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What tutors look for when marking essays

- Marking schemes: criteria related to grade bands
- Writing skills: 'introductory', 'intermediate' and 'advanced' essays

One of the most frequent and reasonable questions that students ask is: What should I be doing to get a better grade? Of course, the answer to this question will depend on a number of factors. For example, what is required of an essay answer will clearly vary according to the precise question set. Equally, the standard expected of essay writing is likely to be higher on more advanced undergraduate courses than on those at entry level. Similarly, there may be higher expectations towards the end of a course than there were at its start. Having said this, it is possible to specify the various qualities (if only in general terms) that distinguish essays in the different grade bands, and what writing skills may be expected from essays at different levels.

Health warning

This chapter has been included to give you a *broad indication of what may be expected, in general, for different grades*. Increasingly, grade bands are defined in relation to 'learning outcomes' that draw on specified 'subject benchmarks' and

'key skills' (see, for example: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk> and <http://www.qca.org.uk/index.html>). Individual courses will have their own course-specific requirements for each of the grade ranges, and also the requirements will vary depending on whether the course is at a more or less advanced stage of undergraduate study. As a result, where they are available, you may want to look at the learning outcomes specified for your particular course of study. However, you should remember that grading an essay is always a matter of weighing up not only the structure, content and style of the essay, but the interplay between these, together with the interplay between any number of the different intellectual challenges built into the assignment. For all these reasons you should not expect the grading criteria for a specific course to map exactly on to what is set out here.

2.1 Marking schemes: criteria related to grade bands

In this chapter you will find guidelines adapted from those produced by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 1994) in conjunction with the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments. They do not correspond to the specific policy of the Open University or any other UK higher education institution, but they should give you an idea of the sorts of *general* things markers are likely to consider for different grade ranges. Remember, what is expected for a particular course for a particular grade may differ from these guidelines. Remember, too, you won't have to do well in every area to get a particular grade. For example, your depth of insight into theoretical issues may compensate for slightly weaker coverage of the evidence, or your understanding of the material may compensate for weaknesses in the coherence of your argument. It may also be the case that some of these criteria will be more relevant to advanced courses of undergraduate study (see section 2.2 below).

Many of the terms used below (for example, 'developing an argument') are explored in greater detail in this guide. If you are unsure of their meaning, you may want to look them up.

Advice for OU students

Always remember to read the student notes for the specific assignment you are attempting and/or ask your tutor for guidance if you are unclear about what is expected of you.

Remember, particularly if you are new to the OU, that the University's marking scheme goes up to 100 and may be different from ones you have been used to in the past.

The criteria following the table indicate 'excellent', 'good pass', 'clear pass', 'bare pass', 'bare fail' and 'clear fail' essays. These categories broadly correspond to the following grade bands.

An excellent pass is likely to

- provide a comprehensive and accurate response to the question, demonstrating a breadth and depth of reading and understanding of relevant arguments and issues;
- show a sophisticated ability to synthesize a wide range of material;

OU	Grade bands		Other
	Conventional university		
85–100	1st	70+	A
70–84	2:1	60–69	B
55–69	2:2	50–59	C
40–54	3rd	40–49	D
30–39		30–39	Fail
0–29		0–29	Fail

- show a sophisticated ability to outline, analyse and contrast complex competing positions and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses effectively;
- demonstrate clarity of argument and expression;
- develop a sophisticated argument, demonstrating logical reasoning and the effective use of well selected examples and evidence;
- where appropriate, demonstrate an ability to apply ideas to new material or in a new context;
- demonstrate depth of insight into theoretical issues;
- demonstrate an ability to write from 'within' a perspective or theory, including the ability to utilize appropriate social scientific concepts and vocabulary; may show a more creative or original approach (within the constraints of academic rigour);
- use a standard referencing system accurately.

A good pass is likely to

- provide a generally accurate and well-informed answer to the question;
 - be reasonably comprehensive;
 - draw on a range of sources;
 - be well organized and structured;
 - demonstrate an ability to develop a strong and logical line of argument, supported by appropriate examples and evidence;
 - show an ability to synthesize a wide range of material;
 - show an ability to outline, analyse and contrast more complex competing positions, and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses effectively;
 - demonstrate the ability to work with theoretical material effectively and some confidence in handling social scientific concepts and vocabulary;
 - where appropriate, demonstrate an ability to apply ideas to new material or in a new context;
- show a good understanding of the material;

- be clearly presented;
- use a standard referencing system accurately.

