

A-Level Psychology

16-Mark Essays · Essay Plans

AQA Psychology (7182)

Essay Plans

55 entries

Ready-to-use skeleton plans for the highest-frequency AQA 16-mark essays. Each plan gives a focused AO1 description (6 marks), three developed AO3 evaluation chains in PEEL form (point, evidence, explain, link), and a justified conclusion - the structure that lifts an answer into the top band.

Discuss explanations for conformity. (16 marks)

AO1	Define conformity as yielding to group pressure. Outline the two explanations (Deutsch and Gerard): normative social influence - conforming to be accepted and avoid rejection, leading to public compliance without private change; and informational social influence - conforming because we believe the group is right, especially in ambiguous or expert situations, leading to internalisation. Link to the types of conformity (compliance, identification, internalisation) and to Asch (NSI on a clear task) and Sherif's autokinetic study (ISI on an ambiguous task).
AO3 (1)	Point: research support for NSI. Evidence: in Asch's study most conformers said privately they knew the answer was wrong but went along to avoid disapproval, and conformity dropped sharply when answers were written privately. Explain: because removing the fear of social judgement removed the conformity, the desire for acceptance is shown to be a genuine cause. Link: this gives the normative explanation strong internal validity rather than mere description.
AO3 (2)	Point: research support for ISI. Evidence: Lucas et al. found participants conformed more to wrong answers on harder maths problems, especially those who rated their own maths ability as low. Explain: when a task is ambiguous and we doubt ourselves we look to others for the 'right' answer, exactly as ISI predicts. Link: this confirms ISI operates in uncertain situations, supporting a two-explanation account.
AO3 (3)	Point: individual differences limit both explanations. Evidence: 'nAffiliators' (people with a strong need for affiliation) conform more (McGhee and Teevan), and not everyone is affected equally by ISI. Explain: if conformity varies with personality, a purely situational explanation is incomplete and the two processes are hard to separate in practice (the dual-process critique). Link: this means NSI and ISI may operate together rather than as distinct routes.
Conclusion	Both explanations are well supported and account for conformity in different conditions - NSI on clear tasks where rejection matters, ISI on ambiguous ones where accuracy matters. However, because the two often work simultaneously and individual differences shape who conforms, the strongest answer treats them as complementary processes rather than competing alternatives.

Discuss explanations for obedience. (16 marks)

AO1	Define obedience as following a direct order from an authority figure. Outline the explanations: the agentic state (acting as an instrument for authority and shifting responsibility upward) versus the autonomous state, with moral strain signalling the shift; legitimacy of authority (we obey those granted power by an agreed social hierarchy, which destructive authority can exploit). Add the dispositional Authoritarian Personality (Adorno) - rigid, hostile, obedient individuals shaped by harsh parenting, measured by the F-scale. Reference Milgram's 65 percent baseline.
------------	--

AO3 (1)	Point: support for situational explanations. Evidence: Milgram's variations isolated one factor at a time - obedience fell to 47.5 percent in a run-down office and to 20 percent without uniform/legitimacy, while Blass and Schmitt found observers blamed the experimenter. Explain: changing the situation reliably changed obedience and people attributed responsibility to legitimate authority, supporting agency and legitimacy. Link: this gives the situational account cause-and-effect evidence.
AO3 (2)	Point: the agentic state is a limited explanation. Evidence: it cannot explain why some participants disobeyed in identical conditions, nor the gradual, willing cruelty of the Nazi Reserve Police Battalion 101 (Mandel). Explain: if the same situation produces obedience in some and resistance in others, situational factors cannot be the whole story and disposition must matter. Link: this points toward an interactionist account.
AO3 (3)	Point: dispositional support but methodological flaws. Evidence: Elms and Milgram found highly obedient participants scored higher on the F-scale, but the scale suffers acquiescence bias and the data are correlational. Explain: the link is real but cannot show that authoritarian upbringing causes obedience, and the explanation cannot account for a whole society obeying at once. Link: disposition adds to, rather than replaces, situational factors.
Conclusion	Situational explanations have the strongest, most controlled evidence and explain large-scale obedience, so they are central; but because individuals differ in identical situations and the F-scale predicts who obeys, the most valid account is interactionist - the situation sets the conditions while disposition decides who fills the agentic role.

