

# PSYCHOLOGY EXAM TIPS DOCUMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

Hi!

My name is Rae, one of the psychology revision session hosts for the M23 cohort! Jampacking content onto a single slide can be tough to understand especially when not listening to the recording that goes with it. In response to suggestions regarding what the revision sessions should cover, as well as in the interest of the organization, tips about exam preparation as well as critical thinking would be compiled here. To aid with navigation, please use the in-system document outline. If you have any questions or concerns about the content in this document, please feel free to contact me through my Discord username written on page 1.

Please understand that this document does not contain an exhaustive nor definitive list of tips. This should only act as a supporting piece of revision material. In the process of writing this document, personal experiences, teacher advice, as well as a plethora of sample responses were referenced. If you believe this document does not mention important parts of any of the sections mentioned above, please let me know and I will make the appropriate amends at our earliest convenience!

With that being said, I hope that this guide was able to help you in some shape or form, best of luck with your exam papers!

P.S. psych is a heavy subject, I'm already proud of you for sitting in the exams :roolove:

P.P.S please handle this document with care ;-; ~~lots of stress and tears were shed whilst writing~~

## RESPONSE STRUCTURE

In paper 1, you will be asked to complete 3 short answer questions (SAQ) and 1 extended response question (ERQ). In paper 2, Standard Level (SL) students will be asked to answer 1 ERQ whilst Higher Level (HL) students are required to answer 2. In paper 3 for HL students only, the length of each response will vary<sup>1</sup>. Below is a simple, but not definitive guide on structuring SAQs, ERQs, and paper 3.

### SAQ

The short answer question features one study that supports the primary content stated in the question - whether it be theory, research methods, or ethics. Out of the time given for a paper 1, the writeup of an SAQ should take around 20 minutes. There are various studies that can be used interchangeably throughout sections of each approach (Maguire (2000), Loftus and Palmer (1974), and Kulkofsky (2011) are some to name a few). To obtain maximum marks in an SAQ, *“the response is fully focused on the question and meets the command term requirements. Knowledge and understanding is accurate and addresses the main topics/problems identified in the question. The response is supported by appropriate research which is described and explicitly linked to the question.”*

### Command Terms

The command terms you can be asked for any SAQ are *explain*, *outline*, and *describe*. To briefly summarize what each command term calls for:

- Explain: Give reasons as to ‘why’ something happens
- Outline: Give a general overview
- Describe: Give an in-depth overview

Even though the command terms are different, the depth of knowledge that you’re expected to show should be at an **‘explain’** level.

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<sup>1</sup> More information concerning how each exam will go can be found on Mythic’s guide, found [here](#)!

## Structure

An SAQ typically consists of the introduction, the study, and the conclusion. The introduction is generally where the background information/content pertaining to the question is put forth. Give definitions to the relevant concepts, and explain the identified topic. Try to structure your content so that you find yourself seamlessly talking about the study! One way to do so is to talk about the method used - how did the method used by the study showcase the behavior identified in the question? Link the research technique back to the question.

The second portion of the SAQ is where you utilize a study as empirical evidence to your point. Talk about the aim, method, findings, and conclusion of the study. It is not a must to include every single minuscule detail about the participants or the exact statistics derived from the findings - write down what you believe would be relevant. You can sometimes add things such as participant attributes or a textbook copy of the procedure, however, being accurate and linking the research back to the question is more important. Use the findings of the study to suggest something about the behavior.

In the conclusion, you link the study back to the prompt. How does the study support the research method or theory or ethical consideration? Explain and summarize what has already been said. New information about the topic should not appear in the conclusion.

There are many exemplar SAQs found on the helper website, I highly recommend you read through these when you have the time to do so.

## Tips

- During the reading time, decide if the question is asking about a theory, ethical consideration, or asking about a study. This decides where you should be placing the most emphasis and detail throughout the SAQ.
- Always ask yourself 'why' when linking the study back to the theory - regurgitation can be nice, but how and why do these two pieces of information correlate to one another?
- There is no need to evaluate in an SAQ - that's for the ERQ!

