

POLITICS

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0 - 7	8 - 15	16 - 22	23 - 28	29 - 36

The range and suitability of the work submitted

In this first year of the operation of the new mark scheme no significant unforeseen problems presented themselves. I had written to the markers on my team both as part of the training exercise and on an individual basis and we discussed how the new scheme should be approached. In their individual reports markers seemed reasonably happy with their marking. Most examiners reported that the quality of essays this session was strong.

Candidate performance against each criterion

A: research question

On the whole students showed a good ability to sketch out their research question within their abstract. Difficulties arose when the student's question had no focus and was couched in generalisations so that no structure for answering the question was created. The whole essay usually suffers as a consequence.

B: introduction

Students are not, for the most part, instructed on how to contextualise their study. Usually they explain their interest in the subject and this can become anecdotal. Moreover it seems to encourage weaker students to use the first-personal singular and the entire essay easily becomes subjective.

C: investigation

An increasing number of students lock themselves into internet sources, some of which are poor, and do not take the trouble to investigate major research sources, by which I mean seminal studies in the area of the essay. Reinventing the wheel, especially a wheel of inferior quality, is not the best approach. The idea of a proper literature search does not appeal as much as a headlong dive into web sources.

D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

This has to be one of the most basic of requirements, and nearly all students appreciate this. Low marks here are almost invariably the consequence of irrelevance.

E: reasoned argument

A major attribute of reasoned arguing is balance, and a significant number of students did not bother even to pay lip service to the notion of stating alternative points of view. It seems to be a skill that is becoming forgotten. A significant number of students think it is sufficient vigorously to support one line of argument only.

F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

In many senses the icing on the cake of reasoned argumentation, this criterion can lift an essay onto a higher plain. Essays that are essentially descriptive are often also derivative, leaning heavily on a few sources. Analysis and evaluation are measures of maturity of judgement. Better essays invariably invest substantial time and effort in the exercise of analysis.

G: use of language appropriate to the subject

What is looked for here is a familiarity with the terms of political discourse, not the jargon of political science as such. This criterion is a good discriminator in respect of tangential and irrelevant arguments, where the discourse of politics is missing.

H: conclusion

Ideally students should be referring back to their original question and their introduction. Students whose question was unfocused and introduction flabby could finish with a conclusion that reflected these uncertainties or alternatively had little to do with the general thrust of the argument at all.

I: formal presentation

It is crucial that students take account of the fundamental nature of writing essays, that the exercise is fundamentally one of arguing in a narrative. It is not a bullet-pointed report, nor should it be thick with lengthy quotations. This year we found essays that were both.

J: abstract

Though at first sight the abstract seems difficult to separate from the introduction and investigation, it is essentially testing synoptic skills. Ideally an abstract will tell the marker everything s/he needs to know about the topic and the way it is to be studied.

K: holistic judgment

In general the mark in this criterion will be high if the essay itself is strong and if there is evidence of individual flair and initiative.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Overall essays this year appear to have been of a better standard, particularly in terms of quality of argument and many reached the standard of university honours work.