

Writing a ‘describe, evaluate and compare’ essay

In the ‘atypical behaviour’ section of PSYB2 it is quite likely that you’ll be given an essay question asking you to describe and evaluate one or more treatments for an anxiety disorder. It is also quite common in many topics to be asked to ‘refer to another...’ in your answer. This requires you to make *comparisons*, something that lots of students do badly in exams.

The essay question you are attempting is this:

Describe and evaluate one behavioural treatment for phobias. Refer to an alternative form of treatment in your answer.

Recall that before you start answering a question you need to ask yourself:

1. What topic am I writing about?
2. What do I have to do with my knowledge of this topic?

Clearly the topic here is:

Describe and evaluate **behavioural treatments for phobias**. Refer to an alternative form of treatment in your answer.

In contrast to most other sorts of essay, however, there are three distinct requirements:

Describe and **evaluate** behavioural treatments for phobias. **Refer to an alternative** form of treatment in your answer.

Those are the question’s requirements then. What we must do now is work out how the marks are going to be awarded by the examiner. Recall that an essay is assessed on two main objectives: knowledge and understanding (AO1) and commentary, analysis, criticism and evaluation (AO2). On PSYB2 a ten mark essay can earn 5 AO1 and 5 AO2 marks. So we can work out that you need to:

- **Describe...**behavioural treatments. ‘Describe’ is an AO1 term meaning ‘give an account of’. You’ll be earning AO1 marks every time you show knowledge and understanding of behavioural treatments by naming them, describing the procedures involved and explaining how they produce their effect.
- **Evaluate...**behavioural treatments. ‘Evaluate’ is an AO2 term which means ‘arrive at a conclusion about the value of something through a consideration of its strengths and weaknesses’. So you will get AO2 marks for identifying positive and negative criticisms of behavioural treatments for phobia, justifying them using either some evidence or an argument and then drawing an overall conclusion about the treatment’s value.

- **Refer to an alternative...treatment.** This instruction means you need to make comparisons between the thing you are focusing on and something else. It's an AO2 term because it involves both **analysis** and **evaluation**. You will be earning AO2 marks when you explain the similarities and differences between behavioural and another treatment and draw conclusions – supported by argument/evidence - about which is better.

What should go into this answer then? The specification mentions one behavioural treatment by name but you will know about at least two. The only specific alternative treatment for phobia is psychodynamic therapy. So the material we could include here would be:

- Behavioural treatments for phobia: systematic desensitisation and flooding.
- Alternative treatments for phobia: psychodynamic therapy.

Evaluating a treatment requires us to consider a range of different criteria. A very useful mnemonic for listing the criteria to inform your evaluation is TEARS. This stands for:

- *Time* – how long is the treatment likely to take? (Shorter is better.)
- *Effectiveness* – how likely is it the client will improve? (Higher is better.)
- *Acceptability* – how easy will the client find it to complete the therapy? (Higher is better.)
- *Relapse* – how likely is it that the problem will come back? (Lower is better.)
- *Side effects* – what are the unintended consequences of treatment? (Fewer and less severe are better.)

The AO1 skill we're practicing here is the skill of **describing treatments** accurately and in detail. You'll be doing this well when you can present, in your own words, an account of how treatment is undertaken, including detail on what the client and the therapist must do along with an explanation of how the treatment works. Here's an example of how this might be done for flooding:

Flooding is a behavioural treatment for phobias. In flooding the client and psychologist first identify the nature of the client's phobia so that the therapist knows exactly what the phobic stimulus is. The client is then given intensive exposure to the phobic object possibly for an hour or more, all in one go. For example, an arachnophobe might have to sit next to or even hold a big tarantula. The client is not allowed to escape from the situation. Flooding works because exposure to the phobic stimulus first causes a big increase in anxiety. However, the client's body can't keep the stress reaction up for very long so the anxiety levels eventually start to fall. Once they have returned to normal the client's learned association between the phobic stimulus and fear has been broken.

The AO2 skill we're practicing here is **evaluating using comparisons**. You'll be doing this well when you can state a strength or weakness of the treatment, justify it using evidence or argument

and then compare the treatment you're evaluating with another to show that it is better or worse. Here's how it could be done for this flooding, using the 'time' criterion:

One strength of flooding is that it is a quick treatment. It only takes one therapy session to complete meaning it is over quickly and is relatively cheap to administer. Consequently many clients - and healthcare providers - prefer it over other treatments. By contrast, psychodynamic therapy takes a long time. Classical psychoanalysis takes years but even brief psychodynamic therapy might take 8-12 sessions. This takes up more of the client's time and costs whoever is paying more money. On this criterion, flooding is the better treatment.

It's important that the examiner can recognise both that you are evaluating and comparing. Several key phrases help you to show this:

- 'One strength of...' shows that you are about to present a criticism.
- 'Consequently...' shows that you are developing your point logically.
- 'By contrast...' shows that you are about to bring in a comparison.

So what should you put in your essay? This time we're looking for you to apply these skills to systematic desensitisation. Your essay will be assessed using the criteria below. **The first four are compulsory.** If you're confident with them you can have a go at the last. In order to do this you will need to do some additional [reading/thinking/etc.].

Assessment objective	What I'm looking for...	Have you done this?
AO1 – Describing treatments for atypical behaviour.	Accurate and well detailed account of how systematic desensitisation is done. Description includes all stages of the process, the actions of therapist and client and an explanation of how the treatment works.	
AO1 – describing research studies of treatments for atypical behaviour.	Reference is made to research evidence of treatments (e.g. effectiveness; chance of relapse). Only the key features (e.g. results) of research are described. Lengthy descriptions of aim, method etc. are avoided.	
AO2 – evaluation of treatments.	Each of the TEARS criteria is used as the basis for a criticism (strength or weakness) of the treatment. Each strength or weakness is justified either by research evidence or an argument.	
AO2 – critical comparisons between treatments.	For at least three of the criteria a comparison is made and a justified conclusion drawn about which treatment is superior.	

AO2 – drawing conclusions using cost-benefit analysis (OPTIONAL).	There is a concluding paragraph in which you weigh up the costs and benefits of systematic desensitisation relative to psychodynamic therapy and decide which is the better treatment overall.	
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You will need to start with the description then structure your evaluation round the TEARS criteria so the above grid isn't an essay plan – it's there to help you plan more effectively by ensuring you include all the material you need to address.

IMPORTANT

You must write a plan and submit it with your essay. If there is no plan your work is incomplete and will receive a mark of zero.

The other way to get a mark of zero is to plagiarise. You are plagiarising if you copy from or paraphrase straight from a textbook, web site or other source without attribution. If you are quoting directly from a source you must cite the name(s) of the author(s) and the date of publication. Plagiarism is a serious academic offence and if you do it at university you get thrown out.

Essays that simply paraphrase the textbook, Wikipedia or whatever will be rejected and a mark of zero recorded.