

Potential Pitfall 1: No clear structure/ thread running through your answers

Here are some tips for structuring your answers in an exam. These are particularly relevant to essay-based exams:

- **PLAN!** Don't launch straight into your answer – as tempting as it is! Think about the question and make sure you understand what it is asking. Do some mind-mapping first; decide what points you need to cover to answer the question fully. Think about how those points could fit together in a coherent, progressive answer.
- **COMMUNICATE WITH THE EXAMINER!** In your introduction, tell them what the main thrust of your answer is going to be. Then guide them through your essay, constantly pointing out the relevance and significance of the ideas you are putting forward. Make sure every paragraph contributes something towards answering the question, and **show your marker** exactly how.
- **DON'T LEAP AROUND!** Each paragraph should make one main point. Make sure each point is properly explained, developed, and evidenced. Try not to start discussing an interesting idea, only to abandon it and skip onto something else.
- **FIRST AND LAST SENTENCES OF PARAGRAPHS ARE IMPORTANT!** These will help you to communicate with the examiner. The first sentence of a paragraph should tell the reader what idea is going to be explored in the paragraph, and how it connects to your previous idea. The last sentence of a paragraph should emphasise its relevance to the question you are answering.
- **PARAGRAPHS SHOULD BE LINKED!** Your essay answers should not be a string of unconnected ideas. Each paragraph should build on the one before it, so that your essay feels progressive rather than random or list-like. Make use of transition words or phrases like 'alternatively;' 'consequently;' 'as a result'; 'however;' 'furthermore...'
- **PARAGRAPHS HAVE THEIR OWN STRUCTURE TOO!** In fact, you can almost think of them as mini-essays, with a structure that might look something like this:
 - **Introduce** your point: Indicate what the paragraph is going to discuss, or what direction it will take your essay in.
 - **Elaborate** on the point. Make sure your meaning is clear – to your reader, not just in your mind!
 - **Evidence:** Present and reference the evidence that supports your point.
 - **Comment** on the evidence: Criticise, analyse or engage with the evidence. What is your interpretation of it? Exactly how does it support your point? Is it reliable? Are there any other factors to consider?
 - **Conclude** your point: Finish the paragraph with a sentence that summarises your point, and indicates what it means for the question. Words like "therefore" and "consequently" can be useful here.

In exams, you might not be able to adhere to such a precise structure for every paragraph. But thinking about a possible outline can help you to stay on track. It reminds you to include evidence for your ideas, and to analyse or comment on that evidence in some way.

Potential Pitfall 2: Not being clear and concise enough

One thing that can lose you marks in an exam is failing to get your ideas across clearly enough. Communicating your thoughts to somebody else is difficult, especially in an exam situation. Similarly, waffling or drifting off the point can be a real time-waster. Below are some tips to help you stay clear and concise when writing in exams.

1. Don't use unnecessarily complicated words or sentence structures. You don't need them – just be clear, concise and precise.
2. Try not to be vague – avoid empty phrases like “some people think” or “it has been said.” Wherever possible, be concrete and specific. Give examples, facts or references to support your assertions.
3. If you are trying to convey a complex idea, break it down into chunks and feed it to the reader in clear, concise sentences. Don't throw it all at the reader at once, or string lots of ideas together with commas.
4. Imagine somebody reading and marking your answers. Have you missed out anything that might stop them from understanding a key idea? Have you expected them to mind-read anything? Do your answers link explicitly to the questions that have been asked?
5. Leave time to read what you have written. It might be a good idea to do this as you go – pause every few paragraphs to check that everything is clear, and to make sure that you have not gone off-topic.
6. Don't be afraid to cross things out or make amendments to your answers. Examiners expect this. Just make sure that the words you want them to mark are clear. Make it easy for them to follow your answers and award you marks!