A clear pass is likely to

- give an adequate answer to the question, though one dependent on commentaries or a limited range of source material;
- be generally accurate, although with some omissions and minor errors;
- develop and communicate a basic logical argument with some use of appropriate supporting examples and evidence;
- demonstrate an ability to synthesize a range of material;
- demonstrate an ability to outline, analyse and contrast competing positions, and to begin to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses (although this may be derivative);
- demonstrate a basic ability to address theoretical material and to use appropriate social scientific concepts and vocabulary;
- be written in the author's own words;
- show an understanding of standard referencing conventions, although containing some errors and omissions.

A bare pass is likely to

- demonstrate basic skills in the areas identified in the 'clear pass' band

but may also:

- answer the question tangentially;
- miss a key point;
- contain a number of inaccuracies or omissions;
- show only sparse coverage of relevant material;
- fail to support arguments with adequate evidence;
- be over-dependent on source material;
- contain only limited references.

A bare fail is likely to

- fail to answer the question;
- contain very little appropriate material;
- show some evidence of relevant reading but provide only cursory coverage with numerous errors, omissions or irrelevances such that the writer's understanding of fundamental points is in question;
- be highly disorganized;
- contain much inappropriate material;
- lack any real argument or fail to support an argument with evidence;
- demonstrate a lack of understanding of social scientific concepts and vocabulary and an inability to deploy social scientific writing skills such as skills of critical evaluation, synthesis, and so on;
- be unacceptably dependent on sources;
- be plagiarized (sometimes);
- demonstrate problems in the use of appropriate writing conventions such that the essay's meaning is systematically obscured.

A clear fail is likely to

- show a profound misunderstanding of basic material;
- show a complete failure to understand or answer the question;
- provide totally inadequate information;
- be incoherent;
- be plagiarized (sometimes).

2.2 Writing skills: 'introductory', 'intermediate' and 'advanced' essays

As you move from entry level to more advanced undergraduate courses it is likely that you will be expected to develop and demonstrate an increasing range of essay writing skills. For example, you may be expected to write from 'within' a

particular perspective, handle more complex theories or systematically interrogate original sources.

A general guide of this kind cannot give you a full breakdown of the skills that will be relevant to every course that you may take. What it tries to do is provide an outline of ‘core’ skills. Individual courses may emphasize different parts of these core skills or may involve specific skills of their own (for example, project writing, employing specific research methods, using graphs to present information). Individual essays may also require you to emphasize some ‘core’ skills more than others. As a result of these factors, you will need to adapt what is set out below according to the demands of different questions and different courses.

We look now in detail at the various criteria that may be expected to distinguish a ‘basic’ or ‘introductory’ undergraduate essay from ‘intermediate’ and ‘advanced’ essays. Once again, many of these points are developed in later chapters, so if you are not sure what the points mean (for example, ‘signposting’, writing from ‘within’ a perspective), you may want to look them up.

Advice for OU students

The following criteria broadly map onto the OU’s undergraduate courses in the social sciences at Levels 1, 2 and 3. Thus, having *completed* your Level 1 course you could be expected to have developed the various essay writing skills identified as appropriate to an ‘introductory’ essay.

Remember, you would *not* necessarily be expected to have these skills already in place on starting an OU Level 1 course in the social sciences. Having developed these skills in the course of your Level 1 studies, you should be ready to tackle essay writing on a Level 2 course, where you would learn the skills identified as appropriate to an ‘intermediary’ essay.

The ‘introductory’ essay

Introductions are likely to demonstrate:

- a clear understanding of the scope of the question and what is required;
- the ability to ‘signpost’ the shape of the essay’s argument clearly and concisely;
- a basic ability to define key terms.

Main sections are likely to demonstrate some or all of the following, depending on what the question requires:

- an ability to construct a basic argument that engages with the question;
- the ability to précis aspects of relevant material clearly and concisely, often relying on commentaries and other secondary sources;
- the ability to outline, analyse and interpret evidence, arguments and the basics of relevant theories;
- the ability to support arguments with appropriate evidence and examples drawn from different sources;
- an ability to utilize basic maps, diagrams and numerical data in a way that supports the discussion;
- some familiarity with major perspectives in the social sciences;
- some familiarity with relevant social scientific vocabulary.

The main section of an introductory essay is also likely to be moving towards demonstrating:

- an understanding that different theories are in competition;
- the ability to outline the main similarities and differences between these;
- a basic ability to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

Conclusions are likely to demonstrate:

- the ability to summarize the content of the essay clearly and concisely and to come to a conclusion.

Quotations should be referenced, and ‘pass’ essays will always need to avoid plagiarism. Essays should ‘flow’ smoothly, use sentences, paragraphs and grammar correctly, and be written in clear English.

The ‘intermediate’ essay

In addition to skills in all the above areas, intermediate essays may also show the following.

