

11 Further sources of guidance on examinations

The Graduate Teaching Assistant's Handbook

Class teachers will find guidance on preparing students for examinations in the GTA Handbook: www.lse.ac.uk/resources/graduateTeachingAssistantsHandbook/. See Section 3 of the Handbook, subsection: 'Helping students to prepare for their examination'.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities do not take different examination papers from other students. However they may be granted extra time, permitted to sit their examinations under medical supervision, allowed to use a computer, etc. Students who may qualify for special exam arrangements should be referred to the School's Disability Officer, Jean Jameson in Room A40 – email: j.m.jameson@lse.ac.uk ; ext 6034

Last minute problems (eg.: special arrangements required due to injury resulting from an accident close to the examination period) should be referred to Katie Porrer in the Student Services Centre - email k.porrer@lse.ac.uk ; ext 7139

Teaching and Learning Centre advice on assessment

This note has been prepared in the LSE Teaching and Learning Centre) by Dr Peter Levin (Educational Developer, Student Support) and Dr Liz Barnett (Director, TLC). If you would like to discuss any of the matters raised in this note, or if you wish, for example, to explore different assessments regimes for new courses, ways of revising existing assessments, advice on question wording, guidance on where and how to use different types of questioning or any other issues related to the design and implementation of assessment you are welcome to contact TLC for advice – contact Liz Barnett l.barnett@lse.ac.uk ext 6623 in the first instance.

Produced by the Teaching and Learning Centre May 2007

Equality and diversity are central to the aims and objectives of LSE. The School actively promotes the involvement of all students and staff in all areas of School life and seeks to ensure that they are free from discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, social background, disability, religious or political belief, age and sexual orientation. At LSE we recognise that the elimination of discrimination is integral to ensuring the best possible service to students, staff and visitors to the School.

This information can be made available in alternative formats, on request. Please contact TLC Administrator, email: tlc.ac.uk



Preparing examination papers and preparing students for examinations: guidance for tutors

The purposes of this note are:

- to provide staff who have responsibility for setting unseen examinations at LSE with an overview of the range of formats for unseen examinations that are currently in use across the School;
- to review examination-setting practice and promote good practice in the process of examination setting;
- to give guidance as to how to support students who are preparing for examinations.

The guidance is directed first and foremost to new staff setting their first LSE examination paper. However, it may prove interesting to established staff, with plenty of experience in examination setting, but who over the years have received no assistance in setting examinations, other than comments made by colleagues at meetings or received from external examiners. The guidance is based on the experience of Dr Peter Levin, student study adviser in the LSE Teaching and Learning Centre 1999-2007. Over this period, many students have consulted the Centre on issues related to examination papers, and voiced their anxieties about question wording and examination paper design/ presentation.

This note may be read in conjunction with two other School documents: 'Instructions for Examiners for Undergraduate and Taught Masters programmes', updated annually and available from the Academic Registrar's Division and the TLC guidance note 'Broadening Student Assessment', available on the TLC website or in hard copy.

1 Introduction

The vast majority of LSE undergraduate and postgraduate courses are examined in whole or in part by unseen, timed examinations. Examination grades form a crucial element of students' final degree awards, and as such, it is beholden on all of us to ensure that the examination setting process is rigorous, and that examination questions are clear, and can be understood by all students, irrespective of their English language capabilities. Many students find examinations extremely stressful. This can be exacerbated by examination papers that have 'surprises' in them, such as unexpected changes in format, over-complicated questioning styles, unfamiliar information on how marks will be allocated across questions and grammatical or numerical errors. This guidance note will describe the main elements of examination papers, and propose good practice approaches.

Across the School, examinations take a wide variety of formats. To some extent these reflect the particular nature of the subject and courses, but they also appear to reflect different approaches on



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the part of examiners to testing the knowledge, understanding and skills of candidates. From a review of examination papers over a number of years, one observation that arises is that once the format for the examination of a particular course is established, it may remain unchanged for several years. While there may be good reasons for such persistence, if these reasons can be made explicit any suspicions that persistence is the result of inertia can be readily allayed. Moreover, periodical review of examination formats is not only good practice: it will put departments in a strong position to withstand the scrutiny of external examiners and bodies charged with overseeing quality assurance across the higher education sector.