## ERQ

The extended response question is the second portion in paper 1, and the only response format in paper 2. Typically, this should take roughly an hour to fully complete. An ERQ usually consists of an introduction, the first study and its evaluation, the second study and its evaluation, the evaluation of the theory (if the question is about a theory), and the conclusion. This is referred to as the study-based approach, in which studies are used to make a point. The ERQ contains 5 criteria and can be awarded a maximum of 22 points. The five criteria are:

1. Focus on the question (2)
2. Knowledge and understanding (6)
3. Use of research to support answer (6)
4. Critical thinking (6)
5. Clarity and organization (2)

## Command Terms

There are four command terms you may be faced with when choosing which ERQ to answer. It is particularly important to know the differences between these command terms. To elaborate on what each command term means:

- Contrast: Contrast essays require you to evaluate the research using points of difference. Then the critical thinking paragraph in this type of essay is all about the contrast. So, for example, how there is biological support for the MSM, but very limited biological support for schema theory.
- Discuss: Discussion questions ask you to look holistically at the question. The recommendation is to evaluate the research you used, but then to have a paragraph in which you answer the question by discussing methodological issues (in general) in the study of that topic, areas of uncertainty and implications of the research.
- Evaluate: If you are being asked to "Evaluate research....", then you should outline the strengths and limitations of the studies that are relevant to the question. You should

not use the same evaluation strategies for all of the research. Redundant responses do not earn high marks. Try to use a range of evaluation strategies to earn the highest marks. Then give an overall evaluation about the research in general.

When asked to evaluate a theory, be careful. In this case, you may evaluate the research as a way to discuss the strength of the evidence that supports the theory. However, that is not enough for this question. Remember TEACUP. You should discuss such things as the operationalization of variables in the theory, cross-cultural validity, predictive validity and applications.

- To what extent: To what extent asks you to look at two sides of an issue and then determine which is the stronger argument. The evaluation of the research is relevant and then include a paragraph about how and why one argument is stronger based on methodological issues (in general) in the study of that topic, areas of uncertainty, etc. You need to talk about the 'yes' and the 'no'.

## Content

As aforementioned, an ERQ typically features two studies or one study that has multiple experiments occurring throughout (Loftus and Palmer is a common example). Content about the question, both the theory and the study, need to be in-depth; but it can be appropriate to leave things out such as participant number and detailed findings (unless these are highly relevant in your evaluation)<sup>2</sup>.

Generally speaking, you would want to have sections dedicated to theory and study. It's possible to mix these two together and have the study support the theory and vice versa. There's not an exact way as to how you should determine whether or not you should be including a certain aspect of the study (research methodology, findings, evaluation). However, being able to provide a strong argument that is then supported by sections of the study can be of great assistance when writing an ERQ.

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<sup>2</sup> Information pertaining to this can be found [in this document](#) written by Chels.

## Tips

- Similar to SAQs, always ask 'why'. It's imperative to explain why and how a study showcases the theory it is investigating.
- Take the reading time to organize your thoughts and structure how you want to answer the prompt. Having a clear roadmap of how you want your response to flow will heavily aid you in writing your response.
- Try and have a few evaluative points up your sleeve that can be applied to different questions, in the instance where the initial evaluative points you have for the study/theory escape your mind. Ecological validity is always a great one to talk about.

## Paper 3

Paper 3 can be a bit of a hit or miss, but let's go through the response structure together. The most important thing is (brainwash yourself with this) that **every response needs to relate to the aim of the study and the stimulus.**

### Question 1

This question is divided into 3 parts:

- a) Identifying the research method and stating two characteristics of it
- b) Describing the **sampling** method and stating two characteristics of it
- c) Suggesting an additional or alternative research method with a justification why

For question 1a, it's important to link what you say back to the stimulus - why did they use that research method with respect to the aim of the study? Be as specific as you can! Even if you get the methods wrong, you can still earn 2 marks if you give a relevant description.

The same can be said about 1b.

1c is where it gets a bit tricky, but it's better to suggest an **additional** method. When you're suggesting an additional method, always keep the aim of the study in mind. Suggesting a

questionnaire in addition to covert observations is a plausible idea, but it all depends on the aim! Use the stimulus to your advantage!

## Question 2

This question can be either:

- a) Describe the ethical considerations that were applied **in the study** and explain if further ethical considerations could be applied.
- b) Describe the ethical considerations in the **reporting of results** and explain if further ethical considerations that could be taken into account when **applying the findings of the study**.

For the first question, if there's a consideration that didn't appear in the stimulus, mention it in your response! You can assume that the consideration was considered, but not applied given the nature of the study - what effects could that have?

For the second question, connect the reporting of the results to the ethical considerations and then think about what concerns there may be in applying the findings. Paper 3 is meant to be hypothetical, but it should be focused on how the use of the findings could link to specific ethical concerns.

