

Psychology

The range and suitability of the work submitted

The range in quality of essays was substantial, from near zero to near maximum marks. A basic cause of this discrepancy would appear to be the choice of topic made by the candidate and apparently approved by the supervisor. Two frequently occurring situations seem to contribute to poor performance:

- a) where the topic is over ambitious for an essay of up to 4,000 words length the candidate will be unable to write a coherent essay in the time available;
- b) where the subject matter has very little, or nothing, to do with psychology.

In the case of a), marks will be low on both general and subject specific criteria, and in b) minimal marks may be awarded for subject specific criteria. Essays on crime, on politics or on music are sometimes submitted for psychology: they usually attract low marks. Higher scoring essays will deal with a compact and self-contained aspect of psychology, usually on a topic area that has several references in academic literature that is firmly embedded in psychology.

The extended essay should not be confused with the internally assessed practical research project. Candidates conducting their own surveys or reports or experimentation into the chosen topic penalize themselves as such an approach cannot attract high marks for either the general or subject specific criteria. In addition, such essays often infringe ethical guidelines so cannot be accepted.

Candidate performance against each criterion

General assessment criteria

Again, candidate performance varied considerably, usually with greater variation for general than for subject specific criteria.

Where a research question has not been explicitly formulated and well expressed, candidates experience difficulty in remaining focused on the topic under consideration in terms of analysis and evaluation. Too frequently, lack of a focused research question leads to an unstructured essay in which relevant material is simply described, attracting minimal marks for a piece of writing which has the potential to be extremely good.

Where a weak research question is posed (or none offered), limited analysis and minimal evaluation tend to follow.

Within the abstract there should be a clear indication of the specific research question, the scope of the investigation, and its findings. Regrettably many candidates found this a difficult process.

A worrying tendency was the inappropriate overuse of the term 'prove' when considering empirical evidence, suggesting a lack of understanding of the nature of psychological research.

Approach, analysis and evaluation carry relatively high marks, and quite a number of candidates performed well in this respect. However, too often both analysis and evaluation were absent or minimal. Many candidates received few marks for C and D either because the essay was almost entirely descriptive, or because they offered only one side of an argument. This has implications for criterion H as in such cases the candidate's own contribution is unclear, the text being simply a series of citations. Conclusions sometimes included the introduction of new material not previously

EXTENDED ESSAY REPORTS – MAY 2003

discussed, and were often too brief, 2 or 3 lines, or too lengthy, 2 or 3 sides. Few mentioned the need for further research, or unresolved questions.

References did not always follow an approved style and in particular www. citations were incorrectly presented. Website references should be comparable to book references, containing similar information rather than simply listing the author's address. Essays considerably under the maximum word limit are highly unlikely to be able to fully address the requirements of the extended essay.

It is often difficult to award an appropriate number of marks for criterion H where far more than the recommended 3 or 4 hours supervision has taken place and it is not easy to distinguish the candidate's level of involvement, personal insight and understanding from that of the supervisor.

Subject assessment criteria

Provided the essay was psychological in nature, the assessment criteria were often well met. Occasionally the use of psychological resources and incorporation of theoretical concepts was sparse. However, many essays lacked the evaluation expected in any discussion of psychological issues, not least in terms of methodological, ethical, cultural and gender considerations.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Teachers are strongly recommended to discuss the nature and aim of the extended essay **prior** to the candidate beginning work on it. The guidance should include strong advice that since the final essay is to be submitted as a psychological work, it would be reasonable for it to contain psychology. It is not appropriate to begin work on a fascinating subject and then try to decide which subject it may be submitted under. Appropriate choice of topic should emerge from an area of interest within syllabus content, ensuring the candidate has a theoretical framework against which to examine an explicit research question.

It would be helpful to the candidate if a substantial number of academic references were to be available. Access to previous work on the chosen topic means the candidate is able to use this as a basis on which to make relevant discussive points. Candidates should be aware that not all that appears on the web is reliable and web information needs to be carefully screened for authenticity and reliability. Clarification is required as to what constitutes a primary reference source.

Candidates must be alerted to the dangers of plagiarism before beginning their research. Malpractice is a serious offence and where proven has very serious consequences for candidates.