2 Examination Formats

Examination papers vary in terms of the following elements:

- Number of sections – or ‘parts’ – into which the paper is divided (see below: papers either have a single section or multiple sections).
- Total number of questions in each section: this may include multiple questions in a single question (eg: where the device of ‘either/or’ is used)
- Number of questions required to be answered for maximum marks to be awarded.
- Rules limiting candidates’ choice of questions to answer from the various sections.
- Rules specifying the maximum number of marks or percentage points that an answer to a question can be awarded.
- Rubric: Instructions and information given to candidates regarding rules as to choice of questions, awarding of marks or percentage points per question, whether candidates may bring books into the examination, the extent to which candidates can or cannot ‘reuse’ work eg: from assessment essays, class presentations or other examination questions etc.
- Type of question, viz. a direct question (ending with a question mark); a statement followed by ‘Discuss’ (or similar instruction); true/false; a description or definition followed by a direct or ‘discuss’ question; a problem to be solved or case to be analysed.

Broadly speaking, papers fall into two categories: ‘single-section’ and ‘multiple-section’.

3 Single-section papers

The single-section paper is found chiefly in subjects where essay-writing is the norm: Anthropology, Geography, Industrial Relations, International History, International Relations, Management, Social Policy and Social Psychology. Undergraduates may be required to answer three or four questions in a three-hour paper. For taught postgraduates the norm for a three-hour paper is three questions. Some departments have recently experimented with the effect of reducing the total number of questions a student is expected to answer in a three-hour examination. These departments have found that the quality of answers is significantly improved when the number of questions is reduced, and there is less obvious distinction between papers written by students studying in English as a first and those studying in English as a second language.

In a recent review of examination papers, three-hour papers that did not contain any ‘either/or’ questions ranged in length from seven questions to twenty four. In single-section papers, the usual technique employed to prevent candidates from answering questions that are close together in terms of subject matter, or that call for a similar style or approach in answering them, is to bracket them together as ‘either/or’ questions. Two or three – very rarely more – questions may be bracketed together in this way.

A useful approach for a revision session is to take some questions from recent past papers and work through them to develop outline model answers. Students find this particularly useful for questions that require them to ‘Discuss’, ‘Critically evaluate’, etc. Another common area of concern that often arises in the central study support sessions on examinations is the extent to which students are expected to reference their arguments in the closed examination setting, the range of references they should be familiar with, and how accurate they need to be with citing reference sources. Such sessions provide an opportunity for teachers/examiners to give candidates an indication of the qualities in answers that examiners are looking for and the criteria that will be employed in marking. Accordingly **examiners are encouraged to use revision sessions to work through past questions, develop outline model answers, and indicate the qualities in answers that examiners are looking for and the criteria they will apply.**

Revision sessions also have another benefit, in that they constitute a ‘level playing field’ for students: everyone who attends gets the same information. It is not uncommon for students to turn up in office hours and ask teachers probing questions in an attempt to discover what will be on the examination paper. **A further ground for holding revision sessions is that it allows examiners to fend off such questions with ‘Come to the revision session.’**

As examiners will of course be aware, it is most important that in the course of revision sessions they avoid giving hints as to the questions that will come up.

Several departments now also include mock examinations. In some cases, these will be run in classes/seminars, in others, students are advised to take the ‘mock’ in their own time, but with the offer of having their work marked and feedback provided. In the former situation, the person organising the ‘mock’ should be aware of any ‘special examination arrangements’ that students in the class will have put in place (see below) – as if this is not taken into account, the impact of the mock may be to increase student anxiety, rather than to reassure and give a ‘safe’ place to practise.

The Teaching and Learning Centre

The Teaching and Learning Centre provides one-to-one support sessions for students who are preparing for examinations. These sessions do not deal with subject matter: their emphasis is on the processes of preparation and question-answering technique. The Centre also provides presentations and workshops on planning, preparing for and sitting examinations, and on using past examination papers. Within the Centre, the Student Counselling Service now also offers workshops and one-to-one counselling on exam stress reduction and coping and relaxation strategies.

Examiners are encouraged to consult the Teaching and Learning Centre for advice on supporting students in the run-up to examinations. TLC staff will work with colleagues in departments to deliver department-specific sessions. Contact: Liz Barnett (l.barnett@lse.ac.uk in the first instance).

