

# Six key exam skills

**Phil Waterhouse** outlines the techniques that will help you get the top grades



**S**tudents and teachers are always keen to know what a 'model' or 'good' answer would be. The different exam boards now offer exemplar material of students' scripts for training purposes, so that you can see what a top response looks like.

When I share these with my students they are always amazed that a particular response is awarded 'full' marks. They always claim that there is something wrong with it or that it could be improved even further with additional points. While this is invariably true, the key point that they have missed is that all examiners are encouraged to adopt a 'positive' attitude within their marking, i.e. they look to reward what is included, rather than focusing on what *isn't*.

Examiners factor in that the work produced is written under the pressures of the exam hall. While your teachers might not reward you with full marks for a piece of work that you have lovingly crafted at home, examiners realise that within the 20 minutes allocated to write a 16-mark response in the exam, not much more could be expected from a student.

## Key skills

The following skills provide the basis of strong exam answers. They are founded on the assessment objectives of all A-level

business courses. While you might not be that interested in what assessment objective 1 (AO1), AO2 etc. involve, the reality is that you probably should be. They are the essential components of success.

## 1 Key hooks and words

Always try to identify the key hooks and key words within an exam question. While this might sound like obvious advice that you have heard throughout your education across all subjects, that fact is that it is crucial to exam success. Taking time to unpick *exactly* what the question is asking you to do and then using this to plan your answer to that *specific* question is the foundation of every great answer.

The key hooks or key words are not what you might have been taught as the 'command' or 'trigger' words. Take the following examples as a guide:

- 1 To what extent is the success of a **strategy** mainly determined by external factors outside of the business's control? *Justify your view.*
- 2 To what extent is it **vital** that **all** firms need to adopt **CSR** to become **financially** successful? *Justify your view.*





**Supermarkets use data from loyalty cards to target promotions at specific customers**

The command words are in *italic*. These words are there to indicate that you need to make a judgement or to evaluate your points.

The key topic words are in **orange**. These indicate which part of the specification is being tested. These are the terms that you need to have learnt and understood within your learning. Your response needs to be about these areas.

However, the key hooks are in **blue**. These are the words that you really need to pick up on. They are only small words, but are the ones that will help you make a decision, which in turn will help you evaluate, which in turn will help you to show that you have answered the question set.

**1** Is it mainly external factors? Yes or No? — Depends on the business really.

**2** Is it vital that all firms adopt CSR strategies? Yes or No? — No, not every firm needs to.

## 2 Definitions

There has always been quite a bit of debate among teachers about whether you should start a response with a definition or not. Some people believe that you should always start explicitly by defining the key terms within the question. This can be a good strategy, as it immediately shows the examiner that you are demonstrating subject knowledge and hitting the AO1 criteria.

However, you can also demonstrate that you have understood the terms implicitly within your response. For example, if a question asks you about how market research methods have helped a business become more competitive, you could define primary and secondary research, but arguably you might be wasting time. If your response was as follows, it would show that you understand a relevant marketing method and how it will be beneficial for the business:

A supermarket might use data collected from a loyalty card, which helps the firm target specific promotions at specific customers based on their past spending patterns to gain greater insight and understanding of what they are likely to buy in the future. This would give the supermarket an edge over rivals.

## 3 Application

Application can come from understanding the industry, understanding the data or potentially bringing in relevant examples. Ultimately, it will depend on the actual question.

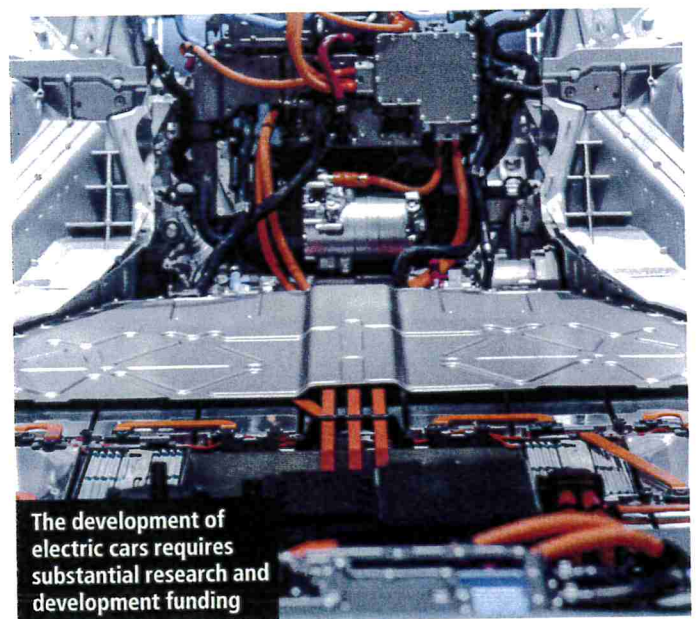
If a question asks you to use the data, then quite simply you must. If the question asks you about a specific business or case study, you *must* link back to this company in your response, and crucially you must consider the specific requirements of that industry. For example, that an airline will behave in a different way to a fast-fashion retailer.

Other questions will be more open-ended and require you to use relevant examples from your own background reading. For example, for a question on external factors, certain businesses like estate agents and the travel industry are highly dependent on the state and health of the economy, so will be very much influenced by outside factors. Knowing which company to use, and when, will require you to have a bank of examples from different areas to draw on. The more of these you have, the easier it will be to access the marks for application. You can find many case studies and examples to use throughout the issues of BUSINESS REVIEW.

## 4 Analysis

Analysis is about building up a clear chain of argument and reasoning that explains *how* what you are putting forward is relevant and pertinent to your argument.

When considering Question 1 above in terms of the car industry, most car manufacturers are being impacted and challenged by external factors, such as the emergence of electric vehicles and the replacement of petrol and diesel cars. This will mean that they will have to look into new product designs, which is likely to require substantial funding. This may place pressure on the firms' finances, as they invest into research and development to try and find workable solutions for replacements to their current product ranges. It might also lead to them having to recruit new employees who have the necessary skills, which might be costly and time-consuming in terms of identifying the right recruits.



**The development of electric cars requires substantial research and development funding**



## 5 Evaluation

When evaluating, think, overall, what is your answer? What is the most important factor? It should not be a repeat of something you have already argued and stated. It should be a clear and justified decision that shows that you have answered the actual question. In terms of Question 1 above, a decent evaluation might be:

Arguably the success of the new models of cars from different manufacturers will be mainly determined by the research and development and investment into innovation that each firm conducts. So while external factors are important, the internal factors, particularly the amount of available finance, will be most significant.

## 6 Answer the question

Have you answered the actual question set? After every paragraph, you really must look back to the precise wording of the question and your plan, and ask yourself: 'Am I still answering the question?' Is it clear to the examiner that you have stayed focused on the key words and hooks? If so, how have you made this obvious? There is nothing wrong with underlining for emphasis exactly what you are trying to argue or justify. Putting words in block capitals is also acceptable. It helps examiners and teachers identify the key arguments and points that you are trying to make.

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## Answers to 'Brainteasers' (p. 9) and 'Making connections' (p. 23)

- 1 (c)      3 (d)      5 (c)      7 (b)  
2 (a)      4 (d)      6 (d)      8 (d)



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