



How To Write AQA Psychology Essays for 16 Marker Questions

By [PsychLogic](#) and [Saul McLeod](#), published 2019

To achieve the highest grade possible in your A-level it's vital that you score as highly as possible in these long essays.

Whereas it's fairly easy to score full marks on shorter questions (1-6 marks) it is far more difficult to score full marks on these long essay questions.

The longest and highest-value questions you might be asked by AQA in the A-level are 16-mark essay questions which you should spend 20-25 minutes on.

Types of Essay Questions

There are 2 type of essay question and you will usually be asked to answer both types for each exam:

1. **'Discuss'** or **'outline and evaluate'** questions – straightforward essays where you describe and evaluate theory and research.

There are 6 marks for AO1 (describe) skills and 10 marks for AO3 (evaluate) skills.

If you could normally write 3 sides in 25 minutes – 1 side should be AO1 the other 2 should be AO3.

2. **'Context'** questions - you'll be asked to read a short passage about behavior in a real-life situation and relate psychological theory/research to this behavior/situation.

There are 6 marks for AO1 (describe) skills, 6 marks for AO3 (evaluate) skills and

4 marks for AO2 skills (linking knowledge to the context of the question).

To score well you must relate psychological theory/research to the behavior/situation described.

How Common are Essay Questions?

Although the new A-level has only been running for a couple of years we can see what AQA are likely to ask in terms of how often and what type of essay questions will come up.

Paper 1: Out of the 4 topics (Memory, Social Influence, Attachment, Psychopathology) you will usually be asked 1 'discuss' 16-mark question and 1 'context' 16-mark question.

Paper 2: Out of the 2 topics (Approaches and Biopsychology) you will usually be asked 1 'discuss' 16-mark question. You will then usually be asked 1 'design a study question' in the Research Methods section.

Paper 3: Out of the 4 topics (Issue & Debates and whatever 3 options you've studied) you will usually be asked 1 'discuss' 16-mark question and 1 'context' 16-mark question.

How to Score AO3 Marks

AO3 skills require you to analyse, interpret and evaluate scientific information, ideas and evidence.

Whereas AO1 skills of describing psychological theory and research are fairly straightforward, AO3 skills are rather more complex. AQA Examiner's Reports repeat year-after-year that:

1. Students find AO3 skills more difficult than AO1 skills.
2. Students score worse on AO3 skills than AO1 skills and are often 'poor' at demonstrating them.

3. Students tend to write too much on AO1 material and not enough on AO3 material.

The following are examples of ways in which you can score AO3 skills. You only need to demonstrate some of these in an essay – not all of them.

There are many ways you can critically evaluate:

- **Methodological Evaluation of Research**

Is the theory you are discussing supported by valid research evidence. After describing a theory go on to describe a piece of research evidence and say, 'X's study supports/refutes this theory...'

What are the strengths and limitations of the research method used: e.g. lab experiment, correlation study, interview, etc. For example, Bandura's Bobo Doll studies are laboratory experiments and, therefore, criticisable on the grounds of lacking ecological validity: i.e. the violence the children witnessed was on television and was against a doll not a human. To gain marks for criticising study's methodologies the criticism must be contextualised: i.e. say why this is a problem in this particular study.

Has the IV and DV been operationalised in a valid way?

Are there problems with ecological validity, demand characteristics, investigator bias or social desirability bias?

Does the sample used have population validity and can findings be generalised?

NOTE. To gain marks for criticising a study's methodology the criticism must be contextualised: i.e. explain why this is a problem in this particular study. You should also explain what implications your criticism has for the theory you are evaluating. The value of a study ultimately rests on whether it provides significant evidence for or against a theory and whether the findings can be applied to real life behavior.

NOTE. Research studies can score marks as either knowledge (AO1) or evaluation (AO3). If you describe the procedures and findings of a study, this shows knowledge. If you comment on what the studies shows, and how it supports or challenges a theory, this shows evaluation.

- **Compare or contrast different theories -**

Outline how the theories are similar and how they differ. This could be two (or more) theories of psychopathology / memory / child development etc. Also try to communicate the value of the theory / study.

