

A-Level Psychology

How to Answer Every Question - Exam Technique Guide

Edexcel Psychology (9PS0)

A-Level

9 question types

THE NILE METHOD - every question, every time

1. Read the COMMAND WORD first - it tells you the skill (state / explain / evaluate).
2. Check the MARKS - roughly one developed point (or mark-scheme line) per mark.
3. Match the ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES the marks reward (AO1 knowledge / AO2 application / AO3 evaluation).
4. PLAN before long answers - jot points, then write in clear PEEL / chain-of-reasoning paragraphs.
5. Use precise terminology, evidence and (where relevant) named studies or data.
6. For evaluation, write developed chains and a justified judgement - not a list.

Multiple choice / selection · ""Which of the following", "Identify", "Select", "State""

TESTS	AO1 knowledge (occasionally AO2 application) · 1 mark each
METHOD	1. Read the stem twice and underline the exact word being tested before you look at the options. 2. Predict the answer in your head, then hunt for the option that matches it. 3. Eliminate the clearly wrong distractors first to shrink the field, then choose between what is left. 4. Shade or write only ONE response - a second mark on the same item voids it.
STRUCTURE	No prose needed. If the format is a single boxed letter, give the letter only; if it asks you to "shade one box", shade exactly one.
MODEL	<i>For "Which sampling method gives every member of the target population an equal chance of selection?" the answer is random sampling - opportunity, volunteer and snowball all bias who is included.</i>
PITFALLS	› Shading or circling two boxes when unsure - the examiner marks it wrong even if one is correct. › Over-thinking a recall item and talking yourself out of the right answer.

Short application ("explain why") · ""Explain", "Suggest", "Using your knowledge of ..., explain""

TESTS	AO2 application of knowledge to a novel scenario · 2–4 marks
METHOD	1. Identify the concept, study or theory implied by the scenario stem. 2. State the idea briefly as your AO1 anchor. 3. Apply it directly to the named person or situation in the source - quote the scenario's own detail. 4. Match the number of developed points to the tariff: roughly one linked point per 2 marks.
STRUCTURE	Point (the concept) → link explicitly to the scenario detail ("In Amir's case ...") → consequence for that behaviour.
MODEL	<i>Because Amir's phobia eased only after gradual exposure to spiders, this shows systematic desensitisation: counter-conditioning replaces the fear response with relaxation, so each step up Amir's hierarchy weakens the learned association.</i>
PITFALLS	› Defining the term but never tying it to the scenario - this caps you at the AO1 floor. › Ignoring the names and specifics given, which the mark scheme requires for AO2 credit.

Describe / outline (AO1) · ""Describe", "Outline", "Give", "State", "Identify""

TESTS	AO1 knowledge and understanding · 2–6 marks
METHOD	1. Decide how many distinct, accurate points the tariff demands (about one point per mark for short items). 2. Use correct psychological terminology and, where relevant, name the study, theory or researcher. 3. Add depth not breadth on higher tariffs: develop each point with a 'what this means' clause. 4. Stay purely descriptive - withhold all evaluation; it earns nothing here.
STRUCTURE	Topic sentence naming the point → a developed sentence explaining or exemplifying it → repeat for each mark required.
MODEL	<i>Working memory has a central executive that directs attention and allocates two slave systems: the phonological loop, which rehearses speech-based information, and the visuo-spatial sketchpad, which handles visual and spatial data.</i>
PITFALLS	› Drifting into evaluation on a 'describe' question, which scores zero for the wasted lines. › Writing one over-long point when the tariff clearly wants several separate ones.

Research-methods question · ""Identify the design", "Write a directional hypothesis", "Explain one strength", "Operationalise""

TESTS	AO2/AO3 of method and design, set in a novel study · 2–6 marks
METHOD	1. Read the study description and pin down the IV, DV, design and sampling before answering. 2. For a hypothesis, choose directional vs non-directional from the wording, then operationalise both variables fully. 3. For strengths or weaknesses, tie the generic methodological point back to THIS study's procedure. 4. Quote the scenario's measurements ("the 10-item recall test") so the answer is anchored, not generic.
STRUCTURE	State the methodological feature → justify it with study detail → for evaluation, add the consequence for validity, reliability or ethics.
MODEL	<i>A directional (one-tailed) hypothesis is justified here because previous research consistently shows caffeine improves reaction time: "Participants who consume 200 mg of caffeine will have a faster mean reaction time (ms) than those given a placebo."</i>
PITFALLS	› Writing a hypothesis as a vague aim or question rather than a testable, operationalised prediction. › Giving a textbook strength of lab studies without linking it to the specific study in the source.

Maths / statistics question · ""Calculate", "Which test", "State whether significant", "Identify the level of measurement""

TESTS	AO2 mathematical and statistical skills · 2–5 marks
METHOD	1. For test choice, classify the data: difference or correlation, experimental design, and level of measurement (nominal/ordinal/interval). 2. Map those onto the named test (e.g. Mann–Whitney for unrelated ordinal difference; Wilcoxon for related; Spearman's rho for correlation; chi-square for nominal). 3. For calculations, show the formula and every working step - method marks survive an arithmetic slip. 4. For significance, compare the calculated value with the critical value the right way: check whether the test needs the observed value to be LESS than or GREATER than critical, and state p and the chosen tail.
STRUCTURE	Sentence 1 states the answer (test name or computed value to required decimals). Sentence 2 justifies it (the data features, or the comparison with the critical value at $p < 0.05$).
MODEL	<i>The data are ordinal and the design is independent groups, so the Mann–Whitney U test is appropriate; with $U = 12$ below the critical value of 23 ($n_1 = n_2 = 10$, $p < 0.05$, two-tailed), the result is significant and the null hypothesis is rejected.</i>
PITFALLS	› Choosing a test without justifying it from design and level of measurement - Edexcel awards the justification, not just the name. › Rounding to the wrong number of decimal places, or reversing the less-than/greater-than rule when reading the critical-values table.

