

Writing Essays at Advanced Level: Some General Advice

The official A-Level and IB markschemes should of course be your first point of reference. However, they can be rather detailed, and you may find this markscheme useful for developing your essay skills.

L1	"No real understanding or knowledge" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demands of the question are not understood; ▪ Knowledge is irrelevant or absent; ▪ Structure is incoherent (e.g. a list of bullet points) 	0-3
L2	"Little understanding; little knowledge" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demands of the question are vaguely understood; ▪ Knowledge is vague and poorly applied; ▪ Structure is lacking in coherence (e.g. no paragraphs) 	4-5
L3	"Limited understanding; limited knowledge" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demands of the question are only partially understood; ▪ Knowledge is accurate, but limited in relevance and scope; ▪ Structure is basic (e.g. paragraphs in no obvious order) 	6-7
L4	"Narrative with bolt-on analysis" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demands of the question are generally understood; ▪ Knowledge is accurate and relevant, but limited in scope; ▪ Structure is narrative, with analysis "bolted-on" to the facts 	8-10
L5	"Analytical but lacking in breadth and / or depth" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demands of the question are understood but not fully addressed; ▪ Knowledge is accurate, relevant, and adequate in scope; ▪ Structure is analytical, with narrative backing up the arguments 	11-13
L6	"Analytical, with breadth and depth" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demands of the question are understood and fully addressed; ▪ Knowledge is accurate, relevant and comprehensive in scope; ▪ Structure is consistently analytical 	14-16
L7	"As above, with a good use of historiography and / or a challenge to the assumptions of the question" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Historiography = Views of different schools of historians ▪ Assumptions of the question = Points of view within the question that could be challenged (e.g. "Was terror the main reason why Hitler successfully controlled the German people?" assumes that he was successful, which a L7 candidate might challenge – at least in a concluding paragraph) 	17-20

Key points

- **Understanding:**
 - Read the question!
- **Knowledge:**
 - Know your stuff!
- **Structure: Narrative + Analysis**
 - **Narrative** answers tell stories. Each paragraph will mainly be details, information and knowledge.
 - **Depth** of narrative depends on the level of knowledge.
- **Analytical** answers make arguments. Each paragraph will start with a **point**, which will then be **explained** with **evidence** (PEE).
 - **Breadth** of analysis depends on the level of understanding.

Practical Advice

Introduction

- **Demonstrate understanding of the question.** Clarify any key concepts that are mentioned (“Marxist”, “Propaganda”); outline which events and time period you will consider, and why
- **Signpost the reader through your essay.** In other words, give a very brief overview of how you plan to tackle the question.

Main body of essay

- **Start each paragraph with an argument** (analysis). If you read the first sentence of each paragraph when you have finished, you should find that you have a summary of your case.
- **Proceed to explain this point using evidence** (including quotes from historians). The more specific this evidence is, the better.
- **This will ensure that your essay is driven by analysis, not narrative.**

Conclusion

- **Answer the question** by such things as
 - Showing how your factors link together
 - Showing how it depends on where / when / at whom you are looking
- **Challenge the question** by tackling any assumptions within it:
 - E.g. “Why did the League of Nations only last 20 years?” suggests that this is a dismal record; you could make the point that the surprising thing is that it lasted so long as this given all the overwhelming problems it faced.

Sample Exercises

1. “Mr. Angry”

- Take a list of sample questions from past exam papers. For each one, copy it down and then underneath explain
 - What loaded assumptions are within it.
 - Why these are quite obviously completely and utterly wrong.

2. “The Skeleton”

- Produce an essay plan which contains merely the first sentence of each paragraph. Leave space underneath each sentence so it can be completed.
- Then, pass your essay to a partner. Their job is to explain the points you make using evidence.
- Finally, take your essay back (or pass it to a third person) to write a conclusion.