

A-Level Psychology

Essay Plans · 16-Mark Plans

Edexcel Psychology (9PS0)

16-Mark Plans

45 entries

Ready-to-use skeleton plans for the most likely 16-mark essays - AO1 outline, three developed AO3 chains, and a justified judgement.

Evaluate the extent to which situational factors can explain obedience to authority.

AO1	Define obedience as following a direct order from a perceived authority figure. Outline situational factors from agency theory - the agentic state (acting as an instrument of authority and passing responsibility upward), the autonomous state, and the moral strain that signals the shift. Add proximity, location and uniform as situational variables, supported by Milgram's baseline 65 percent to 450 volts and the drop when the experimenter left the room.
AO3 (1)	Strength - research support and control. Milgram's standardised procedure varied one situational factor at a time, so the fall in obedience when proximity increased can be attributed to the situation rather than the person; this internal validity means situational explanations rest on cause-and-effect evidence, not just description.
AO3 (2)	Counter - dispositional factors. The F-scale work on the Authoritarian Personality shows some people obey more readily because of rigid, hostile dispositions, and not every participant obeyed in identical situations; this implies the situation interacts with personality, so a purely situational account is incomplete.
AO3 (3)	Issue - validity of the evidence. Critics argue many participants saw through the set-up, so demand characteristics rather than genuine agency may explain the results; if the studies lack internal validity, the situational explanation they support is weakened and may not transfer to real atrocities.
Judgement	Situational factors clearly shape obedience and are backed by controlled, replicable evidence, so they explain a large part of it; however, because dispositional differences and individual interpretation remain, the strongest answer is interactionist - the situation sets the conditions, but personality decides who fills them.

Discuss the role of social identity in explaining prejudice and discrimination.

AO1	Outline Social Identity Theory - categorisation into in-groups and out-groups, identification with the in-group, and social comparison that favours the in-group to protect self-esteem. Link to prejudice (hostile attitude) and discrimination (the behaviour). Use Tajfel's minimal group studies, where mere categorisation led to in-group favouritism in point allocation.
AO3 (1)	Strength - experimental support. The minimal group paradigm shows favouritism appears even with no competition, history or contact between groups; because categorisation alone produced bias, social identity is shown to be a genuine cause of discrimination rather than a by-product of conflict.
AO3 (2)	Counter - realistic conflict theory. Sherif's Robbers Cave field study found prejudice intensified during competition for scarce prizes and fell only with shared superordinate goals; this suggests competition, not just identity, drives discrimination, so social identity may be necessary but not sufficient.
AO3 (3)	Issue - reductionism and individual differences. Reducing prejudice to a self-esteem mechanism overlooks why some high-identifiers show no hostility and others do; without explaining these differences, the theory cannot fully predict who discriminates, limiting its application to interventions.

Judgement	Social identity offers a well-evidenced account that explains prejudice even without competition, so it is a strong base explanation; but because conflict over resources and personal factors add explanatory power, a complete answer combines identity processes with the situational context they operate in.
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Evaluate the multi-store model of memory as an explanation of human memory.

AO1	Describe the multi-store model - sensory register, short-term store and long-term store as separate unitary stores linked by attention and rehearsal. Note the contrasting capacity, duration and coding of each store: STM roughly seven items for under 30 seconds coded acoustically, LTM potentially unlimited and lasting a lifetime coded semantically.
AO3 (1)	Strength - supporting evidence for separate stores. Studies of serial position show strong primacy and recency effects, and brain-damage cases with intact STM but impaired LTM (or the reverse) point to distinct systems; this double dissociation supports the model's central claim that the stores are separate.
AO3 (2)	Counter - the stores are not unitary. The working memory model shows STM has separable components (a phonological loop and visuo-spatial sketchpad), because people can do a verbal and a visual task at once but not two of the same type; the multi-store model's single STM is therefore an oversimplification.
AO3 (3)	Issue - rehearsal is overstated. Evidence shows meaningful, deeply processed material transfers to LTM better than material that is merely rehearsed, so the model's reliance on maintenance rehearsal as the route to LTM does not fit the data, weakening its account of how memories are stored.
Judgement	The model is valuable for establishing that memory is not one system and is backed by dissociation evidence, so it remains a useful framework; however, because STM is multi-part and rehearsal is not the only route to LTM, later models describe the architecture more accurately and the multi-store model is best seen as a foundation rather than a full explanation.

