

Medicine

Exam-Board Forensics · The Medic Method

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25 entries

The gap between an A and an A* is rarely more knowledge, it is knowing exactly what the mark scheme pays out. Top students stop writing everything they know and start writing the specific thing the examiner is told to reward, command word by command word and mark by mark. This is what it means to read an exam paper forensically.

What it is

The mark scheme is the rulebook

Every UK exam answer is judged against a published mark scheme, not against a marker's mood. Forensics means reverse-engineering that document so you write to the points and the levels it actually credits, rather than to the topic in general.

Two things decide the mark

A question is set by an Assessment Objective (what skill is being tested) and steered by a command word (what you must physically do). Read both before you write a single sentence.

Why it is a skill, not luck

This is deliberate practice in the sense of Ericsson: targeted reps against a clear standard, with feedback, on the exact thing that is failing. Decode the scheme once and the same patterns repeat across every paper.

Command words decoded

State / Name / Identify

Give the fact, nothing more. Usually 1 mark, no explanation wanted. Writing a paragraph here wastes time you need elsewhere and earns you nothing extra.

Describe

Say what happens or what something is like, in order and in detail, but without giving the reason. Describe a trend means quote the shape and the figures, not why it occurs.

Explain

Give the reason or mechanism: the why and how. The examiner is hunting for linked cause and effect, so a describe-style answer to an explain question loses the marks.

Compare

Make explicit linked statements about both things in the same sentence, using words like whereas or than. Two separate descriptions side by side is not a comparison and is often capped.

Evaluate / Justify / Discuss

Weigh points for and against, then commit to a supported judgement or conclusion. These are the extended, higher-tariff questions, and a fence-sitting answer with no conclusion stalls in the middle band.

Assessment Objectives

AO1 - knowledge and understanding

Recall and show you understand taught content: definitions, processes, techniques. The lowest-risk marks on the paper if you have revised properly.

AO2 - application

Apply what you know to an unfamiliar context, data set or calculation. Most maths and data-handling marks in science sit here, and you cannot revise the exact scenario, only the skill.

AO3 - analysis and evaluation

Analyse, interpret and evaluate: judge evidence, draw conclusions, improve a method. These marks are the hardest and where top grades are won or lost.

Why the split matters	In GCSE combined science the rough weighting is AO1 40 percent, AO2 40 percent, AO3 20 percent, so nearly half the paper is application and analysis, not recall. Exact splits vary by board and subject, but a pure memoriser caps out well below the top.
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Reading the mark scheme

Points-based marking	Short questions are a tick-list: one creditable point earns one mark. Count the tariff and make at least that many distinct, correct points, because a brilliant single point still scores one out of three.
Levels of response	Extended answers (the classic 6-markers) are placed in a level, typically Level 1 (1 to 2), Level 2 (3 to 4) and Level 3 (5 to 6), on overall quality. Reaching Level 3 needs a coherent, well-structured line of reasoning, not just more facts.
Indicative content is not a checklist	The scientific points listed under a levelled question are examples a strong answer might use, not a tick-list. You are rewarded for the quality and structure of the argument, so logical order and correct terminology lift your level.
Mark your own work honestly	Sit a past paper, then grade it against the real mark scheme and circle every mark you missed and why. This is formative assessment, the highest-leverage feedback loop in the Black and Wiliam (1998) research, Inside the Black Box.
Examiner reports are gold	Each series, boards publish an examiner report naming the exact errors candidates made and the phrasing that scored. Reading it tells you the traps before you walk into them.

Common mistakes

Answering the topic, not the command word	Seeing osmosis and writing everything about osmosis when the question said evaluate is the single most common way able students underscore. The command word, not the topic, defines the task.
Ignoring the mark tariff	A 4-mark question wants four distinct points; a 1-mark question wants one. Padding low-tariff answers and starving high-tariff ones leaves easy marks on the table.
No evaluation in a discuss	Listing only one side, or describing both and never judging, keeps an evaluate, justify or discuss answer stuck in the middle band. The mark scheme reserves the top band for a reasoned conclusion.
Vague language at AO3	Words like affects or changes when the scheme wants increases, decreases or because lose credit. The examiner can only award the precise term, so write it.

In a Nile lesson

Dissect the real paper	We work from genuine past papers, their mark schemes and the examiner reports side by side, so the standard the student is aiming at is the actual one, not a guess.
Map question type to response pattern	Every recurring question type is matched to a scoring pattern: a describe-data drill, an explain chain, a compare sentence frame, a four-stage plan for the 6-marker. The student stops improvising under pressure.
Write, mark, redraft live	The student writes a real answer, we grade it to the scheme in front of them, and they redraft on the spot to climb a level. Immediate, specific feedback is what assessment literacy is built from.
Bank the board differences	AQA, Edexcel/Pearson and OCR test the same science but phrase questions and weight skills differently. We drill the student's own board's house style so nothing on the day is a surprise.