Discuss the role of minority influence in social change. (16 marks)

AO1	Outline minority influence - a consistent (diachronic and synchronic), committed (augmentation principle) and flexible minority creates cognitive conflict that makes the majority reconsider, leading to deeper processing and internalised conversion (the snowball effect), then social cryptomnesia. Describe the process of social change: drawing attention, consistency, deeper processing, the augmentation principle, the snowball effect and cryptomnesia. Use Moscovici's blue-green slide study (consistency raised agreement to 8.4 percent) and examples such as the suffragettes.
AO3 (1)	Point: experimental support for consistency. Evidence: Moscovici found a consistent minority influenced 8.4 percent of trials versus almost none when inconsistent, and Wood et al.'s meta-analysis confirmed consistent minorities are most influential. Explain: because consistency was the variable that produced influence, it is shown to be the key mechanism of minority influence. Link: this gives the explanation of social change a solid causal base.
AO3 (2)	Point: evidence that conversion involves deeper processing. Evidence: Martin et al. found a view shared by a minority was more resistant to a later conflicting message than one shared by a majority. Explain: this suggests minority positions are processed more deeply and lastingly, exactly the internalisation the theory predicts. Link: it validates conversion as the route to durable social change.
AO3 (3)	Point: social change via minorities is limited and indirect. Evidence: Nemeth argues change is usually slow, and being seen as 'deviant' off-putting; Mackie disputes that minorities cause deeper processing at all. Explain: if majorities can prompt deeper thought too and minority influence is fragile and gradual, its role in change may be overstated. Link: minority influence is necessary but not sufficient for change.
Conclusion	Minority influence is well evidenced through consistency and deeper processing and clearly explains historical change. However, because change is slow, indirect and depends on the minority avoiding a deviant image, the fullest account combines minority influence with conformity processes (normative messages) and the role of legitimate authority.

Discuss the working memory model. (16 marks)

AO1	Describe the working memory model (Baddeley and Hitch 1974) as an active explanation of STM. The central executive (limited capacity, modality-free) directs attention and allocates tasks. The phonological loop processes auditory information (phonological store and articulatory process). The visuo-spatial sketchpad handles visual and spatial data (visual cache and inner scribe). The episodic buffer (added 2000) integrates information from the components and links to LTM. Each slave system has limited capacity.
AO3 (1)	Point: support from dual-task studies. Evidence: Baddeley found participants struggled to do two visual (or two verbal) tasks at once but managed a visual and a verbal task together. Explain: this shows separate components handle different information, because only same-component tasks compete for resources. Link: it directly supports the model's central claim that STM is not unitary.
AO3 (2)	Point: support from clinical case studies. Evidence: patient KF had a badly impaired phonological loop (poor auditory recall) but intact visual STM after brain damage. Explain: a selective deficit in one component while another is intact is strong evidence for physically separate stores. Link: this gives the model biological credibility the multi-store model lacks, though brain-damage data may be confounded by trauma.
AO3 (3)	Point: the central executive is poorly specified. Evidence: critics (e.g. Eslinger and Damasio) argue 'attention' is too vague to be a single component and may itself have subparts. Explain: if the most important component cannot be precisely defined or measured, the model is incomplete and partly unfalsifiable. Link: this weakens its explanatory power despite the strength of the slave-system evidence.
Conclusion	The working memory model is a major advance on the multi-store STM, with strong dual-task and case-study support showing STM is an active, multi-part system. However, because the central executive remains vague and the model only explains STM, it is best seen as a detailed account of short-term processing rather than a complete model of memory.

Discuss research into factors affecting the accuracy of eyewitness testimony. (16 marks)

