

Paper 2 · Section A focus paper · Approaches in Psychology

A-level topic mock · 2026 · Maximum mark: 48

This is the A-level version of the Approaches mock (AQA spec 4.2.1). It covers all six approaches (behaviourist, social learning theory, cognitive, biological, psychodynamic, humanistic) and comparison of approaches. The AS version covers only the first four. Indicative content is not exhaustive; credit any other valid points. Specialist vocabulary follows AQA's 2025 *Subject specific vocabulary*.

A Approaches in Psychology

0 1AO2 · 1 mark multiple choice

Which one of the following is an example of negative reinforcement?

Answer: B — A teenager takes painkillers to remove a headache, and so takes them more often.

Negative reinforcement = *removing* an unpleasant stimulus to *increase* behaviour. A = positive reinforcement; C = negative punishment; D = positive punishment.

0 2AO1 · 1 mark multiple choice

Which one of the following best describes the Superego?

Answer: C — The internalised moral compass of the psyche that judges right and wrong.

A = the Id (pleasure principle); B = the Ego (reality principle); D is not a real Freudian construct.

0 3AO1 · 1 mark multiple choice

Which one of the following best describes self-actualisation?

Answer: C — The realisation of one's full potential at the top of the hierarchy.

A = physiological needs (bottom of Maslow's hierarchy); B = safety needs; D describes Rogers's therapeutic concept, not self-actualisation itself.

0 4

AO1 · 3 marks short answer

Outline what is meant by conditions of worth in humanistic psychology.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 3 marks

- **2 marks** for an accurate outline: conditions of worth are conditions imposed by parents (or other significant figures) under which love and approval are made conditional on the child behaving in particular ways ("I will only love you if you do well at school"). The child internalises these conditions and develops a self-concept based on meeting them.
- **1 mark** for explaining the consequence — conditions of worth lead to **incongruence** between the self-concept and the ideal self, producing psychological problems (low self-worth, anxiety). Rogers's **person-centred therapy** uses **unconditional positive regard** to counteract this.

0 5

AO2 · 4 marks application

Use social learning theory to explain Olivia's behaviour. Refer to vicarious reinforcement and at least one mediational process.

Marks for this question: AO2 = 4 marks

- **4 marks** — Clear, coherent explanation engaging with the stem; uses **vicarious reinforcement** AND at least **one mediational process** accurately; both linked to features of Olivia's case.
- **3 marks** — Clear engagement but lacking detail on one of the two required elements.
- **2 marks** — SLT terminology accurate but limited application.
- **1 mark** — Brief, partial answer.

Indicative content:

- **Vicarious reinforcement:** Olivia observes Maya being rewarded (praise, chocolate, extra tablet time) for tidying. Olivia learns that tidying produces positive consequences — even though Olivia was not rewarded herself.
- **Identification:** Maya is Olivia's older sister — a similar-age, high-status role model with whom Olivia identifies.
- **Mediational processes** (credit any one):
 - **Attention** — Olivia notices Maya's behaviour and the rewards that followed.
 - **Retention** — Olivia stores a memory of the tidying behaviour.
 - **Motor reproduction** — Olivia is capable of physically reproducing the behaviour.
 - **Motivation** — Olivia is motivated to copy because she has seen it lead to rewards.

Use the psychodynamic approach to explain Adam's behaviour. Refer to one defence mechanism.

Marks for this question: AO2 = 4 marks

- **4 marks** — Clear, coherent explanation engaging effectively with the stem; correctly identifies **displacement** (or accepts other valid defence mechanisms if argued well); links to specific features of Adam's case; uses psychodynamic terminology accurately.
- **3 marks** — Clear engagement but lacking precision in one element.
- **2 marks** — Defence mechanism identified but limited application.
- **1 mark** — Brief, partial answer.

Indicative content:

- **Displacement** is the obvious answer — Adam cannot direct his anger at the manager (the true source), so he **transfers** it to a safer target (his children).
 - **Mechanism:** the Ego uses defence mechanisms unconsciously to protect itself from anxiety. The original anger directed at the manager would be unacceptable to express (job at risk; social rules), creating internal conflict. Displacement allows the unacceptable feelings to be expressed safely, reducing anxiety.
 - **Link to stem:** Adam was "feeling angry but cannot show this anger at work"; he then "shouts furiously at the children" — the children are a safer target than the manager.
 - **Other defence mechanisms** students might validly apply:
 - **Repression** — Adam may be repressing the anger at the manager rather than acknowledging it; the anger then "leaks out" via displacement.
 - **Denial** — Adam may unconsciously deny that he is angry with his manager.
 - **Theoretical link:** this is psychodynamic theory in action — the Ego uses defence mechanisms to manage conflicts between the Id (which wants to release aggression) and the Superego (which says aggression at the manager is wrong).
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0 7