The Language Centre

The Language Centre offers in-sessional English language classes, which include sessions in the Lent and Summer terms on writing exam answers. See the Language Centre website for details: **www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/language/eaphowtoregister.htm**

9 New and changed courses: sample papers

All examiners should be aware of the following extract from the two Codes of Good Practice on Undergraduate and Taught Master's programmes:

'Students must be given clear advance warning of any new or approved changes to examination format. When the content of a course changes to the extent that previous examination papers may not be a reliable guide to future papers, lecturers should warn students and should produce sample questions for the new parts of the course. When the course is new and, there are no previous papers, a full sample paper should be produced.' (para 4.2)

The 'Instructions to Examiners' booklet (section 9) adds to this with the note that 'such changes should also be announced at lectures, classes and in handouts'.

10 Support for students

The School provides support for students who are preparing for exams in a number of forms. Within departments, several programme handbooks now include departmental advice and guidance on examinations. TLC can advise on how to strengthen this guidance. Many courses are supported by WebCT or other electronic resources, and may include past exam papers and exam answers (the latter is generally limited to some quantitative courses). The 'External Programme' offers an interesting variation in feedback on examinations in the form of Exam Reports that include general observations from examiners on how candidates have tackled a given paper as a whole, and how individual questions have been addressed. Whilst nothing similar is available for students on campus, tutors may wish to review what is on the Exam Reports site and, if you feel it appropriate, encourage students to look at some of this feedback. See www.londonexternal.ac.uk/current_students/programme_resources/lse/examiners_archive/examiners_reports_06.shtml. Many courses now include revision sessions and pre-examination briefings, mock examinations, workshops and one-to-one advice provided by class teachers, course tutors and personal tutors. There is also central provision offered by the Teaching and Learning Centre and the Language Centre.

Course handbooks

A number of departments currently incorporate links to past examination papers in their course or departmental handbooks (all past exam papers are available from the Library website: <https://library-2.lse.ac.uk/protected-exam/>). This enables students to see from the outset what they will be tested on at the completion of their courses – not only past questions themselves and the 'sectionalization' of the paper but also the rubric. This is not only advisable but essential in cases where, for example, students need to purchase a calculator of a kind which they are permitted to take into examinations, and where candidates are permitted to take texts into the examination so long as they are free from annotation. **Examiners are strongly encouraged to incorporate in course handbooks links to past examination papers and information relating to examinations that candidates need to have from the beginning of their courses.**

Revision sessions, pre-examination briefings and 'mocks'

In the main, students appreciate revision sessions, especially where they incorporate some form of pre-examination briefing, so long as they address the issues and anxieties that students bring to the session. **Departments may wish to make the holding of such sessions standard practice where this is not already the case. Consideration should also be given to timing. While the conclusion of teaching in the Summer term may seem to be the natural time for such a session, holding it at the end of the Lent term allows students to base their work during the Easter vacation upon it.**

A perennial issue for examiners to decide is the extent to which they wish to test the breadth as well as the depth of student understanding in the given field. Clearly, reducing the number of questions students are expected to tackle may reduce the breadth of topics that can be addressed. One way of addressing this is to ask questions that require students to, for example, compare and contrast different theoretical positions presented in the course or illustrate a position using case material presented at a different point in the course. This can be an effective way of encouraging students to relate the different elements of their course to each other, but it is important that they have opportunity to practise such integrative work and receive feedback on it through formative¹ course assessment, and not only face this kind of challenge in the examination setting.

4 Multiple-section papers

Examination papers may be divided into two or more sections for a number of reasons:

- (a) as with 'either/or' questions, to prevent students from answering questions that are close together in terms of subject matter, or that call for a similar style or approach in answering them;
- (b) to positively require candidates to answer questions relating to different parts of the course (which may have been taught by different teachers); and
- (c) to test candidates in their competence in different aspects of the subject (eg. Section A may contain essay questions, requiring candidates to demonstrate their grasp of principles, while Section B contains problems which candidates are required to solve to demonstrate their command of practical techniques and their ability to reason).

Multiple-section papers are found in a wide range of subjects: some papers in Accounting and Finance, Economics, Economic History, Law, Mathematics, Operational Research, Philosophy, Sociology and Statistics have this feature.

