

BBC Bitesize - GCSE History- Exam Skills

Episode 2: How to write a good essay

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DATSHIANE: I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

KATIE: And I'm Katie Charlwood.

DATSHIANE: And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

KATIE: This is the second episode in a four-part series on exam skills.

DATSHIANE: And in this episode, we'll be looking at the different types of essays that you might be asked to write in an exam. We'll have some hints and tips and examples on how to write them that gets you those all-important exam marks.

KATIE: And we'll use the mnemonic PEEL, P-E-E-L, to help you remember how to structure your essay.

DATSHIANE: Remember, if you find it useful to make notes along the way, then just press pause and rewind. We're always here, and at the end we'll have a short, snappy summary so that all those key facts stick.

[music]

DATSHIANE: So, you've opened up your exam paper and there's a question inviting you to write a beautifully crafted essay. We know you can do it, but how do you begin? First, take a deep breath, relax, and then, most importantly, read the question. It can be so easy to miss a word, or misread it, and write something that might be factually correct and really well argued, but it's not what the examiner has asked for.

KATIE: Now, I find it useful to draw a vertical pen line to separate every word in the question. This helps me to slow my brain down and then to underline every important or keyword. This makes sure I've completely understood the question and what the examiner is after.

DATSHIANE: A great idea. So, let's look at the types of essay questions you might be asked to write. These might be a factor essay, or a statement essay, or a 'how far do you agree?' question, but whatever type they are, the essay is expecting you to give more than one argument or factor, and here's where you can earn those lovely exam marks.

KATIE: See, a factor essay question is asking you to discuss the significance of multiple factors or causes behind a particular historical event, and the key goal for you here is to analyse how important the various factors are and how they contributed to the outcome.

DATSHIANE: So, for example, Katie: How far have governments been the main factor in the development of the British Empire?

KATIE: Okay, so this is where you pause, you take your time, read the question and underline the keywords, in this case, governments, main factor, and development of the British Empire. We know that there were multiple factors that led to the development, including governments, economic motivations, and ideas like exploration and colonisation.

DATSHIANE: Great. And now you should explain how each factor contributed to the event, starting with the factor in the question. Identify the significance of that one and then other factors, and then compare them for their importance. Finally, make a clear argument about whether governments **were** the main factor, as that is what the question is asking. And if not, say which factor you think was most important.

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KATIE: So that's a factor essay. What about, say, a statement essay?

DATSHIANE: Okay, well, a statement essay is one where you are given a statement about a historical event and then you are asked to agree or disagree. You have to present a balanced argument based on the evidence.

KATIE: So, in this case, the essay question might be something like 'The Great Depression was the main reason for the rise of the Nazis. How far do you agree with this statement?' Your turn, Datshiane.

DATSHIANE: Okay. So, using your tips, Katie, I'd underline 'The Great Depression', 'main reason', 'rise of the Nazis', and 'agree'. Now we need to focus on the factor that's given in the question, the Great Depression, and we need to either agree or disagree with the statement that this event was the main reason. And to do this, we have to compare it with other factors and provide evidence for both sides of the argument.

KATIE: That's right. For example, we might write that one of the other factors was German resentment for the Treaty of Versailles, and that although the Depression worsened Germany's economic situation, resentment over the Treaty of Versailles was a persistent factor that contributed to the Nazi Party's popularity, especially amongst nationalists and war veterans.

DATSHIANE: And you can continue to do this with those other factors, but make sure you end with a conclusion with your clear judgement on the statement as to whether you think it's true or false or perhaps somewhere in between.

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DATSHIANE: Okay, let's look at how to structure an exam essay with an example. So, if the question was 'Explain why the Weimar Republic was weak', you might start by underlining the words Weimar Republic and weak.

KATIE: Absolutely correct. Now, I know I have to write about the various factors contributing to the weakness of the Weimar Republic, but before I start writing the actual essay, I like to create a brief outline of the main points.

KATIE: For example, the Weimar Republic's weaknesses; I might consider political instability, economic problems, and social unrest. Each of these will eventually form a paragraph in my essay.

DATSHIANE: Pen, paper or laptop and keyboard ready, and first paragraph.

