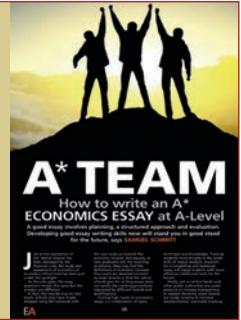


OUR GUIDE TO

GETTING
TOP MARKS
IN YOUR A-LEVEL
ECONOMICS ESSAY

BACK IN 2015, EA FEATURED AN ARTICLE ON HOW TO WRITE AN A* ECONOMICS ESSAY AT A-LEVEL. STUDENTS AND TEACHERS TOLD US IT WAS REALLY USEFUL – SO HERE WE REVISIT THE TOPIC WITH THIS UPDATED AND EXPANDED GUIDE TO GETTING THAT COVETED A*



Some things don't change. The central theme of our 2015 article was that scoring high marks in essays is "a combination of exam technique and knowledge". And that holds true today.

The author of the original article, Sam Schmitt, focussed on the idea that not all exam boards are the same; so the onus is on teachers and students to "read the specifications, examiner reports, and any other guidance they may get hold of" in order to understand how to satisfy the criteria of their exam board.

Four years on, it remains abundantly clear that essays matter. A lot.

In 2019 over 30 000 candidates sat the A-Level Economics exam. The vast majority of those candidates sat their exams with the exam board behemoths of Edexcel and AQA. For Edexcel, a third of its entire marks (100 marks out of 300) come from essays.¹ For AQA, the ratio is higher: 125 marks out of 240. When grade boundaries are often determined by less than 10 marks, it is vitally important to get your essay-writing skills right.

What is an essay?

Essays have always been part and parcel of economics. Despite the ever-increasing

mathematicisation of our subject, any economist worth their salt must be able to communicate ideas verbally. With that in mind, principal examiners use essays to test points of theory in depth and to test candidates' ability to write at length. They can achieve the same from a data paper, but essays allow more abstract questions to be asked which might be a bit awkward on a case-study paper.

How do I get full marks?

You don't. Almost no-one gets full marks. A* candidates manage their time

appropriately and spend just enough time on every question in the exam. There is no point spending 60 minutes trying to achieve 25/25 in the essay if the opportunity cost of that decision is to ignore the 30 multiple-choice questions in Section A.

Instead, candidates need to understand how to obtain "top level" marks as efficiently as possible so they have time to move on to the rest of the paper.

Edexcel and AQA (as well as Eduqas and OCR) employ a "levels-marking system" for essays.² That is: they describe the criteria for different levels of marks and the examiner

AQA DESCRIPTORS

Level of response	Response	Max 25 marks
5	<p>Sound, focused analysis and well-supported evaluation that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is well organised, showing sound knowledge and understanding of economic terminology, concepts and principles with few, if any, errors includes good application of relevant economic principles and, where appropriate, good use of data to support the response includes well-focused analysis with clear, logical chains of reasoning includes supported evaluation throughout the response and in a final conclusion 	21–25 marks

EDEXCEL DESCRIPTORS

Level 4	13–16	<p>Demonstrates precise knowledge and understanding of the concepts, principles and models. Ability to link knowledge and understanding in context using appropriate examples. Analysis is relevant and focused with evidence fully and reliably integrated. Economic ideas are carefully selected and applied appropriately to economic issues and problems. The answer demonstrates logical and coherent chains of reasoning.</p>
Level 3	7–9	<p>Evaluative comments supported by relevant reasoning and appropriate reference to context. Evaluation recognises different viewpoints and is critical of the evidence provided and/or the assumptions underlying the analysis enabling informed judgements to be made.</p>

¹ An essay, for both Edexcel and AQA, is considered to be a long-answer 25 mark question.

² As opposed to a point marking system for other, shorter questions – often calculations.

makes a judgement about which level the candidate's answer sits in best. These are known as descriptors.

Each exam board has its own unique descriptors and teachers and pupils alike should become familiar with them. Although essay questions change, the descriptors for what constitutes an excellent essay do not. The descriptors for AQA and Edexcel are shown on p17.

These descriptors are generated from the 4 Assessment Objectives (AOs) that we have all come to know and love from the 2015 Specification

changes. A 25 mark essay carries marks in all 4 AO areas: knowledge, application, analysis and evaluation.

Tricks for teachers

Until such time as there is a Specification review,³ Edexcel and AQA are unlikely to deviate from this marking system. To do so would leave them open to accusations of shifting the goalposts and putting candidates at a disadvantage.