Multiple-section papers lend themselves to the setting of questions of a variety of types and making rules that allocate different maximum attainable marks to those of different types. For example, in 2006 EH101 contained a Section A consisting of one question, itself made up of ten 'sub-questions' of which candidates were required to answer eight. Answers to all eight could gain a total of '40 per cent of the total marks', suggesting 5 per cent per question: if they are to be answered in 40 per cent of 3 hours, this calls for each sub-question to be answered in nine minutes. Likewise in EC102 (a paper composed of three sections, labelled Question 1, Section A and Section B). Question 1 was composed of 16 sub-questions: perfect answers to all 16 would gain '50 marks': if they were to be answered in 90 minutes this implies answering one sub-question in just over 5½ minutes. It implies too that each sub-question is worth a possible 3% marks.

The inclusion of 'short-answer' questions in an examination paper has a number of advantages. It enables a candidate's knowledge to be tested over a wider range of subject matter than a conventional three or four-question paper does. Thus it limits candidates' ability to do well by mastering only a fraction of the material covered by a course, while not removing the opportunity for a candidate who has mastered the subject in depth to demonstrate that fact. Furthermore, it allows for the testing of a candidates' grasp of a range of basic concepts and principles, and of his or her familiarity with – and fluency in – the specialized language(s) of the subject. 'True-or-false' questions, where candidates are required to give a brief statement of the reasoning on which they base their answer, can manifestly be used for this purpose. So too, conceivably, could multiple-choice questions, where candidates have to select the right

¹Formative assessment: student work, which does not count towards the final degree result, but which is marked and feedback provided by a member of staff and/or fellow students.

answer from a list of possibilities: this method allows for marks to be deducted for wrong answers. Interestingly, no LSE courses have opted for multiple-choice questions for summative² examinations, though these are used as part of course work in some subjects.

Examiners who currently set conventional three- or four-question papers may wish to consider whether moving to a multiple-section paper, including some ‘short-answer’ questions would permit a more thorough testing of candidates’ knowledge, grasp of a range of basic concepts and principles, and familiarity with – and fluency in – the specialized language(s) of the subject. Examiners who use multiple-section papers should give careful consideration to the complexity of the rubrics. This should include some indication as to the rationale for the sections (for example, at least one paper gives titles to the two sections of which it is constituted: GV100 comprises ‘Section A: The Foundations of Western Political Thought’ and ‘Section B: Modern Political Theory’). Examiners can assist students by giving titles to the sections of multiple-section papers. One other key issue to address in preparing multiple-section papers is how realistic the timing is to address the number of questions raised.

5 The rubric

An examination paper’s rubric comprises the instructions and information given to candidates regarding rules on choice of questions, awarding of marks or percentage points per question, etc.

There is very little consistency among the rubrics and the language used across the School. Some rubrics tell candidates how many questions there are on the examination paper; others do not. Some tell candidates to ‘answer’ questions, others to ‘attempt’ them. Some tell candidates how many sections the (multi-section) paper is divided into; others do not. A small minority of papers name the section of the course that is covered by that section of the paper; the great majority do not. While some papers are divided into ‘sections’, others are divided into ‘parts’. Some rubrics inform candidates that ‘All questions will be given equal weight’, others add a figure in brackets, such as ‘25 per cent’ or ‘33 per cent’. (It is not clear in the latter case whether candidates have lost 1 per cent even before they start writing.) Yet others specify ‘marks’ or ‘points’ rather than percentages. Where a sub-question appears to ‘carry’ a fraction of a mark or percentage point, it is not made clear to candidates whether total marks are arrived at by rounding up, rounding down, or rounding to the nearest whole number. The consequences of answering more than the required number of questions, where this is feasible, are not always made clear.

Some rubrics also contain instructions regarding the content of answers: ‘Show all workings clearly’, ‘Candidates should avoid overlap in their answers’, ‘Do not use substantially the same material in more than one question’, ‘Do not use substantially the same material in the two answers’, ‘Marks will be deducted that substantially repeat (sic) the content of the assessed essays for this course’, ‘Credit will be given for use of specific examples drawn from research carried out in the field of x’, ‘Candidates are expected to demonstrate knowledge of a range of theoretical approaches and ethnographic materials’.

In view of the fact that many students take courses outside their ‘home’ department, examiners may wish to take action to remove obvious inconsistencies and anomalies. It should be a matter of principle that candidates are not taken by surprise by the rubric they encounter in the examination room. Moreover, there would seem to be scope for wider use of rubrics of the form ‘Credit will be given for ...’ and ‘Candidates are expected to demonstrate ...’. Not only will statements of these criteria and expectations serve as valuable reminders to candidates in

²Summative assessment: Assessment, usually carried out after a course is completed, which counts towards the student’s final degree result.