KATIE: So, I start my essay with a very brief introduction with the key facts relating to the question - in this case, by defining the Weimar Republic.

DATSHIANE: So that's who, what, where, and when.

KATIE: Right, so the Weimar Republic was the name given to the German government that was established in 1919 after Germany's defeat in World War I. And then I outline the key factors and state my argument clearly. So, in this case, something like, "The Weimar Republic was weak due to a combination of political instability, economic crises, and societal opposition." And now I write a paragraph on each of those factors.

DATSHIANE: Katie, you've also brought in a bunch of bananas to help us with this, but I'm not sure I get the connection.

KATIE: Well, see, that's because in order to eat a banana, you have to peel it first, and PEEL, P-E-E-L, is a great way of remembering how to structure each of those argument paragraphs. P is for point, E is for evidence, E explain, and L link.

DATSHIANE: I like that. That's smart, PEEL.

KATIE: So, let's take a look at these one by one. P, point. Begin each paragraph with a point you want to make that supports your argument. In this case, my first point is about political instability, so I'd write: "The Weimar Republic was politically weak due to its fragmented party system."

DATSHIANE: E for evidence. So, provide the historical evidence to support this.

KATIE: So, I'd put something like, "The Weimar Republic's proportional representation system meant that no party could gain a majority, leading to coalition governments that were often unstable."

DATSHIANE: E, explain how this evidence proves the point.

KATIE: Right, so this would be: "This lack of strong leadership meant frequent elections and constant government changes, making it difficult for the Republic to effectively address Germany's problems."

DATSHIANE: And finally, L, link this back to the question.

KATIE: Thank you, and I will. "This political instability made the Weimar Republic appear weak and incapable of governing effectively."

DATSHIANE: Nicely done.

KATIE: Thank you. In fact, for a really good essay, I want to write three PEEL paragraphs, each centred on a different factor. I've written about the political factors, and so in my next two paragraphs I'd write about economic problems and social unrest.

DATSHIANE: And remember, each time you write a paragraph, make the point supporting the argument, provide evidence, and explain how this proves the point, and link it back to the question. P-E-E-L, PEEL. But we're not done with the essay yet as we need a conclusion paragraph which summarises the main points, restates the argument, and explains why the reasons discussed are the most significant in answering the question.

KATIE: In the conclusion you have to make sure your opinions are clear and that they link back to the question that was asked.

DATSHIANE: You're on a role, Katie. So, tell us your conclusion.

KATIE: Okay, so how about: "In conclusion, the Weimar Republic was weak primarily due to the political instability of its coalition government, the economic crisis that devastated public confidence, and the lack of support from significant portion of society. These factors combined to create a fragile state that was unable to withstand the growing pressures of the 1920s and early 1930s."

DATSHIANE: That's a great start to getting those marks, and to get even higher ones, here's a few more tips which you might want to write down. Make sure your evidence is specific. Is the date correct? Have you used the correct names of people, places or laws? And even, is there a good quote that you've remembered that you can add? Go on, show off your knowledge. This is your time to shine.

KATIE: And remember, some marks can be gained for spelling, punctuation, and grammar, our friend SPAG. It will say so on the page, so take some time to review your answers for better use of punctuation and connectives.

DATSHIANE: Talking of which, historians love making connections. So, point out relationships, how one thing connects to another. This is your chance to impress.

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DATSHIANE: Right, Katie, how about a quick summary of how to write a good essay.

KATIE: Of course. Read the question carefully, make a brief outline before you start writing.

DATSHIANE: Ask yourself, is it a factor essay asking you to state and compare different factors?

KATIE: Or is it a statement essay asking you to agree or disagree with a statement?

DATSHIANE: You may want to start with an introduction or get stuck straight into your PEEL paragraphs. If you do write an introduction, be brief and state your argument.

KATIE: You want three PEEL paragraphs; point, evidence, explain, and link back to the question.

DATSHIANE: And don't forget a final conclusion paragraph.

KATIE: Remember that there's loads more hints and tips on the Bitesize website, and more history revision in the other episodes in this series.

DATSHIANE: In the next episode, we'll be looking at source questions and how to answer them. Thanks for listening.

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