

Offer Holder Support Series

TIPS FOR A-LEVEL ESSAY WRITING

This document is designed to give you a few extra pieces of advice to ensure that your A-level essays really answer the exam questions and show off your knowledge to the examiners. We will not touch on content as that will be very specific to the courses you are taking. These are general principles for improving your essays.

Read the Mark scheme

Mark schemes and Examiners' reports are an invaluable resource because they tell you exactly what the examiners are looking for in both specific questions and overall on past papers. They will highlight how the best students handled the questions and you can use this as a model for how to approach questions in the future.

Think about why the question is being asked

Examiners don't set questions in a vacuum. Often there is a reason why they are asking that specific question- such as a debate in the scholarship or a commonly held belief that could be challenged. Showing the examiner that you know why the question is being asked is a great start for an essay as it shows them that you are in control of the subject matter and that you have your own opinions on popular debates.

Be Clear and Confident

Another way to make sure your examiner is confident in your abilities, is to write with clarity and to be concise. This can be difficult especially in the heat of the exam but here are a few tips to help you with it:

- Practise writing to time. This will help you get used to the pace required and means you will be less likely to default to confusing prose in a rush.

- Plan your essay before you start writing. Even if this is a brief outline, it helps to take a moment to arrange your thoughts and write with purpose.
- Read back what you have written and make sure it is understandable. Insert punctuation if sentences get too lengthy.

Your writing style can also convince your examiner that you are confident (and correct!) with what you are saying. Avoid 'hedging' phrases, such as "appears to suggest" or "it could possibly mean", which can undermine your arguments and the examiner's faith in your answers.

Use a range of examples

Over the course of your studies you will have looked at a lot of different types of sources, particularly in historical subjects. Show that you know more than just what you have read by bringing in different types of evidence where appropriate. An essay that forms conclusions based on archaeology, art, and unusual documents as well as textual sources will be more compelling and score higher than if it just focuses on texts.

In literature-based subjects this is still relevant but may mean showing knowledge about a wide variety of aspects to your texts. For example, form and structure are just as important as word choice and use of literary devices.

Some subjects will also want you to look at what secondary sources say. Remember that what scholars say is not hard evidence for something and that you are allowed to disagree with them if you have good reason and evidence to do so.

And Remember...

Essays are just a means to show your examiner all the things you have learnt over the last two years. You have put a lot of hard work in to learn the content and this is an opportunity to demonstrate how much you know.

Good Luck