

Ten vital elements of exam technique

Ian Marcousé provides ten tips on how to approach exam questions

1 Operate at full focus from the first minute of the exam

Meaning: some candidates treat reading the exam stimulus materials as a warm-up exercise, aiming to have full focus when answering the questions.

Implications: if you have not focused fully on the text, appendices of data and links or contradictions in the materials, you cannot be fully focussed when writing your answers. Application marks require you to focus completely from the moment the teacher says, 'You may start'.

2 When reading the text, treat numbers as a key part of the story

Meaning: there are often appendices of numerical or graphical data in the exam materials. These are at least as important as the text, giving scope for high-level application and analysis.

Implications: many students seem to treat numerical data as 'other' and show no knowledge of this data except when answering a direct question. In business, numbers are probably more important than words. I would make sure to understand the data at the time of reading through the materials (as part of the 20 minutes of reading time).

3 Read every question twice – even the 4-markers

Meaning: the daftest way to lose marks is failing to understand what the question is getting at, yet many candidates misread at least one question per paper.

Implications: if you have not read the question properly, you may waste time on effects, for example, when the question asks for causes (there will be no marks for effects if the question wants causes). This means you are using up time on writing material that will receive no credit.

4 Re-read the question at the end of each paragraph you write

Meaning: with 12 or 20-mark questions, many candidates drift steadily away from the specific question asked – often lurching back to the question in the final paragraph.

Implications: if your answer drifts away from the question, it will be near-impossible to hit the top levels for analysis and evaluation, thereby limiting your mark to perhaps half the available score.

5 Stick rigidly to time

Meaning: A-level business exams allow one mark per minute for answering questions. With Edexcel, for instance, there are 20 minutes of reading time, then 100 minutes for the 100 marks on the paper. So a 12-mark question must take only 12 minutes. When 12 minutes are up, stop your answer and move on.

Implications: grade awarders know that marginal A-grade scripts are not brilliant, but they are consistent. Every answer gathers perhaps 60-70% of the available marks, with 100% achieved on numbers questions, pushing the grade to an A. The answer to the last, perhaps 20-mark, question on the paper is fully argued because the candidate allowed themselves 20 minutes to answer it.

6 Never re-do a numbers question (and never cross out an answer)

Meaning: examiners often see jumbled, confusing workings from candidates who are struggling on a question. If, when you write your final answer, you are sure it is wrong, leave it – do not redo it.

Implications: time is everything in an exam. People who are good with numbers will answer relevant questions quickly. Others may struggle to answer in 4 minutes – and re-doing the question might mean taking 8-10 minutes over a 4-mark question. That makes no sense.

7 Do not get carried away with an argument

Meaning: if you feel strongly about an answer, you may write so much that there is too little time to write an effective counter-argument. If you have written a strong argument, get going on a strong counter-argument rather than making more points to back up your initial ideas.

Implications: you could reach top analysis marks by a powerfully argued case for something, but you can only score well on evaluation if there is a strong counter-argument. So beware of over-writing on the first part of the answer and squeezing out the counter-argument.

8 Make your counter-argument count

Meaning: too many counter-arguments just go through the motions. For example, if the argument said 'X', they now say 'Y' without explaining how something can be X and Y at the same time.

Implications: when deciding which argument to develop in answer to the question, think about a possible counter. Ideally, you will choose a theme for which you can see the 'on the other hand' response. Do not choose the theme you see as unarguably correct.

9 With high-mark questions, pause for thought before evaluating

Meaning: the conclusion to a long question should show the quality of your judgement and your ability to justify that judgement. Allow yourself 30 seconds to sit back and think.

Implications: if a question asks you to make recommendations, you may need to scan over your answer to see which of your arguments is the most powerful in the context of this business and this decision. Directors might spend 3 days on thinking this through, so do give yourself 30 seconds.

10 Never write an abbreviated answer

Meaning: even if you have mistimed your exam – leaving 9 minutes for the final 20-mark question, for example – do not give a bullet-point summary of your answer.

Implications: to hit higher levels on a mark scheme, you need to develop an answer using application to the context and analysis of the question set. One well-developed paragraph could easily score 10/20, while a bullet-point answer will not get you above Level 1, perhaps earning 4/20.

Ian Marcousé is the founding editor of BUSINESS REVIEW and author of A-level textbooks for AQA and Edexcel published by Hachette Learning.