So the rationale behind the structure of multiple-section papers should be apparent, and questions should be clear, free of ambiguity, and expressed in good English. Candidates should not be subjected to confusing questions of the kind listed in Table 2. Punctuation – especially the use of quotation marks – should be consistent and conform to accepted good usage. Questions in quantitative papers should be solvable (except where there is a clear pedagogical rationale provided).

Coverage of the course and number of questions

Currently, in the School, some papers are designed to provide coverage of the whole of the course to which they relate, while others are much more selective. A number fall between these two extremes. Thus some 3-hour papers have as many as twenty four questions (counting ‘either/or’ questions as two), while others have only seven. ‘Wide-coverage’ papers ensure that students who have given class/seminar presentations during the year (or term) will find their topic on the exam paper in some form, but they allow students to focus on only a few topics during the course and may encourage them to revise even fewer in their examination preparation. ‘Selective papers’ inevitably give an advantage to those students who have given class presentations on the topics that ‘come up’, and put students who have not done so at a disadvantage, but they put pressure on students to study and revise much more broadly than do ‘wide-coverage’ papers. (In courses that do not require class presentations the possibility of favouritism clearly does not arise.)

The form and content of all examinations should reflect the syllabus as published in the Course Guide section of the School Calendar. Examiners may wish to take conscious decisions as to whether wide or selective coverage is preferable in a particular paper rather than follow tradition or leave it to personal inclination. They may also wish to consider, as suggested above, the use of some ‘short-answer’ questions as a way of ensuring that candidates do not focus on only a few topics.

Avoidance of overlap between examination papers

It is not unusual for there to be areas of overlap between courses in a degree programme, eg, between a core course and a specialist course. Students taking the specialist course will also be taking the core course. Consequently examiners should ensure that there is no duplication of questions as between core and specialist papers, or indeed that no two questions are so similar that students could use the same material in answering both.

Novelty

It is widely regarded as bad practice to set precisely the same question as one that has featured in a recent examination paper in the same subject, although in a fast-changing subject the same question may call for a different answer. (Now that all exam papers produced since 1994 are available to students via the electronic library pages on the School’s website, it may be advisable to equate ‘recent’ with ‘publicly available’.) Arguably, the pressure to set ‘new’ questions each year has resulted in questions becoming more complicated, if not convoluted, so that examinations are increasingly a test not only of candidates’ knowledge and skills but also of their ability to translate and interpret complex statements. This bears particularly hard on students whose first language is not English. It is suggested that examiners should watch out for a tendency for the questions they have set to become over-complicated, and to ensure that the primary focus on subject knowledge and skills is maintained.

The instruction to ‘discuss’

During the past eight years, in reviewing past examination papers with students, both undergraduates and taught postgraduates, they have as a matter of course been asked whether their teachers have said to them: ‘In our subject, this is how we discuss.’ At the time of writing, no student has ever replied in the affirmative. Given the prevalence of ‘discuss’ question in LSE examination papers, this has to be a matter for concern. There are often distinctive disciplinary conventions in how to ‘discuss’ which may not be made explicit. This is particularly important at the MSc level, where students frequently take courses in disciplines new to them, and where they have minimal time to learn the discipline ‘language’.

Examiners should aim to achieve a ‘match’ between the instructions given in examination papers and the approaches which students are expected to take in their taught courses. Wherever possible, disciplinary conventions should be made explicit.

The concept of ‘explanation’

Many questions in essay-based subjects imply that the candidate is required to offer an explanation of some kind. Examples are provided by

- direct questions of the form ‘Why did ...?’, ‘To what extent ...?’. ‘Under what circumstances ...?’, ‘How significant was ...?’, ‘What factors are driving change in ...?’
- instructions such as ‘Explain ...’, ‘Account for ...’, ‘Account for the failure of ...’
- words and expressions in direct questions or statements that imply cause and effect, such as ‘A was responsible for ...’, ‘B was a product of ...’, ‘C laid the foundation for ...’, ‘It was no accident that ...’.

As in the case of ‘discuss’ questions, students consistently report that their teachers have not made it explicit to them what concept or model of explanation they are employing and/or is customarily employed in their discipline.

