

# UPGRADE

## Writing an essay

Principal Examiner **Andrew Gillespie** gives some advice on how to tackle essays in business studies

When you sit down to write an essay in business studies, you need to think carefully about what you are trying to achieve — what is the purpose of this exercise? The answer, of course, is to meet the needs of your customer, which in this case is your teacher and eventually the examiner.

What then does the reader hope to see? As ever, this will be based around the four skills of knowledge, application, analysis and evaluation, so let us look at each of these in some detail.

### Knowledge

Most essay titles in business studies are fairly broad. They are not narrowly linked to one topic but give you the opportunity to answer them in many different ways. There is no 'right answer'. A good title should provoke several possible lines of argument and it is up to you which ones you pursue. When examiners are trained in how to mark your essays, we discuss what types of answer might be expected, but we always stress that other approaches are acceptable. However, it is true to say that we want to see a 'business' response to the question, as opposed to a 'general' response that anyone might have written whether or not they had studied business before.

Most students could attempt a business studies essay question regardless of whether they had studied the subject. However, their answer would tend to be general and would not be rooted in any deep understanding of the subject. They might, for example, write about firms aiming to make 'lots of money' but not show any understanding of what profit actually means or how it differs from cash. Or they might write about the benefits of being larger in terms of having more power, but not relate this to the concept of economies of scale.

As an examiner, I read an answer and then look back and think about the quality of the understanding of business terms and ideas that has been shown. Does it read as if it is written by someone who has studied the subject for 1 or 2 years? Is it using concepts such as rates of return, opportunity cost, liquidity, scale, culture and strategy with any confidence? Is it demonstrating a good grasp of fundamental issues, such as market conditions, business objectives and external constraints? Is it using the language of business accurately, suggesting that demand may be price inelastic rather than 'sales won't change even if you put the price up loads', or that managing people in a bigger business may encounter diseconomies of scale rather than 'when it gets big it's impossible to run a business'.

Reading your essay out loud is a useful exercise that might help you to think about the way it is written. You might also want to go through an essay you have already completed and mark with a highlighter pen where you think you have accurately demonstrated understanding of a business concept. Compare notes with one of your friends — do they agree with where you have highlighted good understanding?

### Application

While essay titles are broad, they will always have a context, and that context is crucial to your answer. Many of you will have completed your application to university fairly recently. You probably asked your teachers and friends for advice. What you wanted was advice that was specific to you and not general information. You wanted to know what was the best course and institution for you, given your skills, your likely grades, your interests and your career ambitions. You may have been given general advice on how to apply, but this would not have been enough.

Similarly, the examiners want to know what you think about the specific firm or industry you have been asked about. If you don't place your answer in context, they will think, rightly, that you are missing the point. It is the same as your teachers handing out a general advice sheet every time you asked them specifically what courses you should apply for — you would naturally feel you were not getting a good enough answer. That is all application really means — placing your answer in the right context so that it is focused and relevant. You cannot get this from a textbook because a textbook will give general information on a topic. You need to think about it.

A simple test I sometimes use in the classroom, to see whether students appreciate the significance of application, is to set a question such as 'Examine the benefits of market research.' If anyone starts to write an answer, they have not understood the importance of application. You cannot really answer this type of question without knowing the context — what type of business is being considered? What type of decision is being made? How is the firm intending to use market research? What kind of market research is proposed? To answer the question, you need a context.

### Analysis

Imagine you ask a friend what they thought of a new film they had been to see and you were thinking of going to. They answered: 'X was in it, so was Y and so was Z. It was filmed in Paris. It's in colour. It's a romance and it lasts 2 hours. There were about 100 people watching it. We saw it at 8.30 p.m. We watched it in town.' This is obviously just a list of points and does not really tell you what you want to know, which is what the film was like and whether you should go and see it. None of the points has been developed and this is what often happens in essays. Students produce a whole list of ideas but they are not analysed and examined in any detail.

Read over your own essays and look at the extent to which you develop your points. A good essay will have clearly defined paragraphs, each of which makes a particular point and develops the argument at some length. Many students run lots of different points together in one paragraph to try to convince themselves they are analysing. Photocopy an old essay and, with scissors, cut

out all the sections that have a new point in them. You will almost certainly be cutting existing paragraphs into much smaller sections. How many 'points' are you making? Probably far too many. How much did you develop each one? Probably far too little.

A give-away sign is the word 'also'. When a sentence begins with 'Also,' it means a new point is being made, so if this word appears lots of times in your essay, you are probably making too many points in not enough detail.

You should, in addition, consider the extent to which you are using analytical concepts in your answer. Many answers at A2 seem to have completely forgotten the work covered at AS. Concepts such as the elasticity of demand, productivity, unit costs, motivation theory, the Boston matrix, segmentation, budgeting and SWOT analysis are AS concepts for most exam boards. These are all relevant and useful and should be incorporated into student answers at A2 and not ignored.

## Evaluation

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The good candidate is one who is able to reflect on their own arguments. They are able to assess the strength of the case they have made. In business, managers are constantly making decisions about what to do and recommending what course of action to take. The 'right' way will, of course, depend on a whole host of factors — what the objectives are, what the resources available are, what the likely reaction of competitors is and so on. A recommendation for one firm may not be the recommendation for another. Essay answers, like case study answers, need to show this. They need to weigh up the arguments made, discuss the circumstances under which one line of argument is stronger than another and generally make judgements on the points discussed.

This reflection is crucial for success on an A2 essay. It really is not about how much you know, but about how you can discuss and debate a few key arguments. Go back to the cinema example: what you want to know is whether it is worth you going to see that film. Your friend might say that, although he enjoyed it, your tastes are different and so you probably wouldn't. Or that the evening showing was so busy they had to queue for ages, therefore, you might be better going at a different time. Or that it depends what else you have to do that evening. An essay response cannot just say 'the film was good', it must involve a discussion of the question — in this case whether you should go and see it.

Again, it helps to read over past essays. Summarise the arguments you have made (a good test is whether you can find them easily — are the points made in clearly identifiable paragraphs) and then try to find where you have actually discussed them. Have you simply outlined a series of arguments or have you then tried to do something with these ideas?

## Summary

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Writing an essay is a skill and it needs practising. You need to work hard to develop the language and make sure your ideas are built on an accurate understanding of business fundamentals. These ideas need to be brought together to form a well-explained argument. It is not enough to outline the case for, or even the case for and against; a good answer requires some insight into some of the arguments that have been made.

*Andrew Gillespie is Head of Business Studies at d'Overbroeck's College, Oxford, a Principal Examiner for A2 business studies and an author.*