

Preparing examination questions (essays)

Ideas to help ensure that the question(s) are marked objectively

1. Review the marking criteria

This exercise may be undertaken by the Board of Examiners or at faculty/departmental level.

Questions for consideration include:

- Are they objective?
 - An example of an objective criterion is 'answer includes comprehensive coverage of material from the course, and is substantiated using relevant examples'.
 - A poor example is 'an essay that you might have written yourself'.
- Are they relevant for the form of assessment?
 - Marking criteria are often generic and may not be applicable for all forms of assessment: criteria for essays written in examination conditions may differ from those submitted during the year.
 - Some faculties and departments specify distinct and very different criteria for different assessment exercises e.g. Modern and Medieval Languages specify separate criteria for: translations into English; scheduled paper essays; essay portfolios; prose composition etc.
- Do they match the learning outcomes?
 - Learning outcomes should be prepared for all courses: they tell Examiners what knowledge and/or skills a diligent student should have acquired by the end of the course. Learning outcomes are usually included in programme specifications and course handbooks.
 - For a full explanation of the term 'learning outcome', see the University's Guide to Quality Assurance (<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/curricula/aims.html>)
- Are students aware of the marking criteria?
 - All faculties and departments are expected to communicate their marking criteria to students via course handbooks and, ideally, the website.
- How do they compare to cognate faculties?
 - Comparison with cognate Faculties is sensible to ensure fairness across subjects, but is particularly important where papers are borrowed from another course.
- Have you considered how you would mark a student who presented an answer which may be valid but is so unexpected that it hasn't been covered by the marking criteria?

2. Review the policies and practices for double marking

Questions for consideration include:

- Will all answers be double marked, or simply a sample?
 - If a sample, how will this be collected – randomly, or at key points in the allocated marks?
- What happens if the marks differ between examiners/markers?
 - Will the two marks be averaged?
 - Will it be third marked?
 - Will the two examiners/markers concerned meet to resolve a final mark?
 - Will a named examiner (the Chair or the External) arbitrate?
 - Has a mark 'divergence' been defined, and are there clear guidelines on whether different mechanisms will apply depending on extent of the divergence?
 - Information on alternatives to double marking (other ways to ensure robust assessment) can be found in the University's Guide to Quality Assurance: www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/curricula/practices.html
- Preparing a model answer (or outline answer)
 - Exam essays do not generally have a right or wrong answer. You should ensure that you are aware of any local marking criteria before you develop a model answer.

- Questions to consider in developing an outline answer are:
 - a. What key points do you expect in an answer? Can you prioritise them (as a way of indicating a proportion of marks for each point)?
 - b. Should you allot marks for other aspects of the work?
 - c. Does your model answer give an indication of the expected answer for different marking bands (i.e. are there particular points that should affect the mark or grade awarded?)?
- A model answer may take many forms, for example:
 - a. a list of factual content;
 - b. a list of alternative interpretations to the set essay title;
 - c. a list of references or other sources.

Ideas for preparing a marking scheme

- Reflect on whether the marking scheme covers all learning outcomes
 - Have you determined whether the marks awarded should be based solely on the content (factual and illustrative) of the essay, or will some marks be awarded for structure and style?
- Different ways of using the full marking range
 - Many examiners/markers tend to bunch their marks together, whereas a well-designed assessment should give student's marks that follow a normal (bell-shaped) curve – few at the top, most in the middle and a few at the bottom. Often, examiners/markers find it difficult to award very high or very low marks.
 - Does the essay need to be marked out of 100? Would it be more helpful to use a different marking scale (e.g. ABCDE or a 16-point range)?
 - Do the marking criteria give descriptions and indicators at all marking bands?
- Using a marking grid/template
 - Where it is easy to identify key knowledge and skills, a marking grid/template can be helpful, particularly if an allotted number of marks can be given: this can help to ensure that marking is consistent both between scripts and between examiners/markers. Examples include:

Marks awarded	4	3	2	1
Descriptor	Excellent	Very Good	Satisfactory	Insufficient
Factual content				
Relevant use of examples				
Appropriate referencing				
Relevance to the question asked				
Structure and presentation				
Total mark out of 20				

	Awarded mark	Maximum mark
Range of material included		4
Factual accuracy		2
Awareness of alternative arguments		4
Evidence of critical analysis		4
Relevance to the question asked		3
Relevant use of examples		2
Appropriate referencing		2

Clarity of introduction and conclusion		2
Structure and organisation of essay		2
Total		25

Alternatively the form, style and content of the essay can give an indication of which mark/class should be awarded:

	Awarded mark
Evaluation	80-100
Synthesis	70-80
Analysis	60-70
Application	50-60
Comprehension	40-50
Knowledge	30-40
General misunderstanding	0-30

Ideas for ensuring that the question(s) are clear and fair

- Check that the question is relevant to the course content and learning outcomes.
- Ask a colleague to try out the question.
 - A 'dummy run' can identify any ambiguities or errors in the question, or highlight potential points, arguments or answers not covered by your marking scheme or model answer.
- Check whether it is (too) similar to other recent examination questions.
 - This is particularly important if you are also acting as a Director of Studies or Supervisor to one or more candidates. The use of past papers for revision can cause complications if they are too similar to the questions being set.
- Consider whether the question may be inadvertently biased to a particular subset of students.
 - Be conscious of alternative interpretations of the question based on gender, marital or parental status, race, ethnic or national origin, age, colour, disability, sexual orientation or religion of the candidates, in line with the University's Equal Opportunities Policy.