AO1	Define eyewitness testimony and outline the factors. Misleading information: leading questions (Loftus and Palmer - 'smashed' gave higher speed estimates and more false reports of glass, via response bias and substitution) and post-event discussion (Gabbert - memory conformity after co-witnesses talk). Anxiety: the weapon-focus effect reduces accuracy (Johnson and Scott, 33 percent vs 49 percent), while real-event studies (Yuille and Cutshall) show anxiety can aid recall, resolved by the Yerkes-Dodson inverted-U.
AO3 (1)	Point: strong controlled evidence with real-world value. Evidence: Loftus and Palmer isolated the question wording in a lab and the findings drove reforms such as the cognitive interview. Explain: because one variable was manipulated, a causal effect of leading information on recall is established, and it has practical use in justice. Link: this makes the misleading-information research both valid and useful.
AO3 (2)	Point: low ecological validity of lab anxiety studies. Evidence: watching a staged clip lacks the shock of a real crime, and Yuille and Cutshall's real witnesses recalled events accurately months later. Explain: artificial studies may overstate unreliability because they cannot recreate genuine emotional arousal. Link: this means lab conclusions about anxiety may not transfer to real witnesses.
AO3 (3)	Point: individual and methodological complications. Evidence: Pickel argues weapon focus reflects surprise/unusualness rather than anxiety, and anxiety is hard to measure as a single variable. Explain: if the cause of reduced accuracy is unusualness, not anxiety, and arousal is multidimensional, the inverted-U is difficult to test. Link: accuracy must be judged case by case rather than by one rule.
Conclusion	Misleading information clearly reduces accuracy with strong causal evidence, while anxiety has mixed effects depending on its level and the realism of the setting. The most balanced answer is that EWT is conditionally reliable - vulnerable to leading questions and post-event discussion but often accurate for central detail - and is most safely used with corroborating evidence and the cognitive interview.

Discuss Bowlby's monotropic theory of attachment. (16 marks)

AO1 Outline Bowlby's evolutionary theory - attachment is innate and adaptive (aids survival). **Monotropy:** one special primary attachment, governed by the law of continuity and accumulated separation. **Social releasers:** innate cues (smiling, cooing) that elicit caregiving. **Critical period:** roughly 6 months to 2.5 years to form an attachment. **Internal working model:** the first relationship forms a template for future relationships and parenting (the continuity hypothesis). Reference Bailey et al. on the transmission of attachment across generations.

AO3 (1) **Point:** support for the internal working model. **Evidence:** Bailey et al. found mothers with poor attachments to their own parents tended to have poorly attached infants, and the Minnesota study found early attachment predicted later social competence. **Explain:** intergenerational continuity is exactly what the IWM predicts, supporting the idea of an attachment template. **Link:** this gives a key part of the theory testable, supporting evidence.

AO3 (2) **Point:** support for social releasers and innate attachment. **Evidence:** Brazelton found that when caregivers ignored babies' social releasers the babies became distressed, and animal work (Lorenz, Harlow) shows innate attachment systems with critical periods. **Explain:** the importance of innate cues and timing supports Bowlby's evolutionary account. **Link:** however, generalising animal findings to complex human attachment is a limitation.

AO3 (3) **Point:** monotropy is challenged and socially sensitive. **Evidence:** Schaffer and Emerson found many infants form multiple attachments of similar importance, and feminists (Burman) argue monotropy places undue blame on mothers and discourages them working. **Explain:** if a single special attachment is not always primary and the claim has harmful social consequences, that part of the theory is weakened. **Link:** the law of continuity may matter more than monotropy specifically.

Conclusion Bowlby's theory is well supported for innate attachment, social releasers and the internal working model, making it a foundational account. However, because the strict claim of monotropy is challenged by multiple-attachment evidence and is socially sensitive, the strongest answer accepts the evolutionary framework while treating monotropy as the most influential rather than the only important attachment.

Outline and evaluate the learning theory of attachment and Bowlby's explanation. (16 marks)

AO1 Outline **learning theory** ('cupboard love') - attachment is learned through classical conditioning (food UCS produces pleasure; the caregiver becomes a conditioned stimulus) and operant conditioning (feeding negatively reinforces crying; the caregiver becomes a secondary reinforcer). Contrast with **Bowlby's theory** - attachment is innate and adaptive, with monotropy, social releasers, a critical period and an internal working model, where the bond forms with the most sensitive caregiver rather than the one who feeds.

AO3 (1) **Point:** learning theory is contradicted by animal research. **Evidence:** Harlow's monkeys clung to the cloth (comfort) mother rather than the wire one that fed them, and Lorenz's goslings imprinted on the first moving object, not a food source. **Explain:** if attachment forms to a non-feeding figure, food cannot be the basis of attachment, undermining the cupboard-love account. **Link:** this strongly favours Bowlby's emphasis on comfort and innate systems.