The trick then is to come up with a "structure" for students that will enable them to satisfy

all the top level descriptors quickly: AO1 –tick; AO2- tick; AO3 – tick; AO4 – tick. All chopped-up into examiner friendly blocks. This approach works. But be warned: it can be super-dull to teach!

How to tick the boxes

Imagine an essay question on 'the impact of monetary policy on the UK economy'. Students can build their answers one AO at a time. Here is my suggestion for one block of AO1-AO4:

AO1	If the Bank of England increases interest rates then the Pound should appreciate.
AO1 and AO2	If the Bank of England increases interest rates then the Pound should appreciate. In 2018 the Bank of England raised the Bank Rate from 0.5% to 0.75% (an increase of 0.25 percentage points). As a result, it was expected that the Pound should appreciate
AO1, AO2 and AO3	If the Bank of England increases interest rates then the Pound should appreciate. This is because the increase in interest rates will incentivise people to save their money in UK banks; the reward for saving is greater. Therefore, people from outside of the UK are more likely to buy Pounds. As a result, the demand for pounds on the Foreign Exchange (FOREX) market increases and this puts upwards pressure on the price of the pound which increases its value. This is shown in my diagram below. In 2018 the Bank of England raised the Bank Rate from 0.5% to 0.75% (an increase of 0.25 percentage points). As a result, it was expected that the Pound should appreciate.
AO1, AO2, AO3 and AO4	If the Bank of England increases interest rates then the Pound should appreciate. This is because the increase in interest rates will incentivise people to save their money in UK banks; the reward for saving is greater. Therefore, people from outside of the UK are more likely to buy Pounds. As a result, the demand for pounds on the Foreign Exchange (FOREX) market increases and this puts upwards pressure on the price of the pound which increases its value. This is shown in my diagram below. In 2018 the Bank of England raised the Bank Rate from 0.5% to 0.75% (an increase of 0.25 percentage points). As a result, it was expected that the Pound should appreciate. However, the Pound is unlikely to appreciate to a significant degree. In fact, it may not appreciate at all. Firstly, the increase in the Bank rate is very small (just 0.25 percentage points) and so it is unlikely that people will buy significant amounts of pounds just because of that small increase in reward for saving. 0.75% is still very low, especially when compared to the US Fed's Fund Rate which is over 2%. In addition, the lack of business confidence in the UK economy at the moment – caused by fears over Brexit – means that the demand for the Pound may not increase as much as expected either.

³ Which may be sooner than we think

How to achieve a “top level marks” essay ...

- **AO1** – You must show precise knowledge.
- **AO2** – You must apply the answer to the context. Avoid pre-rehearsed, generic answers.
- **AO3** – Your analysis must have clear, logical chains of reasoning and be well-focussed (i.e. use economic concepts and link back to the actual question)
- **AO4** – You must show supported evaluation throughout and have an informed final judgement that builds on previous analysis (i.e. a nuanced conclusion).

Tricks for students

- Don't regurgitate your notebook; you must answer the specific question being asked.
- Paragraph your work so it's easy for the examiner to see where one block of AO1-AO4 ends and another starts.
- AO2 and AO4 should not be separate. They should be integral to every block.
- Offer at least two AO1-AO4 blocks for an essay – this will demonstrate a range of points. If time permits, you should offer three.⁴
- At the end of the essay, you must offer a conclusion which itself builds on the blocks above. It should not be a summary, nor should it introduce new material. It should link back to

the preceding blocks and offer a nuanced judgement on the question, e.g. 'short-run v long-run', 'yes but not always', 'not in all countries'. A throwaway sentence or two at the end will not do!

Teachers' note

The approach I've described here will work but – in truth – I'd rather it didn't.

The disadvantage of the level-based system is we find ourselves, as economists (and as time-poor teachers!), demanding efficient essay templates which satisfy the descriptors and can be drilled into our students.

But economics essays really should be about more than

this: Using templated essay structures squeezes out reward for flair and original thinking – something we should be encouraging just before our students head off to university.

There is a time to drill but there is also a (lot of) time to debate, create and explore our subject with our students.

Students' note

As I've just said above, the approach I've outlined here will work – so I hope it helps you create that A* grade essay.

But, along the way, I hope you develop a deep love of economics – a fascinating discipline that can provide real and lasting insights into human behaviour.

Take the time to explore the subject. Ultimately it will benefit you at exam time – and far beyond.

Good luck!•

George Vlachonikolis
Head of Economics
Headington School
Principal Examiner

FOR MORE

You can read our original article on how to join the A* Team at: iea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/EA-Spring-2015_WORKSHOP.pdf



⁴ The benefit here is that if one block is not top level, then there are two other opportunities to be considered top level.