AO1 · 3 marks short answer

Outline the role of genotype, phenotype and evolution in the biological approach.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 3 marks

- **1 mark** for **genotype**: the genetic make-up of an individual — the genes carried on the chromosomes (fixed at conception).
 - **1 mark** for **phenotype**: the observable characteristics that result from the interaction of the genotype with the environment.
 - **1 mark** for **evolution**: Darwin's (1859) theory of natural selection — characteristics that increase survival and reproduction are passed to the next generation. Over time, adaptive characteristics become more common in the population.
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0 8

AO1 · 3 marks short answer

Briefly outline Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Refer to at least three of the levels.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 3 marks

- **1 mark** for the overarching idea: Maslow (1943) proposed a hierarchy in which **lower needs must be satisfied before higher needs can be pursued**. The pinnacle is **self-actualisation**.
 - **2 marks** for clear description of at least three levels:
 - **1. Physiological** — food, water, sleep, warmth.
 - **2. Safety** — security, stability, freedom from fear.
 - **3. Love and belongingness** — intimate relationships, friendships.
 - **4. Esteem** — respect, achievement, self-confidence.
 - **5. Self-actualisation** — realising one's full potential.
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Outline what is meant by cognitive neuroscience. Refer to one example of research.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 4 marks

- **2 marks** for accurate outline: cognitive neuroscience is the scientific study of how **cognitive functions emerge from the physical and chemical activity of neurons and brain structures**. Uses brain-imaging techniques (fMRI, PET, EEG, ERPs) to map mental processes onto specific brain regions. (In the 2025 spec, cognitive neuroscience sits within the biological approach.)
 - **2 marks** for an example:
 - **Maguire et al. (2000)** — London taxi drivers had larger posterior hippocampi (spatial memory); size correlated with years of experience.
 - **Tulving et al. (1994)** — PET scans showed semantic memories activated the left prefrontal cortex; episodic memories activated the right prefrontal cortex.
 - **Broca's area** (left frontal lobe) — language production, identified through post-mortem and confirmed by modern brain imaging.
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Compare the behaviourist approach and the humanistic approach. Refer to at least two points of comparison.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 4 marks, AO3 = 4 marks

Level	Marks	Descriptor
4	7–8	Knowledge of both approaches is accurate and well detailed. Comparison is effective and uses at least two clear points of contrast. Clear, coherent, focused; specialist terminology used effectively.
3	5–6	Knowledge generally accurate. Comparison mostly effective but may be one-sided in places.
2	3–4	Some accurate knowledge. Comparison limited; may be largely descriptive of each approach in turn.
1	1–2	Knowledge limited; little or no actual comparison.
0	0	No relevant content.

Indicative content — at least TWO points of comparison should be drawn. Possible points:

- **Nature vs nurture:** Behaviourism is strongly *nurture* (blank slate; all behaviour learned). Humanism is interactionist but acknowledges innate drives (e.g. the innate drive to self-actualise).
- **Free will vs determinism:** Behaviourism is **hard environmental determinist** (Skinner explicitly denied free will). Humanism is the strongest **free will** approach (Rogers's emphasis on self-determination).
- **Reductionism vs holism:** Behaviourism is **environmentally reductionist** — reduces behaviour to stimulus–response chains. Humanism is explicitly **holistic** — treats people as whole, integrated individuals.
- **Scientific status:** Behaviourism is highly scientific (controlled lab experiments, operationalised variables). Humanism is the *least* scientific (concepts like self-actualisation are difficult to operationalise).
- **Methodology / approach to research:** Behaviourism uses nomothetic methods (general laws of learning from large samples). Humanism uses idiographic methods (in-depth study of individuals; subjective experience).
- **Views of human nature:** Behaviourism is morally neutral (humans are shaped by environment). Humanism takes an **optimistic** view (humans are inherently good, growth-oriented).
- **Application to therapy:** Behaviourist → systematic desensitisation, token economies. Humanistic → person-centred therapy, unconditional positive regard.
- **Animal research:** Behaviourism relies heavily on animal models (Skinner's rats, Pavlov's dogs). Humanism considers humans qualitatively different from animals — animal models inappropriate.

Top-band answers will pick AT LEAST TWO dimensions and explicitly contrast the two approaches on each — not just describe each approach separately.