## Question 3

Question 3 can be either:

- a) Discuss the possibility of generalizing/transferring the findings of the study
  - i) Quantitative: concerns the representative nature of
    - 1) the sample
    - 2) sample size
    - 3) ecological validity
  - ii) Qualitative: concerns transferability of findings
    - 1) TWE can the findings be transferred to the target population?
    - 2) What variables are important to consider when transferring the findings to another population?
    - 3) How can the research be used to generate a theory?
- b) Discuss how a researcher could ensure that the results of the study are credible

- i) Only applies to qualitative research **only**
- ii) Focuses on the researcher's ability to determine the validity of interpretations - consider all types of internal **and** external validity.
- iii) Always ask: how to establish credibility?
- c) Discuss how the researcher in the study could avoid bias
  - i) Be specific and consider things like blind controls, sampling method, reflexivity, and triangulation.

The most important thing here is to connect the response to the strengths and limitations of the **research method**.

## CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is the use of evidence and reason to evaluate claims. Please note that critical thinking and evaluation are **not** the same<sup>3</sup>. Evaluation can be about things such as but not limited to the study chosen, the methodology, the theory, and the validity of an argument. Critical thinking is where you are making a judgment based on what is presented to you. There are many areas to these that can be evaluated in order to showcase critical thinking, however, it is recommended to keep evaluation, as well as content **relevant** to the question at all times. It can be tempting and of second nature to some to regurgitate all the evaluative points you know when writing an ERQ - but whether or not you are able to link these evaluative points back to the study, and consequently the theory, is the small bridge between the 3-4 mark descriptor and the 5-6 mark descriptor.

There are two areas to focus on:

- 1) the analysis of individual studies used to develop an argument
- 2) the broader discussion of the question

It is essential that critical thinking not be an "add-on" or a list of psychological terminology sprinkled into your essay. All critical thinking must be "unpacked" - use the words "because" and "that is" to complete your thoughts. In other words, don't just write that a study is not cross-culturally valid, but write "because..." and explain why this is the case - for example

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<sup>3</sup> An explanation as to why they are different can be found [here](#)!



because the sample was made up exclusively of white British males from an individualistic society.

Directly quoted from the psychology subject guide, the areas of critical thinking are *research design and methodologies; triangulation; assumption and biases; contradictory evidence or alternative theories or explanations; and areas of uncertainty*. Please note that the above five areas will not always be relevant in response, nor are they hierarchical. In order for a student to obtain maximum marks in the critical thinking criterion, *“the response consistently demonstrates well-developed critical thinking. Evaluation or discussion of relevant areas is consistently well developed.”*

As aforementioned, there are various ways to think critically. There are various acronyms such as MATBEARS and TEACUP that you can utilize when evaluating. MATBEARS is usually used when evaluating a study, TEACUP is typically used for evaluating theories, and you can utilize different aspects of a study as evidence. Nuanced critical thinking, and thus critical writing, often includes different perspectives, logical connections between ideas, and evaluating arguments by examining whether or not the evidence (the studies) are relevant and valid. These tips may not be a recipe for success, but have worked in many instances.

Below are a few statements for you to practice critical thinking. Remember, always ask ‘why!’

1. Loftus and Palmer’s (1974) study lacks ecological validity.
2. Lee and Lee’s study on globalization and anorexia may lack construct validity?
3. Brown and Kulik’s study may not have reliable data.
4. Steele and Aronson’s study on stereotype threat has a sampling bias.
5. An advantage of case studies is that they often use method triangulation.

## Ethics and research methods

If you are asked to *“Discuss ethical considerations in the study of the brain and behaviour,”* then the only critical thinking that is relevant to the question is a discussion of the **ethical considerations**. Remember, do not evaluate the study from an ethical standpoint; instead,

choose an ethical consideration (e.g. informed consent), choose a study to explain (e.g. HM) and then make the link between the two. You need to explain the consideration (generally) and why it is important and then link it to what happened in the study you have chosen. You may also discuss why researchers made the choices that they did in the study that you have chosen.

If you are asked to “*Discuss one or more research methods in the study of the brain and behaviour,*” then your evaluation should only focus on the research method. Do not discuss ethics, cross-cultural validity or sampling biases. You should focus only on the strengths and limitations of the research method which are relevant to the studies that you have chosen. Once again, try to avoid redundancy. It is helpful to either choose two different research methods or two aspects of the same method (a true experiment vs a natural experiment).