Assess the reliability of eyewitness testimony as evidence in the legal system.

AO1	Define eyewitness testimony and outline factors affecting its accuracy. Cover misleading information - leading questions and post-event discussion - and anxiety. Reference Loftus and Palmer, where the verb in a leading question changed estimated speed and later increased false reports of broken glass, showing memory can be reconstructed after the event.
AO3 (1)	Strength - controlled evidence and real-world value. Laboratory studies isolate the leading-question variable, demonstrating a clear causal effect on recall; this has driven practical reform such as the cognitive interview, so the research is both internally valid and useful in improving justice.
AO3 (2)	Counter - low ecological validity. Watching a clip of a staged crash carries little of the shock of a real event, and meta-analytic field data on genuine witnesses show more resilient memory for central details; this suggests lab studies may overstate unreliability under real conditions.
AO3 (3)	Issue - individual and emotional differences. The weapon-focus effect and the inverted-U relationship between anxiety and recall mean accuracy varies with the witness and the situation, so a single verdict on reliability is too blunt and the value of testimony must be judged case by case.
Judgement	Eyewitness testimony can be distorted by leading information and extreme anxiety, so courts are right to treat it cautiously; but because central details are often retained and anxiety has mixed effects, testimony is not worthless - it is conditionally reliable and most safely used alongside corroborating evidence.

Evaluate biological explanations of aggression.

AO1	Outline biological explanations of aggression - the limbic system (amygdala) and its role in responding to threat, the regulating effect of serotonin where low levels reduce inhibition, and hormonal influence from testosterone. Add the genetic angle, including the MAOA gene linked to low enzyme activity and impulsive aggression.
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AO3 (1)	Strength - biological evidence. Animal and human studies link reduced serotonin and amygdala activity to heightened aggression, and drug studies that raise serotonin lower aggressive responses; this experimental manipulation supports a causal role for neural and hormonal factors rather than mere correlation.
AO3 (2)	Counter - reductionism. Reducing aggression to neurotransmitters and genes ignores how learning and provocation shape behaviour; the same low-MAOA genotype is linked to aggression mainly in people who were maltreated as children, so the gene acts through the environment, not alone.
AO3 (3)	Issue - determinism and application. A strong biological account implies aggression is largely outside personal control, which is uncomfortable for the legal system; yet the same evidence has practical value, suggesting drug or hormonal interventions, so the explanation is useful even where it raises responsibility concerns.
Judgement	Biological factors have solid experimental support and real treatment potential, so they explain an important part of aggression; however, because gene-environment interaction and learned triggers are needed to predict who actually becomes aggressive, a biosocial explanation that combines biology with experience is the most complete.

Discuss the use of twin and adoption studies in investigating the influence of nature on behaviour.

AO1	Explain the logic - twin studies compare concordance rates in monozygotic (100 percent shared DNA) and dizygotic (about 50 percent) twins, while adoption studies compare children with biological and adoptive relatives to separate genes from environment. Higher MZ concordance or resemblance to biological parents is taken as evidence for a genetic influence.
AO3 (1)	Strength - a natural way to estimate heritability. Because MZ and DZ twins differ in shared genes, comparing concordance offers a practical estimate of genetic contribution that could not be obtained experimentally in humans; this gives the method scientific value for traits such as intelligence and disorder risk.
AO3 (2)	Counter - the equal environments assumption. MZ twins tend to be treated more alike and share more experiences than DZ twins, so higher MZ concordance may reflect shared nurture rather than shared DNA; this confound means heritability figures are inflated estimates rather than fixed values.
AO3 (3)	Issue - concordance is rarely 100 percent. If a trait were purely genetic, MZ concordance should be complete, yet it almost never is, which itself proves the environment contributes; this shows the method's own data undermine any strongly nativist conclusion drawn from it.
Judgement	Twin and adoption studies are a powerful and often the only feasible way to gauge genetic influence, so they are justified; but because shared environments confound the comparison and concordance is never total, their results show that nature and nurture interact and should be read as upper limits on heritability, not proof of genetic determinism.