AO3 (2) **Point:** human evidence also undermines learning theory. **Evidence:** Schaffer and Emerson found many Glasgow infants attached to the most responsive caregiver, not the one who fed them most. **Explain:** sensitive responsiveness, not feeding, predicts attachment, exactly as Bowlby argued. **Link:** learning theory based on food is therefore an oversimplification, though conditioning may still play a minor role via attention.

AO3 (3) **Point:** Bowlby's theory is supported but reductionism is a risk on both sides. **Evidence:** Bailey et al. support the internal working model, but learning theory's stimulus-response account ignores the infant's active role and emotion. **Explain:** Bowlby offers a richer, evolutionary explanation, yet both theories simplify a complex two-way process (e.g. interactional synchrony). **Link:** a more complete view integrates innate systems with the reinforcing value of responsive interaction.

Conclusion	Learning theory is largely discredited as a full account because both animal and human studies show attachment forms to comfort and responsiveness, not food. Bowlby's evolutionary theory is far better supported, so the strongest answer favours Bowlby while acknowledging that conditioning may contribute and that attachment is a reciprocal process neither theory fully captures.
-------------------	--

Discuss the behavioural approach to explaining and treating phobias. (16 marks)

AO1	Outline the two-process model (Mowrer) - phobias are acquired by classical conditioning (a neutral stimulus paired with fear becomes a conditioned stimulus, as in Little Albert) and maintained by operant conditioning (avoidance is negatively reinforced because it reduces anxiety). Outline the behavioural treatments : systematic desensitisation (counterconditioning and reciprocal inhibition using a hierarchy and relaxation) and flooding (prolonged exposure until anxiety extinguishes).
AO3 (1)	Point: the explanation has real-world application. Evidence: the two-process model directly explains why exposure therapies work - SD breaks the learned association and flooding prevents reinforcing avoidance; Gilroy et al. found SD effective for spider phobia at 33 months. Explain: the success of therapies built on the model gives it indirect support and clinical value. Link: this is a major strength for explaining and treating phobias.
AO3 (2)	Point: the explanation ignores cognition and evolution. Evidence: many people cannot recall a conditioning event, and biological preparedness (Seligman) explains why fears of snakes are commoner than fears of cars. Explain: if phobias arise without conditioning and follow evolutionary patterns, the behavioural account is incomplete and cognitive factors (irrational beliefs) are overlooked. Link: this limits the two-process model as a full explanation.
AO3 (3)	Point: the treatments have limitations. Evidence: flooding is traumatic with high dropout (ethical concerns), and exposure therapies work less well for phobias with a strong cognitive component such as social phobia. Explain: because the treatments tackle the behaviour, not the underlying thoughts, they may not suit every phobia. Link: this suggests combining behavioural therapy with cognitive techniques.
Conclusion	The behavioural approach explains how phobias are acquired and maintained and underpins effective, evidence-based treatments, so it is a strong account. However, because preparedness and cognition fill gaps it cannot, the best answer treats conditioning as the core mechanism while accepting that cognitive and biological factors are needed for a complete explanation.

Discuss the cognitive approach to explaining and treating depression. (16 marks)

AO1	Outline Beck's cognitive theory - faulty information processing, negative self-schemas, and the negative triad (negative views of the self, world and future). Outline Ellis's ABC model - an Activating event triggers irrational Beliefs (mustabatory thinking) that cause emotional Consequences. Outline the treatment : CBT, including Beck's cognitive therapy ('patient as scientist' testing the triad plus behavioural activation) and Ellis's REBT (extending ABC to ABCDE - Disputing irrational beliefs to reach Effective new beliefs).
AO3 (1)	Point: research support for the role of cognition. Evidence: Grazioli and Terry found cognitively vulnerable mothers were more likely to develop post-natal depression, and negative thinking predicts depression onset. Explain: because faulty cognition precedes depression, it supports the cognitive explanation rather than being only a symptom. Link: this gives the approach a credible causal basis.
AO3 (2)	Point: strong practical application through CBT. Evidence: March et al. found CBT as effective as antidepressants and most effective when combined with them. Explain: a successful therapy derived directly from the theory supports the cognitive explanation and shows real-world value. Link: this is a key strength, though success may depend on the therapeutic relationship as much as challenging thoughts.

