

# A parent's guide to understanding exam techniques

As you may recall from your own experience sitting an exam can be nerve wracking. Often, developing a good understanding of exam techniques will help to calm nerves and allay fears.

This guide provides you with an insight into exam techniques and how understanding the way in which exam questions are put together can help your child provide the best answer.

On the following pages you will find tips on:

- **Understanding exam techniques**
- **Understand how Assessment Objectives (AO) are used in setting exam questions**
- **Command words – what they are and how to use them**
- **Hints and tips when your child is in the exam**
- **Techniques to keep going if your child has a memory block.**

Our website has a whole section on how you can help and support your child as they prepare for exams.

We would recommend that you read **'Supporting your child at exam times'** as it contains useful hints and tips as your child gets closer to exam time.

# What are exam techniques?

Put simply, understanding exam techniques is not about what your child knows, but how it's applied under exam conditions. Whilst revision is a vital part to getting good exam results, examination technique is also important.

Skills relating to exam technique include:

- following instructions and responding appropriately to command words (see next page)
- writing using academic language suitable to the task
- using knowledge from different parts of the syllabus to answer specific questions.

Before we look at each of these in turn, it's important to understand how Assessment Objectives (AO) are used.

Your child's teacher will most probably discussed these within class so your child will have a common appreciation of what the objectives are. Exams test both your child's knowledge of the subject and the skills that they've obtained in demonstrating this knowledge.

It's important to know the proportion of marks awarded for each Assessment Objective.

Three common Assessment Objectives used in OCR's qualifications are:

- **Recall, select and communicate**

The meaning of this objective is straightforward: it tests the information and learning your child has acquired and how well they can comprehend meanings and interpret information in written or graphic form.

- **Apply knowledge, understanding and skills**

This objective requires your child to be able to recognise when and where the knowledge they have might be useful in real life. Application is the skill of being able to apply their knowledge to different contexts and circumstances in order to understand why problems and issues arise.

- **Analyse and evaluate**

*Analysis* covers a range of areas. It can involve:

- looking at a piece of data, a table, chart or diagram and interpreting it
- identifying trends
- identifying the elements that make up the problem, issue or case that you are considering.

*Evaluation* involves judgement and opinion. When your child evaluates they will make some comment about how important, significant or valuable something is. To be successful, your child will need to demonstrate that they have the confidence to make judgements based on their knowledge.



# What are command words?

'Command words' are the guides in the question which identify which Assessment Objective (AO) is being targeted by that question. They are used carefully and the word order is chosen to make it clear what the examiner is looking for.

All exam questions go through a rigorous process of scrutiny to ensure that they provide your child with the best chance to show their knowledge and understanding.

Certain command words are associated with certain Assessment Objectives so it pays to have some idea of what these mean to inform your child which skill they should be focussing on in the question.

It is important to read the whole question and to understand what the question is getting at, as the command word on its own may need reinforcing with the remainder of the

question. A useful hint would be to highlight the command words in each question.

Below is a table with a list of command words associated with the relevant Assessment Objectives.

Assessment objective - Recall, select and communicate	Assessment objective - Apply knowledge, understanding and skills	Assessment objective - Analyse and evaluate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Define</li><li>• Describe</li><li>• Explain</li><li>• Give</li><li>• Identify</li><li>• Name</li><li>• Outline</li><li>• State</li><li>• What is meant by</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Apply</li><li>• Calculate</li><li>• Demonstrate</li><li>• Describe</li><li>• Examine</li><li>• Explain</li><li>• Give</li><li>• Give an example</li><li>• Graph</li><li>• Identify</li><li>• Name</li><li>• How</li><li>• Show how</li><li>• Using</li><li>• Using examples</li><li>• What would be the benefits/costs of</li><li>• What trends</li><li>• Which</li><li>• Why</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Advise</li><li>• Analyse</li><li>• Assess</li><li>• Assess the relative importance</li><li>• Calculate</li><li>• Compare and contrast</li><li>• Consider</li><li>• Critically assess</li><li>• Discuss</li><li>• Evaluate</li><li>• Examine</li><li>• Explain</li><li>• Explain why</li><li>• Identify</li><li>• Justify</li><li>• Organise</li><li>• Predict</li><li>• Show how</li><li>• What</li><li>• What factors</li><li>• Which</li><li>• Why</li></ul>

You will notice that **certain words appear in more than one category**. This is where the rest of the question is important in giving your child the full picture of what is required.



# Hints and tips in the exam – advice for your child

To support your child to prepare for the exam, share with them these hints and tips when sitting the exam

## The first few minutes....

When the invigilator utters the magic words, 'You may now turn over the page', avoid the temptation to rush in. Adopt a calm, methodological approach by doing the following:

- read the instructions and make sure you understand them (e.g. how many questions from how many parts, how many questions in total, do the questions attract the same proportion of the marks?)
- write out your personal details
- read the whole paper, checking both sides of the page, so that you don't miss anything
- plan how you are going to use your time – allocate time for each question relating to the number of marks it has. Make a note of this plan and stick to it.

## Selecting questions

Look for questions that relate to those parts of the course that you have revised. Read the questions carefully before you attempt to answer – what exactly is it asking? Does the question have more than one part? Make sure that you underline key words in the question – looking for the command words. Having done all this, is the question about what you think it is and do you still want to answer it if you have a choice?

## Writing essay style questions in exam conditions

Answering essay style questions is both about the knowledge you hold and the way in which you use that knowledge.

Writing extended response answers in examinations is similar to writing essays. Spend a few moments planning your answer before you write it.

Think about the following points:

- You need to have a **structure**, with a proper introduction and conclusion, and cover points in an organised way. It may be best to write less on each point and leave out some of the background.
- You need to include **analysis of the points** being raised and reflect upon them critically. Show understanding of **different, and possibly opposing, points of view**. Read the question carefully.
- You must **demonstrate relevant knowledge** by using terms, ideas and concepts from the course. Evidence and examples are important ways of supporting the points you make. Always ask yourself, is what I am including relevant to the question?
- It is possible to **use quotes** (especially in Humanities subjects) or **make reference** to key thinkers in the field as part of your evidence. In an examination, you do not need to include a bibliography and references.

- Use proper sentences and paragraphs rather than bullet points. Keep your **writing concise**, but always spell words out properly and **never use 'texting' abbreviations**.

Above all, don't fill your answer with names and facts just for the sake of it. Make sure that everything you include is relevant to the question.

## If your mind goes blank

- **Don't panic**
- If you have a plan you're less likely to go blank in the middle of a question, but should this still happen, go on to the next question and come back later to the one you were tackling
- Another way of avoiding these blank moments is to jot down notes whenever ideas come into your head in somewhere else on the examination paper
- One idea is to use the **SHEEP** technique which can often kick start your mind into remembering key facts. SHEEP stands for **S**ocial, **H**istorical, **E**nvironmental, **E**conomic, and **P**olitical - often you can remember ideas concerning the topic in hand once your mind filters these categories.

*The weeks leading up to exam time is a time when your child will need a great deal of support.*

*For hints and tips on revision, preparing for the exam and a count down to the day, please download 'Supporting you child at exam time'.*

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