

UNIT

45

WRITING SHORT RESPONSES

Use this unit to help you to:

- ▼ tackle 'short-answer' questions efficiently
- ▼ score more marks in these kinds of questions.

What is a short-answer question?

A short-answer question is a structured question found in some exam papers.

In most short-answer exams, you have to answer all of the questions – you haven't a choice.

There is usually a number beside each question which tells you how many marks you can get for the question. Some questions may carry only 1 mark, others may carry several marks.

There may be a few lines of space ruled out after the question and this gives you an idea of how long your answer is expected to be.

Some exam papers start with some short-answer questions (where you answer them all) and then go on to some 'long-answer' questions (you may have a choice here) where you simply write your answers on blank pages provided for you.

How to approach short-answer exams

Many people find these exams quite difficult. But it's possible to work out solutions to all the main problems. You can develop a strategy for coping with this sort of exam paper.



Here are some of the sorts of questions people tend to ask about short-answer exams. Look at each in turn, and note down your answer.

- 1 Suppose there are 6 lines of space left for the answer to Question 4. Do you need to fill all of the space with your answer?
- 2 Suppose you get stuck on Question 6. Should you keep trying to work out the answer, or leave it?
- 3 You know a lot about Question 8, which carries 2 marks. Should you put down all you know?
- 4 There are 36 questions, and you've only got an hour. Should you try to work through them from 1 to 36, or is there a better way of doing them?

Response

Here are my answers.

- 1 No, you don't have to fill in all the space. The amount of space is decided by the maximum amount a 'big writer' may need. If you can answer the question well in half of the space – that's fine.
- 2 No, don't keep struggling with that question. Move on to other questions where you do know the answers. You can always go back to the problem question later – the answer may just come to you as you're thinking about later questions.
- 3 No. Tempting as it is, when you have answered the question as asked, there are no more marks for extra detail. In fact you would be losing time (time = marks) needed for other questions.
- 4 If you work consecutively from Question 1, you may get only to question 20 when the time is up, and miss some easy questions you can answer between 21 and 36. It's a good idea to answer the questions you find easy first (whatever their numbers), then go through the ones that you find fairly easy. Leave the difficult ones till last. This way, you don't miss the chance of getting marks for things you know.

How to answer a short-answer question

Here are some tips for answering these sorts of questions.

- Read each question more than once before you answer it. (Many candidates give answers to what they thought the question asked and get no marks.)
- Don't rewrite part of the question: save yourself time and effort. For example:

Question: *name three transition metals that have coloured oxides.* (3 marks)

Answer 1: Three metals that have coloured oxides are iron, chromium and manganese.

Answer 2: iron chromium manganese

Answers 1 and 2 would both get the same (3) marks.

- Don't give more than the question asks for. If your 'more' was wrong, you would actually lose marks. For example, taking our question on transition metals:

Answer 3: iron chromium magnesium sodium

Answer 3 would get only 2 marks, because 'sodium' is wrong.

- Glance ahead to the next question; sometimes it gives a clue to what the answer to the present question should be.



From time to time, you may not have enough space for your answer, perhaps because you've put something down, then realised it was wrong. What should you do? Note below what you would do.

Response

It's sensible not to try to squeeze your answer into what space there is by using tiny writing which may be difficult for the examiner to read.

Write clearly in the space where the answer should be something like: 'Please see top of this page' or 'Please see foot of page 6' to tell the examiner precisely where you have written your answer. In the place where you write your answer, write a clear note saying which question this stray answer belongs to.

Action plan

If you're preparing for exams which involve short-answer papers, you may like to get hold of as many past papers as possible, and practise on them. This will help you increase your speed and perhaps give you an idea of what sort of questions will turn up in your exam.

Note below how you will practise short answer questions.

How to practise short answer questions	When
Approaches to use:	

What else?

Other units related to this one are:

- 41 *Planning and writing essays 3*
- 44 *Exams – watching the clock*
- 50 *Reading the exam paper*