## How to evaluate when brain too hurty

- **Describe, analyze, evaluate** - when evaluating or thinking critically, work your way through the study or the theory by asking yourself ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘how’, ‘so what’, and finally, ‘what next’. This linear model of critical questions can help you probe the root cause and thus synthesize arguments and come to conclusions. ‘What’ is a useful way to introduce the background and contextual information to the problem/topic. Then, ‘how’ (how does this work in practice/context) and ‘why’ (why this argument/solution) allow exploration of relationships on a micro to macro basis, and can also be a good way to introduce alternative theories or arguments. ‘So what’ (What does this mean; why is this significant; is this convincing? Why or why not?) and ‘what next’ (What be learned from it; what needs doing now) thus look at the implications and resolutions derived from the topic<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Linear model based off of one provided by Plymouth University. Learning Development Unit, 2010

- **Application** - how is the study applied to the theory, and potentially other contexts?  
The application can be referred to as the link back to the question. How exactly is the study relevant to the question? Being able to apply the study to the question means you are able to draw conclusions, which is a major part of both the SAQ and ERQ. Applications can come in the form of where the theory can be applied to, or what needs to be done in the future. For example, when evaluating Loftus and Palmer (1974) on the topic of reconstructive memory theory, a plausible link could be “this study suggests that memory can be distorted by leading questions or the phrasing of a question. These findings can be applied to determine the reliability of eyewitnesses' testimony, as eyewitnesses are a key part to a court hearing. However, due to the study's low ecological validity, further research should be done in more realistic situations in order to validate these findings.”
- **Structure** - seems obvious, but organize your arguments in a logical manner and use signposting to connect one argument with another. This can guide the examiner through your essay and makes it seem more cohesive. There are times where the topic sentence of your second body paragraph may directly build off of the concluding sentence of your first body paragraph, and times where the topics are parallels away, which is completely fine! Take the reading time to map out the response structure in your head, and once that is over, write this structure out on a piece of paper before starting to write your response.
- **Correlation** - when writing down evaluative points of the study, try and explain or state what importance or relevance it has with the theory. What limitation of the theory does the limitation of a study highlight? How is this relevant to your point? This is particularly relevant when wanting to adopt an argument-based approach in ERQs, as the evaluation points should be supporting the point you're trying to make with each paragraph in your response.

## ADOPTING AN ARGUMENT-BASED APPROACH WHEN WRITING ERQS

When responding to ERQs, it's habitual to first talk about the theory in the introduction, before introducing the two studies and their respective evaluative points. While an argument-based layout is similar to some extent, the main difference between the two is how information that would typically go into the introduction of a study-based approach is embedded throughout the response itself. The points made in an argument-based approach are points about the theory the studies correlate to - the study and their respective evaluative points are used to support them <sup>5</sup>.

### Structure and layout

A study-based approach typically employs the following format:

Introduction → Study 1 → Evaluation 1 → Study 2 → Evaluation 2 → Evaluation of the theory  
→ Conclusion

While this format is clear and easy to follow, it can be difficult to flow from one thing to another. The study-based approach often includes evaluations of the studies discussed, and partially gives recognition to the evaluative points of the theory. As a result, critical thinking is oftentimes over fleshed out, and the evaluative points may not be the most relevant to the prompt given.

On the contrary, an argument-based approach can look something like this:

Introduction → Argument (point), study with relevant details 1 → Argument (point), study with relevant details 2 → Appraisal of points and studies → Conclusion

The introduction is where you are placing down key definitions to the prompt. Depending on the command term, you can add a sentence or two of how research in the particular field has provided multiple perspectives, but your essay will explore one (or two) of them.

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<sup>5</sup> More information and an example of the argument-based approach can be found in [this](#) video, made by Mr. Popov.

The evaluative points of the theory should be the argument conveyed in each body paragraph. For example, using schema theory as an example, an argument could be 'schema theory has wide applicability, such that it can explain phenomena such as memory distortion, consumer behavior, and can be applied to improve information gathering processes.' From there, link the point with the study you want to talk about - Loftus and Palmer (1974) could be an example for this. Try and figure out the relevant details of the study that correlate with the point made.

After that, it is essentially a rinse and repeat process until everything you want to say has been said already.

## CONCLUSION

Again, please note that the tips on this document aren't exhaustive 😓 but are supposed to act as a guiding point for students when it comes to writing responses on each paper.

Make sure you keep practicing writing responses, especially in timed conditions! This helps you understand how you need to divide your time when it comes to outlining and dedicating time to each question across the 2 (or 3 if you're HL) papers.

As always, if you have questions, you're more than welcome to ask in the psychology channel!