

Writing your first psychology essay

50% of your mark in the January PSYB2 exam comes from essay writing. Psychology essays have distinct requirements which you must learn to meet. This is your first opportunity to understand what those requirements are and how to fulfil them.

The essay question you are attempting is this:

Describe and discuss research into social facilitation (10 marks).

When you attempt a Psychology question you need to ask yourself two things:

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

If you can correctly address these two questions you are well on your way to writing the sort of essay that will get you the marks. Let's look at our exam question again. The requirements of this question are pretty straightforward (more so than with some other questions, but you are just starting out). The topic here is:

Describe and discuss research into social facilitation.

And what you have to do with it is:

Describe and discuss research into social facilitation.

So we've identified the requirements. Where we go next requires us to understand how the examiner is going to mark the essay when she reads it. A psychology essay is marked on two main criteria, that we call AO1 and AO2.

- You get **AO1 marks** when you show knowledge and understanding of psychology. AO1 marks are for knowing the facts and being able to present them to the examiner accurately and in detail.
- You get **AO2 marks** when you show you can comment on, analyse, apply, criticise and evaluate psychological knowledge. AO2 marks are for being able to think about the facts in a variety of ways and presenting your thinking clearly to the examiner.

The requirement part of the question makes it clear that both of these AOs are being assessed. The examiner is telling you that you need to:

- **Describe...research into social facilitation.** 'Describe' is an AO1 term meaning 'give an account of'. So you will get AO1 marks every time you show knowledge and understanding of research into social facilitation by giving an accurate and detailed account of it. Other AO1 terms could be 'state', 'outline' or 'explain'.
- **Discuss research into social facilitation.** 'Discuss' is an AO2 term meaning 'comment on in a variety of ways'. So you will get AO2 marks for showing that you can interpret, analyse, criticise

and evaluate research into social facilitation and clearly explain your thinking in written form. Other AO2 terms could be 'assess', 'criticise' or 'evaluate'.

So what else do we need to know? What about this word 'research' – is that important? Yes it is. In the context of an exam question:

- **Studies** means practical investigations (e.g. experiments or observations).
- **Theories** means explanations of how things work.
- **Research** means both explanations/theories and investigations/studies.

Knowing this is important because an examiner will only give you marks for doing things that answer the question. If the topic of the essay is studies of social facilitation then that's different from when the topic is theories of social facilitation. In each case you would be writing a different essay. Although quite a lot of the content would be the same, the way you used it in your essay would be rather different.

In the case of our essay question we've been lucky, as research into social facilitation allows us to write about either or both theories and studies of social facilitation. That gives us quite a lot of material we potentially could include:

- Studies of social facilitation including Triplett (1898); Zajonc et al (1969); Michaels et al (1982); Baron (1986).
- Explanations of social facilitation including Zajonc's theory of dominant and non-dominant responses; the Yerkes-Dodson curve; distraction conflict theory and evaluation apprehension theory.

Because there's such a variety of material there are, in fact, many different ways of writing the essay. One of the things you need to get used to in Psychology is that there is rarely one single answer that the examiner is looking for. You are being assessed on your ability to use what you know and because you can use knowledge in many different ways there are many different possible answers to the same question.

For the time being, we're going to focus on writing a simple response to this essay where we're starting to practice two important skills.

The AO1 skill we're practising is the skill of **describing studies** accurately and in detail. You'll be doing this well when you can present, in your own words, a narrative account of how a particular piece of research was carried out including the following information: the aim of the study, the method the researchers used to gather their data and results they obtained. Here's an example of how this might be done for Triplett's co-action study:

Triplett wanted to see how co-actors could affect performance on a task. He gave 40 children the task of winding a fishing reel as quickly as they could. Some of the children did this alone and some of them did it in pairs where they

could see how the other was performing. Triplett found that in most cases the children in pairs completed the task faster than those acting alone.

The AO2 skill we're practicing is the skill of **interpreting and commenting on research results**. You'll be doing this well when you can explain what conclusions can be drawn from a piece of research and link your conclusions to theoretical explanations. Here's how it might be done in the case of Triplett:

Triplett's study shows that people perform better when co-actors are present. He suggested that the co-actors brought an element of competition to the situation and that people put more effort into the task because they wanted to do better than the co-actor. Those without co-actors did not have this extra motivation so they didn't perform as fast.

It's important that the examiner realises that you are interpreting and commenting, so they know to award you some AO2 marks. The best way to do this is to use phrases that introduce your interpretation. Some good ones are:

- *This study shows that...*
- *This result suggests...*
- *One implication of this finding is...*

When you state your initial conclusion you should look at the aim of the study. Triplett's aim was to see whether co-actors affected performance so our conclusion starts by pointing out that it did. What follows is a fuller explanation of *why* this happened.

So what should you put in your essay? This time around we're going to be looking for you to apply these two skills to two or more studies. Your essay will be assessed using the following criteria. The first two are compulsory. If you're confident with them you can have a go at the third. In order to do this you will need to do some additional reading before planning your essay.

Assessment objective	What I'm Looking For...	Have you done this?
A01 – knowledge and understanding of studies of social facilitation.	Accurate and detailed description of two or more studies of social facilitation <i>excluding</i> Triplett's coactions study. Descriptions give details of aim, method and results. Results are described in terms of trends and figures are given.	
A02 – Interpretation and commentary of research findings	Appropriate conclusions drawn given the aims of the study. Conclusions are clearly flagged with appropriate phrases. Conclusions are linked to theoretical explanations of the findings.	

A02 – Criticism of research findings (OPTIONAL)	Attention is drawn to appropriate limitations of the research (e.g. artificial setting; limited samples). Criticism is clearly flagged with appropriate phrases (e.g. ‘one limitation of this study is...’) An explanation is given of the likely effect of the limitation on the results of the study.	
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You will need to deal with one study at a time so the above grid isn't a plan for the essay – it's there to help you plan more effectively by ensuring you include what needs to be included. A plan would look more like this:

A01*Triplet - coaction study**40 children - fishing reels**Faster with coactors*A02*Shows coactors facilitate performance**motivation from competition**Problems: laboratory study; limited sample.***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. 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.