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A-Level Psychology

Common Mistakes · Examiner Tips

Edexcel Psychology (9PS0) | Examiner Tips | 34 entries

The mistakes that cost marks across Edexcel Psychology - and exactly how to fix each one, straight from examiner reports.

Essays and AO3

Describing studies instead of evaluating them	A retold method and result earns AO1 credit at best, so an evaluation question capped on AO3 leaves most marks on the table. State a judgement word first - strength, weakness, limitation - then justify it. The study is evidence for your point, never the point itself.
Evaluation points that never land on the question	Generic lines such as the sample was small or it lacked ecological validity score nothing if they float free of the named theory or study. Tie every criticism back to the exact thing in the question and explain what the flaw does to the conclusion. Relevance is the gatekeeper for AO3 marks.
Listing evaluation rather than developing it	Three half-sentences of point with no elaboration read as a shopping list and stay in the lowest band. Build each point: state it, explain the mechanism, give the consequence, and where useful add a counter. Two fully developed points beat six stubs every time.
Forgetting the conclusion on extended-response items	Top-band descriptors reward a substantiated judgement, so an essay that simply stops mid-argument is held below the ceiling. Close with a reasoned verdict that weighs the evidence you have actually used. A conclusion is not a summary - it is your decision plus the reason for it.
Ignoring the command word in the question	Treating describe, explain, assess and evaluate as interchangeable wastes effort in the wrong objective. Assess and evaluate demand AO3 judgement; explain demands AO1 and AO2 reasoning. Underline the command word before you write and let it shape the whole answer.
Writing everything you know rather than what is asked	A data dump on the topic signals that the candidate has not read the precise focus, and unfocused material earns nothing. Answer the question that is printed, not the one you revised for. Plan two minutes so each paragraph clearly serves the actual demand.
Confusing reliability with validity	Using the two terms loosely is one of the most penalised errors in the reports. Reliability is consistency on repetition; validity is whether you are truly measuring what you claim. Name which one you mean, define it, then apply it to the study in front of you.
Treating ecological validity as a free criticism	Stamping low ecological validity on every lab study without justification reads as a learned phrase, not analysis. Explain why this particular task fails to reflect real behaviour and what that means for generalising the findings. Unexplained jargon is invisible to the mark scheme.
Vague references to other research	Phrases like studies have shown or research supports this give no evidence the examiner can credit. Name the researcher or study and state what it actually found. Precision is what separates a supported claim from an assertion.
Running out of time on the long essay	Spending the budget on early short items leaves the highest-tariff question rushed and capped well below its potential. Allocate roughly one mark per available minute and guard the final essay fiercely. A planned, complete essay always outscores a brilliant unfinished one.

Research methods and maths

Muddling independent and dependent variables	Swapping the two collapses the logic of the whole design and loses easy method marks. The independent variable is what the researcher manipulates; the dependent variable is what is measured as a result. Write both as a single clear sentence before you analyse the study.
Writing hypotheses that are not operationalised	A prediction such as music affects memory cannot be tested because neither variable is measurable as stated. Operationalise both - define exactly how each is manipulated and measured, with units. An examinable hypothesis names what will actually be recorded.
Confusing directional and non-directional hypotheses	A one-tailed prediction states the direction of the effect; a two-tailed one only states that a difference or relationship exists. Picking the wrong type loses marks and, in inferential testing, changes the critical value you compare against. Justify your choice from the existing evidence.
Choosing the wrong inferential test	Test selection follows the design, the level of measurement and whether you seek a difference or a correlation. Skipping that reasoning leads to the wrong statistic and an unjustifiable conclusion. Walk the decision tree in writing so the examiner sees the logic, not just the name.
Misreading significance against the critical value	Whether the calculated value must be greater than or less than the critical value depends on the specific test, and reversing it inverts your conclusion. Check the rule for that statistic every time before you decide. State the comparison explicitly so a slip is visible and recoverable.
Treating $p < 0.05$ as proof	Significance at the 0.05 level means the result is unlikely to be chance, not that the hypothesis is certain or the effect large. Reject the null hypothesis - do not claim you have proved anything. Marks are lost for overstating what a probability actually licenses.
Confusing the three measures of central tendency	The mean, median and mode are not interchangeable and each suits different data. The median resists outliers, the mode handles categories, and the mean needs roughly symmetric interval data. Choose deliberately and justify the choice from the data type and distribution.
Reading correlation as causation	A strong correlation coefficient near +1 or −1 shows association, not that one variable causes the other. A third variable or reverse causation may explain the link entirely. Only a controlled experiment licenses a causal claim, so phrase correlational conclusions with care.
Confusing experimental designs	Independent groups, repeated measures and matched pairs each carry different strengths and confounds, and naming the wrong one breaks the evaluation. Identify the design, then discuss order effects or participant variables as appropriate to it. The design dictates which problems are even relevant.
Weak or generic ethics answers	Naming deception or consent without saying how it would be managed leaves the response superficial. Apply the issue to this study and give a concrete safeguard, such as informed consent procedures or a debrief. Examiners reward applied ethics, not a memorised list of principles.