Discuss the psychodynamic approach. Refer to the case of Sarah as part of your discussion.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 6 marks, AO2 = 4 marks, AO3 = 6 marks

Level	Marks	Descriptor
4	13–16	Knowledge of the psychodynamic approach is accurate and generally well detailed. Application to Sarah is effective and integrated across the stem. Discussion is thorough and effective with strong evaluation. Clear, coherent and focused.
3	9–12	Knowledge evident with some accuracy. Application mostly effective. Discussion mostly effective but limited in places.
2	5–8	Some accurate knowledge. Application limited and partial. Discussion superficial.
1	1–4	Knowledge limited; little or no application or discussion.
0	0	No relevant content.

Indicative AO1 content — the spec requires reference to:

- **The role of the unconscious** — most behaviour is driven by thoughts, memories and drives we are not aware of. Revealed through dreams, free association and slips of the tongue.
- **The structure of personality (Id, Ego, Superego):**
 - **Id** — pleasure principle; primitive, instinctual, present from birth (oral stage).
 - **Ego** — reality principle; mediates between Id and Superego using defence mechanisms; develops in the anal stage.
 - **Superego** — morality principle; internalised moral standards; develops in the phallic stage.
- **Defence mechanisms** (spec requires repression, denial and displacement):
 - **Repression** — unconsciously pushing distressing thoughts out of awareness.
 - **Denial** — refusing to accept reality.
 - **Displacement** — transferring negative emotions to a safer target.
- **Psychosexual stages:** oral (0–1), anal (1–3), phallic (3–6), latency (6–puberty), genital (puberty+). Unresolved conflict at any stage produces **fixation** — adult traits associated with that stage.

Indicative AO2 content — engagement with Sarah:

- **Oral fixation:** Sarah's three signature behaviours — **nail-biting, smoking, sarcasm** — are the textbook signs of **oral-stage fixation**. The oral stage (0–1 year) focuses on the mouth as the source of pleasure; if needs are unmet (e.g. inadequate feeding or early weaning), fixation produces these adult oral behaviours.
- **Therapist's hypothesis:** the therapist directly invokes "experiences as a very young baby" — this is precisely what psychodynamic theory predicts. Sarah's adult symptoms are interpreted as the surface expression of an early childhood conflict.

- **Repression and the unconscious:** Sarah cannot give up the behaviours through conscious effort ("tried many times ... cannot do so for more than a few days") — psychodynamic theory would say the underlying drives are **unconscious**, so willpower alone is ineffective.
- **Therapeutic technique:** free association and dream analysis are classic psychoanalytic techniques used to bring unconscious conflicts into consciousness, where they can be worked through.

Indicative AO3 content:

- **Strength — explanatory range:** the psychodynamic approach offers explanations for personality, mental disorders, gender development, moral development and dreams — within a single coherent framework. Few other approaches attempt such breadth.
- **Strength — practical application (psychoanalysis):** Freud developed the first systematic "talking therapy" — the ancestor of modern psychotherapy. Modern psychodynamic therapies remain in clinical use.
- **Limitation — unfalsifiable:** the core claims (the unconscious, repressed memories, oral fixation) cannot be directly tested. Any contradictory evidence can be reinterpreted as resistance or further repression. By Popper's criterion, unfalsifiable claims are not scientific.
- **Limitation — case-study evidence:** the approach relies heavily on case studies of atypical individuals (Anna O, Little Hans, Dora). Generalising from a small number of (mostly female, Viennese, neurotic) clients to all humans is risky — limits population validity.
- **Limitation — gender bias:** Freud's theory is strongly gender-biased. The Electra complex was added later and treated as less satisfactory than the Oedipus. Freud claimed female superegos are weaker than male, leading to claims that women are "less moral" — alpha bias.
- **Limitation — cultural and temporal validity:** Freud's theory reflects late-19th-century Viennese society (sexually repressed, patriarchal, middle-class). Concepts may not generalise to modern multicultural societies with different sexual norms and family structures.
- **Limitation — psychic determinism:** the approach implies behaviour is determined by unconscious forces beyond the individual's control — incompatible with moral responsibility and the legal system.
- **Limitation — applied to Sarah specifically:** oral fixation is one of many possible explanations for nail-biting and smoking — biological (nicotine dependence), behaviourist (operant conditioning of nicotine reward) and cognitive (stress-coping schemas) explanations also exist. The therapist's psychodynamic interpretation cannot be tested against these alternatives.

Top-band answers will (1) cover all four spec elements (unconscious, Id/Ego/Superego, defence mechanisms, psychosexual stages); (2) explicitly identify Sarah's behaviours as oral fixation; (3) link her difficulty giving up the behaviours to the unconscious nature of the drive; (4) include at least two substantial evaluation points (typically unfalsifiability + one other); and (5) reach a balanced conclusion (typically: the approach has enormous historical and clinical significance but its specific scientific claims remain difficult to test).