- **Debates or perspectives -**

Explain the theory/study in relation to the position it takes on **issues and debates** (paper 3) such as nature vs. nurture, reductionism vs. holism, determinism vs. free will, nomothetic vs. idiographic approaches.

For example, biological explanations of mental disorders take a 'nature' perspective and can be criticised for being reductionist.

You can also state what **approach in psychology** the theory/study relates to: biological, behavioral, cognitive, psychodynamic or humanistic.

- What are the **ethical issues** of the research? -

Does a study involve **ethical issues** such as deception, lack of consent, psychological or physical harm, etc.

Some theories/studies are regarded as socially sensitivity in that findings suggest that a particular group are in some way inferior. Might such findings fuel discrimination?

Research conducted on animals may raise issues to do with protection from harm and/or generalisability to humans (e.g. Harlow's research into attachment).

- **Gender/culture/historical bias -**

Theory and research is often criticised for being based on or biased towards males and/or European culture (for example, the psychodynamic approach). Sometimes, research is criticised for being irrelevant to modern society as it was conducted a long time ago when cultural norms were different (e.g. Asch's research into conformity).

Is the theory / study ethnocentric? Psychology is predominantly a white, Euro-American enterprise. In some texts, over 90% of studies have US participants, who are predominantly white and middle class. Does the theory or study being discussed judge other cultures by Western standards?

If research is biased towards men or women it does not provide a clear view of the behavior that has been studied. A dominantly male perspective is known as an androcentric bias.

- **Social Sensitivity-**

Do the findings suggest that a particular group are in some way inferior? Might such findings fuel discrimination?

- **Real world applications -**

What implications does the theory/study have for behavior in the real world and what uses could it be put to in the real world?

For example, research into the effects of infants' response to separation from attachment figures when in hospital changed the way in which hospitals operate parental visiting hours.

The PEC System

It is very important to elaborate on your evaluation. Don't just write a shopping list of brief (one or two sentence) evaluation points. Instead make sure you expand on your points, remember, quality of evaluation is most important than quantity.

When you are writing an evaluation paragraph use the PEC system.

- Make your **P**oint.
- Explain how and why the point is relevant.
- Discuss the **C**onsequences / implications of the theory or study. Are they positive or negative?

For Example

(Point) It is argued that psychoanalytic therapy is only of benefit to an articulate, intelligent, affluent minority.

(Explain) Because psychoanalytic therapy involves talking and gaining insight, and is costly and time-consuming, it is argued that it is only of benefit to an articulate, intelligent, affluent minority. Evidence suggests psychoanalytic therapy works best if the client is motivated and has a positive attitude.

(Consequences) A depressed client's apathy, flat emotional state and lack of motivation limit the appropriateness of psychoanalytic therapy for depression. Furthermore, the levels of dependency of depressed clients mean that transference is more likely to develop.

How to Answer Context Questions

These questions are basically the same as Discuss questions (i.e. you need to describe and evaluate) but you also need to try to make 4 good links to the context at some point during your essay.

It's easiest to show how to do this using an example.

Polly always checks what her friends are going to wear before she gets ready to go out because she does not like to be the odd one out. Jed watches his colleagues carefully when he starts a new job so that he can work out where to put his things and how long to take for lunch.

Discuss two explanations for conformity. Refer to Polly and Jed in your discussion. (Total 16 marks)

- 6 marks for knowledge **(AO1)** of informational and normative social influence.
- 6 marks for evaluation/analysis/discussion **(AO3)** of informational and normative social influence.
- 4 marks for application **(AO2)** – i.e. how research can be related to Polly and Jed. As

you go through the essay when you come across a point which relates to either of them simply say:

“Normative social influence relates to Polly always checking what her friends are wearing as she wants to be approved of and liked by the group and fears disapproval and embarrassment if she thinks she’s not dressed like the rest of her friends”, etc.

Try and relate material back to Polly 2 times and Jed 2 times. For example, expand on the points: Polly (i) checks what her friends are wearing – , (ii) doesn’t like to be the odd one out; Jed (i) watches his colleagues carefully, (iii) so that he can work out where to put things and how long to take for lunch (both of which relate to informational social influence).

Rob is a sixth-form student who has started hearing voices in his head. The voices come often, are usually threatening and make Rob feel frightened. The voices are making it difficult for Rob to complete his homework properly and he is worried about how this may affect his chances of going to university.