Studies and application

Muddling the classic and contemporary studies	Each topic pairs a classic with a contemporary study, and blending their methods or findings produces a confused, uncreditable answer. Learn the pair as two distinct studies with their own aims, samples and results. Keep a labelled grid so you never cross the wires under pressure.
Vague aims, samples and procedures	Writing that researchers studied aggression in some children is too loose to gain method credit. Reproduce the specifics - who, how many, what task, what measure. The detail of the procedure is exactly what the AO1 marks are awarded for.

Generic application that ignores the scenario	On a source or scenario item, a textbook answer that never quotes the stem cannot reach the application marks. Lift specific details from the scenario and explain them with the named theory. Application means using the case in front of you, not reciting theory beside it.
Naming a theory without explaining the mechanism	Saying behaviour is due to classical conditioning is a label, not an explanation. Spell out the process - the pairing, the association formed, the response produced - for this specific behaviour. The marks live in the how, not the name of the approach.
Forcing one approach onto everything	Some scenarios are designed to be read through biological, cognitive or learning lenses, and clinging to a favourite ignores the better fit. Match the explanation to the cues in the stem. Flexibility across approaches is a skill the synoptic papers deliberately test.
Ignoring the key question in clinical and applied topics	Candidates revise theory and overlook the contemporary key question linked to each application area. These items reward psychological concepts applied to a real societal issue. Prepare each key question explicitly and rehearse linking evidence to the debate it raises.
Confusing diagnostic systems in Clinical	Mixing up the DSM and the ICD, or misstating how a condition is classified, undermines the whole Clinical answer. Know which system says what and the reliability and validity issues each faces. Precise classification detail is a frequent source of dropped marks here.
Misremembering studies in the optional applications	In Criminological, Child or Health Psychology, candidates often half-recall the supporting studies and blur their findings together. Pin down two or three solid studies per topic with accurate results. A few studies known precisely beat many known vaguely.

Exam strategy

Misjudging answer length from the mark tariff	Writing a paragraph for two marks or two lines for twelve wastes time or caps the score. Let the tariff set the depth: a short point per mark on low items, structured development on high ones. The number in brackets is a planning instruction, not decoration.
Leaving questions blank	An empty space guarantees zero, whereas a sensible attempt can pick up method or application marks even when memory fails. Always write something grounded in psychological reasoning. Partial credit is real and recoverable across this specification.
Skipping the mark-allocation plan on long answers	Diving straight into an extended response usually produces an unbalanced answer that over-runs one strand. Spend two minutes mapping points to assessment objectives before writing. A brief plan is the cheapest route into the top bands.
Ignoring synoptic links on Paper 3	The synoptic paper rewards connecting methods, issues and content across the whole course, yet many answers stay inside one topic. Bring in relevant studies and debates from elsewhere where the question invites it. Breadth of linkage is precisely what this paper assesses.
Illegible or disorganised handwriting	Examiners can only credit what they can read, and a cramped, unstructured page hides good points. Write legibly, leave space, and signal each new point clearly. Presentation does not score directly, but it protects every mark you have earned.
Misreading the question under time pressure	Glancing at the topic and answering the question you expected rather than the one printed is a recurring, costly slip. Read every word, underline the focus and the command, then begin. Ten seconds of careful reading saves whole paragraphs of wasted writing.