The situation is complicated further by the many usages that students encounter of the word ‘explain’. Indeed, in examination questions we find ‘Explain’ used with a variety of different meanings: **(1)** ‘Say clearly what is meant by ...’; **(2)** ‘Describe how X came about’; **(3)** ‘Show how causes combine to bring about certain effects’; **(4)** ‘Give reasons why someone behaved in the way they did’. It is not unusual to find more than one meaning used in questions in the same examination paper.

Examiners who wish to test candidates’ ability to ‘explain’ should ensure that they have been taught the concept(s) of explanation employed in their discipline. Candidates should also have been made aware before the examination that the instruction to ‘explain’ can have a variety of meanings.

8 ‘Good practice’ principles

The following are suggested as principles that departments might consider adopting for the setting of unseen examination papers³:

Comprehensibility, clarity and good English

It should perhaps go without saying that the first requirement of an examination is that a student who has followed the course reasonably assiduously should be able to comprehend what it is that he or she has to do in order to get good marks. Arguably the stress involved in taking unseen examinations should not be added to by making it difficult for candidates to comprehend what is needed.

³See also Instructions for Examiners section 9.3.1

the examination itself: when they are seen in past examination papers they provide a valuable ‘steer’ for the many students who make use of this much-valued resource, and this may reinforce effective learning strategies during the year.

6 Question types

The two most common types of examination question used at LSE are direct questions and ‘discuss’ questions. These are elaborated on in Table 1 by outlining the form of the question or instruction given to candidates that is customarily employed for each type and observations on the purpose of questions of each type. The second part of the table gives examples of variations on these two standard formats that have caused confusion for some students, and gives recommendations of how to avoid such confusion.

Other formats include:

Description or definition followed by a direct or ‘discuss’ question: The question is generally in two parts. The first part requires the candidate to ‘Describe’, ‘Explain’ (in the sense of ‘set out the facts’), ‘Outline’, ‘Define’ or ‘Say what is meant by’ a term or expression. There is generally (but not always) a second part in the form of a direct or ‘discuss’ question relating to the subject of the first part. The requirement to describe or define is a straightforward test of candidates’ knowledge. The answer provides a ‘platform’ for answering the direct or ‘discuss’ question that follows it.

True/false questions: A statement or series of statements, preceded by the question: ‘Are the following statements true or false?’ True/false questions directly test the ability of candidates to reason in the language(s) of the subject. They are used in very few LSE examination papers (eg,: EC102 and PH101).

Problem to be solved: The question takes the form of stating certain ‘givens’ together with the requirement that certain conclusions be drawn from them. This requirement may be expressed in the form of a direct question (eg, ‘What will be ...?’) or an instruction, such as ‘Show’, ‘Prove’, ‘Find’, ‘Calculate’, ‘Draw’, ‘Advise’ (in Law examinations). In some subjects, the givens comprise or include a ‘scenario’ (eg, Law) or a case study (eg, Industrial Relations). Problems test candidates’ knowledge of the material (facts, theories, additional givens, techniques, etc.) and their ability to reason from these to the correct solution to the problem. Scenarios and case studies can be used to provide simulations or actual examples from the ‘real world’ and thus test candidates’ ability to work with ‘realistic’ material.

Note: The complexity of question wording, and in particular, the extent of material students need to read through in order to answer questions needs to be carefully considered. A few LSE examinations give students an additional 15 minutes reading time at the start of the examination. In other institutions, students may be given preparatory reading (eg: a case study, or data set) for consideration prior to the examination.

7 Feedback from students

Each year, 250-300 students consult the Teaching and Learning Centre for study skills support. Very few of these are ‘weak’ students, students of low academic calibre, in need of ‘remedial’ teaching. Insofar as they are ‘struggling’, they are struggling not so much with subject matter but as to understand what is expected of them if they are to do well in examinations. Analysis of the issues they habitually bring to the study advisers over the past eight years have revealed three common difficulties that students experience in preparing for and taking unseen examinations: **(a)** understanding the instruction to ‘discuss’; **(b)** understanding the concept of ‘explanation’; **(c)** confusion arising from the wording, punctuation, etc., of particular questions. **(c)** is addressed in Table 1. The other two concerns are:

