

Essays: Ten types of unfair exam question

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'Unseen' exams, where you sit down, look at a set of questions that you've never seen before, and write essays for three hours, are for many students stressful experiences.

It is not always apparent what the examiners want you to do, what a question is asking for. Sometimes this is fair enough, that's part of the test. But sometimes it happens simply because the question has been badly drafted. Often, too, it happens because you haven't been taught, in courses that you've followed, *how* to 'discuss' or 'explain' or whatever. The questions haven't been written to relate to your course.

As a result, you have to spend precious time in the exam room deciphering the question and getting stressed out, and even while you're writing there's the nagging thought at the back of your mind that you might be on the wrong track entirely. And this is the experience that you've run up debts of tens of thousands of pounds to pay for!

In my opinion, these badly-drafted questions are simply unfair.

In this report, I identify ten frequently-encountered types of unfair exam question. For each I give one or more examples, and identify the source of the confusion they generate. And for each I also address a brief note to examiners suggesting how to avoid setting an unfair question. Here are the ten types:

(1) A 'direct' question (with a question mark after it) followed by the command – or a sentence beginning – 'Discuss'.

Example: *What role do the media play in relation to gender? Discuss in relation to one type of media product.*

Source of confusion: You are getting two conflicting messages. One is telling you to *answer* the question, the other is telling you to *discuss* it. Many candidates dive in to answering the question, but become confused when they realise there is a 'discuss' message to address too.

Examiners please note: Because questions always call for an *answer*, an instruction following a direct question should always begin 'Answer with reference to ...'.

(2) A statement that isn't in quotation marks, and looks like a statement of fact rather than opinion, followed by a direct question.

Example: *There is rapidly growing concern about the sexual rights of children. What should be done to safeguard these rights?*

Source of confusion: Because of the absence of quotation marks, it isn't clear to you whether you are expected or entitled to challenge the premise – i.e. to ask whether the concern is indeed rapidly growing, and whether it is rapidly growing everywhere – or shouldn't challenge it, even if you think it is factually wrong (wholly or in part) or needs to be qualified.

Examiners please note: If you want to provide candidates with a premise, it should be a precise, factual, verifiable statement.

(3) A statement that isn't in quotation marks, but looks like a statement of opinion, followed by 'Discuss'.

Example: *The most promising approach to classifying security risks within an organization involves the use of control mechanisms. Discuss.*

Source of confusion: Are you expected or entitled to challenge the opinion that this is 'the most promising approach', or should you merely deal with alternatives to using control systems? Because of the absence of quotation marks, it isn't clear to you whether (a) the statement is indeed offered as a statement of opinion and you are expected or entitled to challenge it, or (b) you should not challenge it, but merely deal with what follows from it.

Examiners please note: You should make it clear, by using quotation marks, whether a statement of opinion is to be discussed or is to be taken as a premise, a given.

(4) A twin question, i.e. two questions one after the other, as opposed to a single question in two parts.

Example: *Account for the decline of private rented housing in the UK after 1918. What could and should the Government do to support this sector?*

Source of confusion: Candidates don't know whether they are expected to think about, plan and write two distinct answers in the time allotted for just one, or take the two together, e.g. by focusing on the role of Government in the post-1918 decline of private rented housing. Nor do they know whether or not marks are divided equally between the two parts.

Examiners please note: Do not set twin questions.

(5) A quotation followed by a question that doesn't specifically refer to the quotation and would be perfectly comprehensible on its own, if the quotation weren't present.

Example: *'I am all the daughters of my father's house, And all the brothers too.'* (Shakespeare, Twelfth Night) *Compare and contrast two or more representations of sex and gender in literature.*

Source of confusion: The 'compare and contrast' instruction can be followed without referring to the quotation. You don't know whether it would be permissible or attract a penalty to do this.

Examiners please note: **Resist the temptation to include a quotation from the literature unless you specifically want candidates to address it.** [Candidates should be advised well in advance of exams as to how they should treat such quotations.](#)

(6) A question that incorporates a metaphor or colloquial language.

Example 1: *'The cost of social security is the Achilles heel of British social policy.'* Discuss.