AO3 (3)	Point: the approach may be limited and could blame the patient. Evidence: it struggles to explain anger and biological aspects of depression, and CBT may suit motivated, articulate clients better than severe cases. Explain: overemphasising irrational thinking risks ignoring real-life circumstances (poverty, abuse) and implying the depression is the patient's fault. Link: this means biological and situational factors must also be considered.
Conclusion	The cognitive approach is well supported and underpins CBT, the leading psychological treatment for depression, so it is highly valuable. However, because it cannot easily explain biological factors or anger and risks blaming the individual, the most valid view combines cognitive explanations with biological and situational factors, with CBT often used alongside medication.

Discuss the behaviourist approach in psychology. (16 marks)

AO1	Outline behaviourism - it studies only observable behaviour, assumes we are born a blank slate and learning is the same across species (so animal research is valid). Classical conditioning (Pavlov's dogs) - learning by association, where a neutral stimulus paired with an unconditioned stimulus produces a conditioned response. Operant conditioning (Skinner's box) - learning by consequences, with positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement and punishment shaping behaviour. Reference the emphasis on scientific, controlled lab methods.
AO3 (1)	Point: a strength is the scientific, controlled methodology. Evidence: Pavlov and Skinner used highly controlled lab experiments isolating cause and effect. Explain: measuring observable behaviour objectively gave psychology scientific credibility and replicable findings. Link: this makes behaviourism a rigorous, empirical approach.
AO3 (2)	Point: real-world application is a further strength. Evidence: conditioning principles underpin token economies in institutions and behavioural therapies for phobias (systematic desensitisation). Explain: the approach has produced effective, practical treatments, demonstrating useful explanatory power. Link: this gives behaviourism clear value beyond the laboratory.
AO3 (3)	Point: it is environmentally deterministic and reductionist. Evidence: it ignores free will and mental processes, and much research used animals (Skinner's rats) whose behaviour may not generalise to humans. Explain: reducing behaviour to stimulus-response conditioning oversimplifies complex human cognition and removes personal responsibility. Link: the social learning and cognitive approaches offer a more complete account by reintroducing mediational processes.
Conclusion	Behaviourism gave psychology scientific rigour and practical therapies, so its contribution is substantial. However, because it ignores cognition and free will and over-relies on animal studies, it offers only a partial explanation, and later approaches that include mental processes provide a fuller account of human behaviour.

Discuss ways of investigating the brain. (16 marks)

AO1	Outline the methods. fMRI measures changes in blood oxygenation and flow to show brain activity during tasks (good spatial resolution). EEG records general electrical activity via scalp electrodes (used for sleep and epilepsy; excellent temporal resolution). ERPs isolate the brain's specific response to a stimulus by averaging many EEG readings. Post-mortem examinations study the brain after death to link damage to behaviour (e.g. Broca's and HM's case). Note each varies in spatial and temporal resolution and invasiveness.
AO3 (1)	Point: fMRI is non-invasive with high spatial resolution. Evidence: unlike older scans it uses no radiation and produces detailed images of which regions are active during a task. Explain: this lets researchers localise function safely and objectively. Link: however, its poor temporal resolution (a 5-second lag) means it cannot show the precise timing of activity.
AO3 (2)	Point: EEG and ERPs have excellent temporal resolution. Evidence: they record activity in milliseconds, making them ideal for studying sleep stages and the timing of cognitive processing. Explain: this captures real-time changes fMRI misses. Link: but their poor spatial resolution and the difficulty of isolating a pure ERP signal limit precise localisation.

AO3 (3)

Point: post-mortems are valuable but limited. **Evidence:** they enabled early discoveries (Broca's area) and detailed study of brains like HM's that scans cannot match. **Explain:** yet damage may occur between study and death (a confound), causation cannot be established, and there are ethical issues over consent. **Link:** they best complement, rather than replace, scanning methods.

Conclusion

Each technique trades spatial against temporal resolution and invasiveness, so no single method is best. The strongest research uses them together - fMRI for location, EEG/ERPs for timing, and post-mortems for detailed structural insight - giving a fuller, more valid picture of brain function than any method alone.