Rob has not told anyone about his experiences, but his parents and teachers have noticed that he appears distracted, anxious and untidy.

Outline and evaluate failure to function adequately and deviation from ideal mental health as definitions of abnormality. Refer to the experiences of Rob in your answer. (Total 16 marks)

- 6 marks for knowledge of these 2 definitions of abnormality **(AO1)**.
- 6 marks for evaluation/discussion of these 2 definitions of abnormality **(AO3)**.
- 4 marks for application – i.e. how definitions and evaluation of these definitions can be related to Rob’s behavior **(AO2)**.

As you go through the essay relate relevant material to Rob’s behavior. Try and do this at least twice for each definition. For example:

“Rob’s difficulty in completing homework fit with the failure to function adequately definition of abnormality as his emotional state and experiences are starting to interfere with his ability to work”.

Other points you could expand on include: (i) he is hearing voices – Deviation from Ideal Mental Health – he does not have an accurate perception of reality; (ii) he is anxious – Deviation from Ideal Mental Health – he does not have positive attitudes to the self; (iii) he is ‘untidy’ – Failure to Function Adequately – his experiences mean he cannot longer look after/care for himself.

If you would like to submit your essay for review please [email](#)

Example Essays

Attachment Essays

Discuss research into the influence of early attachment on adult relationships

Discuss the usefulness of animal studies for investigating attachment

Discuss Bowlby’s theory of attachment. Use learning theory as a part of your discussion

Exam Question Guides

Revision Resources

How To Write AQA Psychology Essays for 16 Marker Questions

How To Answer AQA Psychology Short Context Questions

How to Answer ‘Design a Study’ Research Methods Questions

Research Methods Exam Questions and Answers ☐

Research Methods Exam Questions and Answers (48 marks) ☐

Research Methods Exam Questions and Answers (24 marks) ☐

Revision Notes

Paper 1: Introductory Topics

Social Influence

Memory

Attachment

Psychopathology

Paper 2: Psychology in Context

Biopsychology

Research Methods

Paper 3: Issues and Options

Issues & Debates

Schizophrenia

Aggression

Forensic Psychology

Relationships

Gender

Past Papers

AS Paper 1

2017 Exam Paper
2017 Mark Scheme
2017 Examiner Report
2016 Exam Paper
2016 Mark Scheme
2016 Examiner Report

A-Level Paper 1
2017 Exam Paper
2017 Mark Scheme
2017 Examiner Report

Assessment Objectives

AO1
Demonstrate knowledge
(a) demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific ideas, processes, techniques and procedures.
(b) show a knowledge and understanding of psychological theories, terminology, concepts, studies and methods.

AO2
Application of knowledge
(a) apply knowledge and understanding of scientific ideas, processes, techniques and

procedures:

in a theoretical context

in a practical context

when handling qualitative data

when handling quantitative data

This skill area tests knowledge of research design and data analysis, and applying theoretical understanding of psychology to everyday/real-life examples.

AO3

Analyse, interpret and evaluate

(a) analyse, interpret and evaluate scientific information, ideas and evidence, including in relation to issues, to:

make judgements and reach conclusions

develop and refine practical design and procedures.

Examples of how you can score AO3 marks

Whether or not theories are supported or refuted by valid research evidence.

After describing a theory go on to describe a piece of research evidence saying, 'X's study supports/refutes this theory...' and then describe the research study.

Contextualising how the topic in question relates to broader debates and approaches in Psychology.

For example, would they agree or disagree with a theory or the findings of the study?

Animal Research - This raises the issue of whether it's morally and/or scientifically right to use animals.

The main criterion is that benefits must outweigh costs.

Animal research also raises the issue of extrapolation. Can we generalize from studies on animals to humans as their anatomy & physiology is different from humans?

General criticisms and/or strengths of theories and studies.

E.g. 'Bandura's Bobo Doll studies are laboratory experiments and therefore criticisable on the grounds of lacking ecological validity'.

To gain marks for criticising study's methodologies the criticism must be contextualised: i.e. say why this is a problem in this particular study.

'Therefore, the violence the children witnessed was on television and was against a doll not a human'.

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