



Examiner and teacher **Alan Todd** provides advice on how to develop your exam technique

As an experienced teacher of A-level business studies, I have spent much time developing and perfecting an answering technique that allows my students to access the higher levels of the mark scheme and demonstrate their true potential.

The real benefit of this technique is that it allows you to demonstrate all the skills required in a joined up and flowing manner. It is the cement that bonds the assessment criteria together, making sense of everything your teachers demand of you. You can practice this technique all year round, so that you naturally use it when it really matters, namely in the exams.

The Todd technique

After clarifying in your own mind the demands of the exam question, I recommend that you break your answer into three or four paragraphs. This will depend on the mark allocation for the question, e.g. three paragraphs for an analysis-based question and four paragraphs for an evaluative one.

Paragraph 1

Your first paragraph should be a short introductory paragraph. The first sentence should contain a definition of the key content or syllabus term given within the question, for example:

Discuss the benefits of ToddCo plc carrying out a business plan for its new chocolate bar.

If you can show you know what the topic involves early on, then the examiner will credit you with content and understanding and you may access 1 or 2 knowledge marks very quickly. In this case you should define the term 'business plan'.



Always apply your answers to the scenario, in this instance a chocolate manufacturer

In your next sentence, you should introduce your response to the question and the specific scenario (showing application). For example:

As ToddCo plc are launching a new chocolate bar, it may be useful to plan what it intends to do to help organise all of its activities (such as its marketing, operations and human resources) and this may help guarantee its success. A product launch involves many different decisions and a great deal of coordination (e.g. promoting the launch and getting the product out on time) and so a business plan is essential.

By doing this you are stating that you understand the question and you grasp the scenario that the business is currently in. You will have shown knowledge, clarified your application to the situation and set up your response to the question.

Paragraphs 2 and 3

In the next couple of paragraphs, I recommend that you try to raise **two points** (in this case benefits, one per paragraph) so that you can fully explain, apply and argue, and therefore access all the mark scheme levels.

You should answer this type of question by stating and explaining each point. You can do this using business theory to start with, as this will gain you some marks for knowledge and basic analysis. But you should then apply the point to the precise scenario given in the case. This means using the information in the case relevantly and in context of the question, for example:

In carrying out a business plan, the company will have to organise research to back up its decisions. This could mean an increase in the accuracy and quality of its decision making. For example, it may help it to decide exactly what resources and funds are needed to produce an effective product launch. In this company's case, this is vital as the target market for chocolate bars has a large degree of competition (such as Cadbury and Mars) and any mistakes could be costly, therefore increasing the importance of using a business plan.

The above response uses excellent link phrases such as 'this could mean', 'in this company's case' and 'therefore'. Using these types of phrases will encourage you to write with greater depth, knowledge and application, and even allow you to briefly evaluate the point you have made. The examiners would have to credit your use of the skills and the sequence in which you have answered.

I then recommend that you write a further sentence to try to argue, fully analyse and evaluate the point. After this, you will need to consider the counter-argument because this is an evaluative question. By using the term 'however', you will be arguing an opposing point, for example:

However, research is costly and planning is not always accurate. You may have unreliable data — perhaps because your competitor undertook actions, such as price cuts that might distort your findings of how your product might do. Also changes in market conditions may mean your plan is out of date; for example, sales may be lower than expected due to hot weather. This means ToddCo may end up wasting valuable time and resources on a product that may not be successful and may not fit into the market.

Once you have completed this technique for two points (benefits in this case), you will have argued your answer fully and in context of the question, extending these points and analysing to the highest levels. The final paragraph is the evaluation one.

Paragraph 4

In your final paragraph, you should first briefly summarise your whole argument, for example:

Overall there are numerous benefits that ToddCo plc can gain from carrying out a business plan.

Once you have generalised here, you must make a decision about the overall outcome, for example:

I would say that ToddCo plc must carry out a business plan as there will be so much money at risk in a market like this. You would not want to invest a lot of money into a launch without planning ahead.

By doing this, you will have made a decision, scored evaluation marks as well as more application marks. In your final sentence, I recommend that you use a 'challenge', for example:

However, the success from carrying out a business plan in this company's case depends on the amount of research carried out as well as how regularly the business checks the outcomes given in the plan and adjusts where appropriate, otherwise the plan becomes less valuable and will waste ToddCo's vital time and resources.

With this final sentence you are fully weighing up and justifying the benefits of a business plan, all of which you have done with *this* company in mind.

Writing template

In Box 1, I have drawn up a writing template that summarises the technique discussed above. Use the template to practise answering exam questions. The more you practise this technique, the more you will extend your answers and make decisions to fully evaluate the question in the given scenario.

Box 1 The Todd technique writing template

Paragraph 1 — introduction to answer

Clarify the demands of the question in your mind, then write a definition of the key content term and introduce your response to the question and the specific scenario.

Paragraph 2 — raise point 1

Raise the point either from the case or in theory (explain it, discuss the possible effects, outcomes, implications, positives, negatives, pros, cons, fors and against etc.) Apply the point back to the question in the case study.

Paragraph 3 — raise point 2

Complete in the same manner as paragraph 2.

Paragraph 4 — evaluation

Provide a one-sentence answer summary first, then discuss the overall possible outcomes for *this* company only. Make a balanced judgement (how much/little this company is affected etc.) and say what this means *therefore* (in the short/long term, for the company's success etc.)
