

# UNIT 50

## READING THE EXAM PAPER

Use this unit to help you to:

- ▼ address each question consistently and with good focus
- ▼ pass the exam.

### Introduction

The prime rule of any exam is simple: within the time allowed, score as many as possible of the available marks.

You may be surprised that many candidates seem to use the following rules. They:

- don't read the question properly
- spend half the total time on Question 1
- write down all they can about the first word they see that they know something about
- go off at a tangent, whenever possible
- never look back to make sure they are still answering the question that is asked
- spend twice as much time on parts of questions that carry 5 marks as on those carrying 15 marks
- make up answers when they are in doubt
- avoid using their judgment
- avoid showing how they got to the answer in a calculation.

This unit suggests some ways of making sure that *you* follow better rules. You may like to refer to Unit 44 *Exams – watching the clock*, as you tackle this unit.

# Reading the questions

In Unit 44 *Exams – watching the clock*, we look at how you can usefully spend the first 10 minutes of an exam.

One of the activities you need to do at this stage is to read the questions. Let's explore this seemingly straightforward activity in some detail.



*How* should you read the questions? See if you can note down ways to read the questions that would help you get down to answering some of them.

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## Response

You may have noticed that you aren't simply reading at this stage, you're making decisions as well. Here are some suggestions:

- Read each question slowly, and more than once.
- Work out exactly what the question is asking for.
- Underline or highlight key process words that tell you *how* to structure your answer, for example:
  - analyse
  - calculate
  - compare
  - contrast
  - define
  - describe
  - discuss
  - evaluate
  - prove.
- Underline or highlight key topic words that tell you what your answer needs to be about.
- Look back at each question with this in mind: 'Is this a good question for me?'
  - If it is very good for you put two ticks beside it
  - If it is fairly good, put one tick
  - If it is no good, put a cross beside it.

This way you can make a sensible choice about which questions you can do, and in which order you prefer to try them. ( Most people like to start with a good one.)

You can see from this response that there is a lot more than 'reading' to reading the questions.

# Answering the questions

It is worth adding three more rules about exams:

- All of the available marks are associated with the *answers to the questions that are asked* – not with things the question doesn't ask for.
- Each question or each part of a question is allocated a specific amount of marks. You cannot get more marks if you answer a question in more detail than asked for.
- The examiner can give you marks only for what you put on the exam paper – not for what you know but have not shown in your answers.

The main thing is to make sure that you are answering the question that is asked. Reread the question every few minutes to check that you are still on course and not going off at a tangent. (You can't get marks for going off the point.)



Spend a few minutes thinking how you would approach an essay-style question to try to make sure you stick to the question that is asked. Note any ideas you have below.

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## Response

You may have different suggestions, but you should find these useful:

It is worthwhile to spend a few minutes noting down a plan of the content and arguments of the essay you are going to write. Then plan out your introduction and the conclusion. Check that this plan addresses the question and then start writing the essay.

This plan will help you to produce a coherent logical essay, which starts in an interesting way, goes where it promises to go, then comes to a convincing conclusion.

If you run out of time and go on to the next question, your plan will help you to refocus on the essay when you come back to it later in the exam.

## Tips for getting more marks

Here are a few more tips for getting as many marks as you can squeeze out of the examiner.

- Try to make your paper look good. Underline headings and try to leave margins uncluttered.
- Don't make sentences too long. An examiner who has to read each of your sentences twice will get irritated.

## Checking and making changes to get more marks

It is useful to save 20 minutes or so at the end of an exam to check through your answers and make alterations. Even if you haven't finished some of the questions it is worth taking the time to check through your work. You can pick up more marks by checking your work.

Quickly read through all that you have done. As you read, ask: 'Am I still sticking to the question?'

- Add bits here and there to make it clear to the examiner that you're addressing the question properly.
- Correct mistakes you find and add other little points you have remembered.

It's not too late to make adjustments, but make sure any changes are clear and the examiner can read them.

We look at how to use the last 20 minutes of an exam in Unit 44 *Exams – watching the clock*.

## Action Plan

In this unit you have seen how important it is to read the exam paper carefully and to keep checking that you are addressing the question as you write your answer.

It is worthwhile practising doing this. You may like to get hold of an old exam paper (preferably a recent one) and try the following:

- spend 5 minutes reading the questions as if you were in a real exam
- make notes on how you would answer the questions
- give yourself the appropriate length of time to answer some questions in full.

Use what you have learned in this unit to decide how you will read the questions and answer them and write your plans below.

**How I will read the questions**

**How I will answer the questions**

**How much time I will have for checking and correcting**

## **What else?**

Other units related to this one are:

22 *Detailed or close reading*

41 *Planning and writing essays 3*

44 *Exams – watching the clock*