Evaluate the learning approach as an explanation of how phobias are acquired and maintained.

AO1	Outline the two-process model - phobias are acquired through classical conditioning, where a neutral stimulus is paired with a fear response, and maintained through operant conditioning, where avoidance is negatively reinforced because it removes anxiety. Reference the Little Albert study, in which a child learned to fear a white rat paired with a loud noise.
AO3 (1)	Strength - successful application. The model directly explains why systematic desensitisation and flooding work, since they break the learned association and prevent reinforcing avoidance; the effectiveness of these therapies provides indirect support for the conditioning account and gives it real clinical value.
AO3 (2)	Counter - not all phobias follow a trauma. Many people with phobias cannot recall a conditioning event, and common fears such as snakes are far more frequent than fears of modern dangers like cars; biological preparedness explains this better, suggesting learning is not the whole story.

AO3 (3)	Issue - ignoring cognition. The learning model leaves out irrational beliefs and catastrophic thinking that sustain phobias, which is why cognitive therapies can succeed where exposure alone fails; this omission means the behavioural account is incomplete as an explanation of maintenance.
Judgement	The two-process model explains acquisition and maintenance clearly and underpins effective therapies, so it is a strong account; however, because preparedness and cognition fill gaps it cannot, the best explanation treats conditioning as the core mechanism within a wider diathesis-stress framework.

Evaluate the biological explanation of schizophrenia.

AO1	Outline biological explanations of schizophrenia - the dopamine hypothesis, where excess dopamine activity or oversensitive receptors links to positive symptoms such as hallucinations, and the genetic explanation supported by rising concordance with genetic closeness. Note the revised version distinguishing hyperdopaminergia and hypodopaminergia in different brain regions.
AO3 (1)	Strength - drug and genetic evidence. Antipsychotics that block dopamine reduce positive symptoms, while amphetamines that raise dopamine can induce them, supporting the hypothesis; combined with higher MZ than DZ concordance, this points to a real biological basis with treatment value.
AO3 (2)	Counter - direction of causality and confounds. Dopamine changes could be an effect of the disorder rather than its cause, and concordance is never 100 percent, so genes alone cannot be responsible; this shows correlational evidence cannot establish that biology is the sole driver.
AO3 (3)	Issue - ignoring psychological and social factors. Family dysfunction, expressed emotion and life stress predict onset and relapse, and ignoring them risks a reductionist account; the diathesis-stress model better fits the data by treating biology as a vulnerability that environment triggers.
Judgement	The biological explanation has strong drug and genetic support and has produced effective treatments, so it is central to understanding schizophrenia; but because causality is unclear and social stressors matter, the most valid explanation is diathesis-stress, where a biological predisposition is activated by environmental triggers.

Assess the effectiveness of one or more strategies for reducing or treating criminal behaviour.

AO1	Outline a treatment strategy such as a token economy, based on operant conditioning - desirable behaviours in an institution earn tokens (secondary reinforcers) exchangeable for privileges, shaping conduct over time. Optionally contrast with anger management, a cognitive-behavioural programme targeting the thoughts that trigger aggression.
AO3 (1)	Strength - measurable behaviour change. Token economies produce clear, recordable improvements in cooperation and reduced aggression within institutions, and the system is cheap and easy for staff to run; this practical effectiveness makes it a workable tool for managing offender behaviour.
AO3 (2)	Counter - poor generalisation. Behaviour shaped by tokens often fades once the reinforcers stop, because the change is externally driven rather than internalised; high reoffending after release suggests the strategy manages conduct inside but does not reform the offender outside.
AO3 (3)	Issue - it treats symptoms, not causes. The token economy ignores the cognitive distortions and social conditions behind offending, which is why approaches such as anger management or restorative justice that target thinking and relationships may achieve more durable change; this limits the strategy on its own.
Judgement	A token economy is effective for short-term behaviour management and is cheap to run, so it has a clear institutional role; however, because its effects rarely transfer to life after release, lasting reduction in offending requires combining it with cognitive and social strategies that address the underlying causes.