Introductions are likely to demonstrate:

- a clear understanding of more complex essay questions;
- a basic ability to ‘signpost’ the content as well as the shape or structure of the essay but not in a laboured way;
- a grasp of the major debates that lie ‘behind the question’;
- an ability to define key terms.

Main sections are likely to demonstrate some or all of the following, depending on what the question requires:

- the ability to construct more complex arguments relevant to the question;
- the ability to ‘weight’ different aspects of the material according to their significance within the overall argument;
- an ability to identify and précis the key debates relevant to the question;
- the ability to outline more complex theories in a basic form;
- an ability to relate abstract ideas and theories to concrete detail;
- an ability to support arguments with appropriate evidence and examples;
- an ability to utilize information drawn from across a wide range of source materials;
- the ability to evaluate critically, that is identify the strengths and weaknesses of competing positions and make a reasoned choice between these;
- an ability to utilize more complex maps, diagrams and numerical data;
- a preliminary ability to work from original texts and data without relying on commentaries on these;
- increased familiarity with major social scientific perspectives and social scientific vocabulary and increased confidence in applying these to specific issues;
- a preliminary ability to write from ‘within’ specific perspectives or theories;
- an ability to pull together different aspects of the course and to apply these to the essay;
- a basic ability in selecting and using appropriate quotations from, and making references to, key texts in the field.

Conclusions are likely to demonstrate:

- an ability to highlight the essay's core argument;
- the ability to provide a basic summary of the key debates raised by the question and the ability to provide an overview of 'current knowledge';
- a preliminary ability to point to absences in the argument or areas worthy of future development.

Essays should also be properly referenced, be written in the author's own words, and utilize a more developed and fluent writing style (for example, by handling transitions effectively).

The 'advanced' essay

In addition to skills in all of the above areas, advanced essays may also show the following.

Introductions are likely to demonstrate:

- the ability to present a more sophisticated version of the essay's core argument;
- the ability to summarize in more sophisticated forms the key debates raised by the question;
- the ability to provide more sophisticated definitions of terms;
- an ability to really interrogate the question by focusing on ideas or sub-questions prompted by the question in hand.

Main sections are likely to demonstrate some or all of the following:

- the ability to construct complex arguments, 'weighting' each section according to its significance within the overall argument;
- the ability to provide sophisticated outlines of complex theories;
- the ability to support arguments with appropriate evidence and examples drawn from a wide range of sources, and to use evidence *selectively* in a way that supports central points;
- the ability to synthesize and evaluate competing positions critically and the confidence to write from 'within' a specific perspective or theory on the basis of a reasoned understanding of its strengths and weaknesses;

- where appropriate, recognition of the potential uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge in the field under discussion;
- familiarity with, and confidence in, handling complex maps, diagrams and numerical data;
- familiarity with, and confidence in, handling original texts and data without relying on commentaries;
- familiarity with the major social scientific perspectives and social scientific vocabulary, and confidence in applying these to specific issues and to new contexts;
- the ability to pull together different aspects of the course and apply these to the issues raised by a specific essay question;
- the ability to use appropriate quotations and cite key texts in the field.

Conclusions are likely to demonstrate:

- the ability to present a sophisticated summary of the essay's core argument;
- the ability to provide an effective synthesis of the key debates raised by the question, or a sophisticated overview of the state of 'current knowledge';
- a developed ability to point to absences in the argument or areas worthy of future development.

'Advanced' essays should be fully referenced and written in your own words. The best essays are likely to show a significant depth of understanding of the issues raised by the question and may show a more creative or original approach (within the constraints of academic rigour).

Different skills, same writer

In thinking about the requirements of different levels of essay writing, it is important to realize that different levels of skills do not come neatly packaged. For instance, you may already have advanced essay writing skills even while working at an introductory level of undergraduate study. Alternatively, you may have advanced skills of analysis (such as the ability to break down a complex argument into its component parts and summarize these effectively), but be struggling with the handling of theoretical concepts and perspectives. Or you may be very effective at your essay introductions, but shakier when it comes to

putting the argument together in the main section. The important point to grasp is that the foregoing advice provides *indications* of what may be expected at different levels across the whole range of abilities, *not* that you must be able to demonstrate the appropriate level of ability in all cases. Remember, too, that an essay is always greater than its component parts, and it is how you put all those parts together that is often as important as the parts themselves.

SUMMARY

- Essays are graded on extent to which they demonstrate of an understanding of relevant course content and of social scientific and writing skills.
- The exact mix of content and skills required will depend on the course and question. However, it is possible to specify in general terms what is expected for each grade band.
- As you become increasingly experienced, you should expect your understanding of social scientific arguments and your writing skills to increase in sophistication.