Example 2: *Why should we care whether social interactions produce human capital externalities?*

Source of confusion: It isn't clear to you whether you are expected or entitled to answer in similar non-rigorous language, although it would be prudent to assume that you will be penalized if you do. And if English isn't your first language, you may not understand a question that employs a metaphor or colloquial language. (It was more than 30 years ago, but I shall never forget how badly I felt when I overheard an international student leaving an examination room and asking another candidate: 'What does 'Achilles heel' mean?' At least it was a question that I hadn't set.)

Examiners please note: Bear in mind that candidates may not have as extensive a vocabulary as you: questions should be couched in non-colloquial English free of metaphors.

(7)

A question that incorporates an ambiguous expression, i.e. an expression that could be interpreted in two or more ways.

Example: *To what extent is the control of family size the key to economic development in any country?*

Source of confusion: Here, 'any country' could mean 'any country in the whole world' or 'any one country of your choice'.

It isn't clear to you how you are expected to interpret the question. You may waste time puzzling out which of two interpretations is the appropriate one; you may not realize there is more than one way of interpreting the question and choose the 'wrong' one; or you may realize half-way through writing your answer that there is more than one interpretation. None of these is a good situation to be in.

Examiners please note: Ambiguity in exam questions is extremely unfair to candidates, and for that reason should be avoided.

(8) A question that is over-complicated.

Example 1: *Critically examine why it is necessary to design social policy from a gender perspective?*

Example 2: *To what extent can it be argued that the European powers failed diplomatically in the aftermath of the break-up of Yugoslavia?*

Source of confusion: The expressions 'Critically examine why' and 'To what extent can it be argued' are brain-scrambling complications of questions that could have been expressed much

more simply. Had these questions been worded ‘Critically examine the claim that it is necessary ...’ and ‘Comment on the assertion that the European powers ...’ they would have been much easier to comprehend and arguably would have been better tests of a candidate’s knowledge. Over-complicated instructions distract candidates from the subject matter of the question and are particularly problematic for candidates whose first language is not English.

Examiners please note: [Keep the language of exam questions simple and straightforward.](#)

(9) [‘Discuss’ questions when you haven’t actually been taught how to discuss.](#)

Examples: These will depend on the particular course of study that you have followed. They usually take the form of a statement, normally enclosed within quotation marks, followed by ‘Discuss’ or a form of words such as ‘Do you agree?’ or ‘Evaluate this statement’. Sometimes the statement is expressed in a sentence that starts with the instruction ‘Consider the view that ...’.

Source of confusion: Students consistently report that they [haven’t been taught](#) explicitly [how to discuss, how discussion is conducted in their subject or their department.](#) Confusion is the result.

Examiners please note: It should be demonstrated to students as part of their course how you discuss. They should be provided with worked examples.

(10) [‘Explain’ questions when you haven’t actually been taught how to explain.](#)

Examples: These will depend on the particular course of study that you have followed. The word ‘explain’ is used with a variety of different meanings, e.g. (a) ‘Say clearly what is meant by ...’; (b) ‘Describe how X came about’; (c) ‘Show how causes combine to bring about certain effects’; (d) ‘Give reasons why someone behaved in the way they did’. You may well find more than one of these meanings turning up in the same exam paper. And you will find other words and expressions that imply cause and effect: ‘Account for ...’; ‘Why did ...?’, ‘Under what circumstances ...?’; ‘A was responsible for ...’; ‘B was a product of ...’.

Source of confusion: As in the case of ‘discuss’ questions, students consistently report that their teachers have not made it explicit to them what concept or model of explanation they are employing and/or is customarily employed in their discipline.

Examiners please note: If you wish to test candidates’ ability to ‘explain’ please ensure that they have been taught how to do it, i.e. you have demonstrated to them the concept(s) of explanation employed in your subject. You should also have demonstrated to them that the instruction to ‘explain’ can have a variety of meanings.

[For more ideas to help you do well in exams, see *Sail Through Exams!*, ISBN 0335215769]

And if you come across other examples of unfair exam questions, please forward them to me: **peter.levin[[@](mailto:peter.levin@student-friendly-guides.com)]student-friendly-guides.com** (without the square brackets, of course). Names and email addresses will not be kept or divulged to anyone else.