How to write Psychology Essays

The Rough Guide

The first thing to remember in these exams are that they are your chance to show off what you know to the examiner – so do just that! If you use an evaluation issue or psychological concept – define it in your own words to show that you understand it – not that you’re just writing some work because you heard me say it once in class.

You will have one and a half hours in the exam to answer 2 questions; one Section A and one Section B (make sure that you do only answer one from each section). Spend about 30 minutes on A and about an hour on B. Try to write a brief plan first before you dive into your essays to keep you on track and, worst case scenario, if you don’t finish the examiner will be able to see where you were going with your essay.

Always try to give yourself a few minutes at the end of the exam to read over what you have written to make sure that it actually make sense and that you haven’t written anything stupid.

Section A

Section A questions will ask you to talk about a sub-topic area (eg. Measuring adherence, Methods of promoting health …) and you should give yourself about 25-30 minutes for this part. This should give you an idea of how much you should be writing.

a) This part of the question will ask you “Describe something about [insert sub-topic area here]” – these questions can differ somewhat depending on the sub-topic in question, but they will all be basically wanting you to describe at least one study in detail (or 2 studies/theories in less detail). You could be skilled enough to receive a maximum of 6 marks for this section.

So, what do you need to write? Well to achieve full marks on this section you need to demonstrate good knowledge and understanding of the study(s) or theory(s) that you refer to. You will need to give a detailed overview of the study referring to (and this is not an exhaustive list) background, aim, participants, methodology, results, inferences, conclusions etc. Also, remember to let the examiner know why you’re talking about the study that you have mentioned… a sentence saying something to the effect of ‘this is why I’ve spent the last 10 minutes writing this is…’ will be an excellent start to showing your understanding of the study.

It’s really important to get as much detail as you can into this part within the time that you have. As mentioned above as long as the question doesn’t specifically ask for 1 study you can either talk about one study in detail or two studies in less detail.

The most important thing to remember about this part of the essay is that you need to get as much evidence from the studies into the essay as possible while showing your understanding of the study in the context of the sub-topic area.

b) Here you will be asked something along the lines of “Evaluate what psychologists have found about “[insert sub-topic here]” – BUT – a lot of the time the question will try to catch you out so the most important thing about this section is to answer the question that is set! A pretty easy task? Well make sure that you read the question – lots of the time you will be asked to evaluate a particular issue within the sub-topic area like usefulness or methodology. If this is the case make sure that you do actually evaluate the usefulness or methodology and that you’re not just giving generic evaluation points and you can make sure that you do this with your comments. If you PEC just right you could walk away with a massive 10 marks for this section.
In this section you should be using P.E.C (point, example, comment, for the uninitiated) x4 – so four paragraphs each highlighting one point of evaluation in relation to the question. As far as PEC goes, a few tips:

- Make sure that you’re P’s are appropriate to the question;
- Make sure that you’re E’s are relevant;
- Make sure that you’re C’s relate back to the question – a foolproof way of ensuring that you’re answering the question!

**Section B**

Section B questions will always ask you about a *topic area* (eg. Pain, Stress, Adherence …) and you should allow yourself around an hour for this part of the exam. A Section B questions is broken up into three parts a, b, and (surprisingly) c.

a) This part of the question will ask you to describe “What psychologists have found out about [insert topic area here]”… for your troubles you will be awarded a maximum of 10 marks for this section.

Here you will need to summarise 3 or 4 studies – I would suggest 4 just to be on the safe side. There doesn’t need to be masses of writing – the skill is to summarise the studies in a succinct way.

Start each study / theory with a new paragraph just to highlight the different areas.

For each paragraph try to have a sentence relating what you have just written back to the question – basically saying ‘this is why I’ve written about this’ -- *Here you will be marked for S.P.G.*

b) This part of the question will ask you to evaluate “What psychologists have found out about [insert topic area] … as a reward for your perseverance you will be given a maximum of 16 marks for this section.

Here you will need to have 3 or 4 evaluation issues (again I would advise 4). Start each evaluation issue with a new paragraph. Each paragraph should be structured along the following lines:

- Lead with the issue – state what the evaluation issue that you’re identifying is.
- Define the evaluation issue – maybe in relation to the topic area if appropriate.
- Give your first example (study, theory etc.) – you are not limited to only those which you identified in part (a) you can use any appropriate studies.
- Then give another study – this will either be a compare or contrast – so it could again be highlighting the issue at hand or it could be a ‘however’ study.
- Leave a thoughtful comment.

You will be assessed on the structure of your argument so try to keep the essay flowing – avoid a list like essay (…the first evaluation issue is this… the second evaluation issue is this …etc.)

c) The final part of the question will ask you to apply your knowledge to a ‘real world’ scenario. We can only really give you a general guideline for this question as it is very reliant on the type of questions that is asked. For getting this far you will be bequeathed a maximum of 8 marks.

- Lead with your suggestion
- Justify your suggestion with appropriate evidence
- State the effect that your suggestion may have
- Evaluate your suggestion

Just remember – these exams are there for you to show off what you know – not to trip you up. Make sure that you read the questions fully BEFORE you start answering them. Plan your essays briefly. Read what you have written before the end of the exam.

And most of all: have fun! 😊