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Type and form of question, instruction to candidates and when to use this type of question	Examples of problems that arise in wording/punctuation	Source of confusion	Recommendations for avoiding confusion
<p>Direct question:</p> <p>A sentence that terminates with a question mark [?]. The instruction ‘Answer the question’ is implied.</p> <p>Direct questions are suited to assessing a wide variety of candidates’ attributes, notably their knowledge of the subject, familiarity with literature (including theories and debates), and ability to provide explanations of phenomena.</p>	A ‘direct’ question followed by a sentence beginning ‘Discuss ...’ or similar.	Candidates are receiving two conflicting messages. One is telling them to <i>answer</i> the question; the other is telling them to <i>discuss</i> it. Many candidates dive into answering the question, but trail away into confusion because they subliminally also get the ‘discuss’ message.	Because questions always call for an answer, an instruction following a direct question should always commence ‘Answer with reference to ...’
	A question that incorporates a metaphor or colloquial language.	It is not clear to candidates whether they are expected or entitled to answer in similar non-academic language, or whether they will be penalized if they do. If English isn’t their first language, they may not understand a question that employs a metaphor or colloquialism.	Metaphors and colloquialisms should be rigorously excluded from examination questions unless there is very good reason for using them.
	A question that actually incorporates a mistake, such as a word left out.	This is a rarity, but by no means unknown. It wastes candidates’ time, is distracting, and increases stress.	Every effort should be made to avoid mistakes in questions.
	A question that incorporates an ambiguous expression, ie, an expression that could be interpreted in two or more ways. (For example, the expression ‘in any country’ could mean ‘in any country in the whole world’ or ‘in any one country of your choice’.)	It isn’t clear to candidates how they are expected to interpret the question. They may waste time puzzling out which of two interpretations is the appropriate one; they may not realize there is more than one way of interpreting the question and choose the ‘wrong’ one; or they may realize half-way through writing their answer that there is more than one interpretation.	Ambiguous expressions should be rigorously excluded from examination questions.
	A question in which the instructions are over-complicated (eg, ‘Discuss how far you agree’ and ‘To what extent can it be argued?’).	Over-complicated instructions distract the candidate from the subject matter of the question and are particularly problematic for candidates whose first language is not English.	Over-complicated instructions should be rigorously excluded from examination questions.
	A ‘double-barrelled’ question, ie, two questions one after the other (as opposed to a question in two parts).	In effect, candidates have to think about, plan and write two answers in the time allotted for just one, but are given no assistance (eg, an indication of the depth expected to gain good marks) in doing this.	Care should be taken to avoid yoking together two questions that could well have been set as separate questions.
<p>‘Discuss’:</p> <p>A statement, usually enclosed in quotation marks, followed by an explicit instruction such as ‘Discuss’ or ‘Evaluate (or critically evaluate) this statement’. Common variants are (a) to follow the statement with the words ‘Do you agree? Give your reasons.’) and (b) to express the statement in a sentence commencing with the instruction ‘Consider the view that ...’.</p> <p>‘Discuss’ questions, like direct questions’, are suited to assessing a wide variety of candidates’ attributes. In addition to their knowledge of the subject and familiarity with literature, answering such questions calls for an ability to ‘dissect’ the question, to engage with the debate on a theme, and to form a judgment as to the validity of a proposition.</p>	A statement that is not in quotation marks, and could reasonably be interpreted as a statement of fact rather than opinion, followed by a direct question or ‘Discuss’.	Because of the absence of quotation marks, it is not clear to candidates whether (a) they are expected or entitled to challenge the statement, or (b) they should not challenge it, even if they think it is factually wrong (in whole or in part) or should be qualified.	<p>All statements to be discussed should be placed in quotation marks. Candidates should be advised in advance of the significance of the presence or absence of quotation marks around a statement.</p> <p>Where a direct quotation is used, the source should be indicated – simple good practice in line with teaching students about effective citation.</p> <p>As above.</p>
	A statement that is not in quotation marks, but looks like a statement of opinion, followed by ‘Discuss’.	Similar to the above. Because of the absence of quotation marks, it is not clear to candidates whether the statement is indeed offered as a statement of opinion and (a) they are expected or entitled to challenge it, or (b) they should not challenge it, but merely deal with what follows from it.	Candidates should be advised in advance as to how they should treat such quotations.
	A quotation from the literature – eg, a ‘classic’ – followed by a question that doesn’t refer to the quotation and would be perfectly comprehensible on its own, if the quotation weren’t present.	It is not clear to candidates whether or not they are expected to refer to the quotation in their answer.	