Evaluate / assess (AO3) · ""Evaluate", "Assess", "To what extent", "Explain one strength and one weakness""

TESTS	AO3 analysis and evaluation, often with AO1 marks · 4–8 marks
METHOD	1. Select the strongest evaluation points rather than listing every one you know. 2. Build each as a chain of reasoning: point → evidence → explanation → 'this matters because ...'. 3. Use comparison and counter-argument ("however", "on the other hand") to show analysis, not just description. 4. Where the tariff allows, weigh the points to reach a brief supported judgement.
STRUCTURE	PEEL paragraph per point: Point → Evidence (named study/data) → Explain the implication → Link back to the question, alternating strengths and weaknesses.
MODEL	<i>One weakness of the multi-store model is its evidence base: Shallice and Warrington's patient KF had impaired short-term but intact long-term memory, which the single STM store cannot explain - this matters because it suggests STM is not unitary, undermining the model's account.</i>
PITFALLS	› Describing studies instead of using them as evidence for an evaluative point. › Stating a strength or weakness without explaining its consequence, which leaves the chain of reasoning incomplete.

8-mark extended response · ""Evaluate", "Discuss", "Assess""

TESTS	AO1 + AO3 (and AO2 where applied to a stem) · 8 marks, levels-based
METHOD	1. Plan two to three substantial evaluation points before writing. 2. Open with a tight AO1 outline of the theory, study or debate - enough to anchor the AO3, no more. 3. Develop each AO3 point as a full chain and balance strengths against weaknesses. 4. Close with a short, criteria-based judgement that answers the exact command.
STRUCTURE	Concise AO1 → chained AO3 point 1 (strength) → AO3 point 2 (limitation) → AO3 point 3 → reasoned one-to-two-sentence conclusion.
MODEL	<i>Bowlby's monotropic theory is supported by Lorenz's imprinting and Harlow's monkeys, showing attachment has a biological basis; however, the monotropy claim is challenged by evidence of multiple simultaneous attachments, so on balance the theory captures the drive to attach but overstates one special bond.</i>
PITFALLS	› Spending half the answer on AO1 description and leaving too little room for the AO3 the marks reward. › A bolt-on conclusion that merely repeats earlier points instead of weighing them.

12-mark extended response · ""Evaluate", "Discuss", "To what extent", "Assess""

TESTS	AO1 + AO3, frequently with AO2 to a novel source · 12 marks, levels-based
METHOD	1. Map the marks to the AOs in the question and plan three to four developed points. 2. If a source or scenario is given, apply your points to it explicitly to capture the AO2 strand. 3. Sustain chains of reasoning and use connectives that signal analysis and comparison. 4. Reach a substantiated judgement that follows from the argument, not a fresh claim.
STRUCTURE	AO1 outline → AO2 application to the source (if present) → AO3 chains ×3 alternating strength/limitation → evaluative conclusion that resolves the question.
MODEL	<i>Applying social learning theory to the source, the child copies the aggressive model because the behaviour was reinforced, echoing Bandura's Bobo doll findings; yet the lab setting lacks ecological validity, so while SLT explains the observed imitation it may exaggerate effects seen outside controlled conditions.</i>
PITFALLS	› Treating a source-based 12-marker as a generic essay and never referring to the stem, forfeiting AO2. › Generic, undeveloped evaluation that names limitations without explaining their impact on the argument.

16-mark extended essay · ""Evaluate", "Discuss", "Assess the extent to which""

TESTS	AO1 + AO3 (and AO2 where applied) at the top tariff · 16 marks, levels-based
METHOD	1. Plan a clear line of argument and four developed evaluation points before writing a word. 2. Set out accurate, selective AO1 - breadth and depth balanced, terminology precise. 3. Develop sustained chains of reasoning, embedding issues and debates (e.g. nature–nurture, free will–determinism, reductionism). 4. Synthesise throughout with counter-argument, then give a fully justified conclusion tied to the command word.
STRUCTURE	AO1 overview → AO3 chains ×4 alternating strength/limitation, each weaving in evidence and a debate → integrated conclusion that delivers a defensible judgement.
MODEL	<i>The biological approach explains OCD via genes and the COMT and SERT variants, supported by twin concordance; this is praised for objective, scientific method yet criticised as biologically reductionist, since it overlooks cognitive distortions - so the strongest account is arguably a diathesis–stress one combining both, which is the judgement the evidence best supports.</i>
PITFALLS	› Knowledge-dump introductions that crowd out the AO3 carrying most of the marks. › No coherent line of argument - disconnected points with a conclusion that does not follow from them. › Omitting issues and debates, which the top level descriptors expect at 16 marks.