify and credit, when



the AO3 follows directly on from the AO1 it relates to. For study questions the 'integrated approach' with AO1 and AO3 interspersed is more common. However there is no 'one way' to write a full-marks answer and as long as chains of reasoning can be clearly identified the 'separated' approach can work well, and may make more sense and be easier to write for certain questions.

12 mark question styles

Can there be a 'context' 12 mark question on Paper 1 that requires AO1, AO2 and AO3?

Yes, while there hasn't been one in recent series, the 12 mark question on Paper 1 could assess AO1, AO2 and AO3. Similarly while the 12 mark question on Paper 3 has assessed AO1, AO2 and AO3 in recent series, this is not determined by the specification either and it could be a AO1 & AO3 question.

Applications and implications

For an issues and debates question, do students need to include what the implications are, if a behaviour is due to nature or nurture?

Depending on the question this may or may not be required, but is likely to be a good approach to evaluation in response to any question. Anything relevant to the question and the AOs being assessed can be credited when it comes to evaluating.

Can applications of a study be relevant to a discussion of its ethics, in an issues and debates question about ethics?

Again, anything relevant to the question and the AOs being assessed can be credited. If the application in question has a clear ethical benefit then this is likely to be relevant as part of a 'cost-benefit analysis' approach to ethical decision-making – but had the application not had a clear ethical dimension it would not have been.

AO1 content

For the question 'to what extent are classification systems a reliable and valid way of diagnosing mental health disorders?' 20 marks, the stem seems to indicate that the AO1 is about the classification systems, but the indicative content on the mark scheme is about types of validity and reliability. Would students get marks for describing the DSM and ICD as systems?

Any knowledge and understanding relevant to the question can gain credit – so in this case descriptions of the DSM and ICD would gain AO1 credit. However it is also important that the question is addressed and in this case that means dealing with the issues of reliability and validity. A lengthy description of either or both systems not linked to reliability or validity would not help to address this question, so AO1 credit would be limited. A better approach would be to focus on aspects of the systems



relevant to the question and show knowledge and understanding of reliability and validity in this context.

Assessment objectives for shorter questions

When there is a context 4 mark question such as ‘using your knowledge of realistic conflict theory, explain the behaviour of...’ how do students know if it is AO1 and AO2 or just AO2?

Questions of this type asked in 2017, 2020 and 2021 were all AO2 x4 with no AO1 marks, in contrast to 8 mark ‘discuss’ questions which are always 4 AO1 + 4 AO2.

Calculations – errors and decimal places

Are ‘errors carried forward’ when marking calculation questions? When carrying out calculations e.g. for statistical tests should students round to 2 d.p. or keep 4 d.p. until the end?

There are no ‘error carried forward’ marks in psychology. Full marks are awarded for the correct answer whether working is present or not. Depending on the question marks may be available for correct working even if a mistake is made, which the mark scheme will clarify.

Students should be advised to follow the instructions in the question. Regarding the final answer, if a number of decimal places is specified they should follow this, otherwise it doesn’t matter how many they give as long as their decision is reasonable. In terms of working, if they round to too few decimal places they could arrive at an answer which doesn’t get all the marks, so while it is unlikely to make a difference it is safest to keep to 4 d.p. or use the exact value saved in a calculator.

Dividing topics between teachers and synoptic questions

How do most schools teach the topics? In our school we split the content half and half, e.g. one teacher does social and one does cognitive - this makes it hard to mark or advise students on the cross-over I&D type questions - any advice?

The best way of dividing content between teachers will depend on the individual context of each centre and their teachers, and Edexcel does not have any recommendations on this. As in any subject with synoptic exam questions, it is an advantage if every teacher is familiar with the whole specification, but this expertise takes time to develop. Where multiple teachers are teaching the course, and do not all know all the topics, it is likely to be beneficial if opportunities can be created for them to discuss synoptic questions and students’ responses to these, and strengthen their knowledge and understanding of topics they have not taught this way.