

Examination Essay Marking Guide for Tutors

Marks awarded by tutors for the same essay can vary substantially. This variation is derived from two principal sources:

- a) Variation between markers. Different markers can award widely divergent marks to the same piece of work (see for example Diederich 1974, Newstead and Dennis 1994)
- b) Variation within the same marker. There have been observed wide differences in marks awarded by the same marker at different times for the same essay. The first papers that are marked are often marked differently than later papers. A moderately good essay following a run of poor ones tends to be assessed higher than it deserves, but if it follows a run of very good ones, it is marked down (Hales and Tokar 1975).

To assist in avoiding these two sources of variation the following advice is offered.

- 1) If marking criteria have been distributed by the subject coordinator read these carefully and clarify any areas of which you are uncertain prior to the start of the marking process.
- 2) Read several (at least 10) of the examination essays on a single question in a preliminary fashion to establish a view of general performance.
- 3) Choose models of excellent, good, and poor papers to which you can refer to refresh your memory of the standards by which you are grading.
- 4) Having identified papers of differing levels of excellence, compare them to determine what the distinguishing features are.
- 5) Then coarsely grade the whole batch of the essay question, into excellent, pass and fail. It is then easier to discriminate more finely for the final mark.
- 6) **Use the full range of marks.** You will never see the perfect essay so think of the marking process a one of rank ordering rather than a quest for perfection. Give 20 when you believe the essay is excellent even if it is not absolutely perfect. Give 0 when the essay has no merit.
- 7) Do not change your standard as you mark. It is important to maintain internal consistency so that all students in the cohort that you are marking are treated in the same manner. There may be a tendency to mark later papers more harshly than earlier papers
- 8) Each question should be marked across the whole cohort of students or tutorial group so that the standard for each question is more likely to remain the same. Marking by student rather than by question allows more room for halo effects, a high or low mark on one question influencing your judgment on the students answers to other questions.
- 9) The papers should be reordered after each question is marked through the whole cohort to prevent systematic ordering effects. If you mark one question though all booklets starting from

the front of the pack then reorder before you mark the next question. (Take particular care however, that you put the script books back in the right order when you have finished all questions and that you accurately record each mark).

10) Do not mark for more than two hours at a time and do not mark when you are tired. Students are depending on you to give them a fair assessment and the decisions you make about their work are very important.

11) When you have finished marking go back to the first five – ten papers you have marked and mark them again.

- Diederich P. B. 1974 *Measuring growth in English* Urbana IL: National Council of Teachers of English
- Newstead S and Dennis I 1994 Examiners examined: the reliability of exam marking in psychology' *The Psychologist* 7: 216-19.
- Hales L.W and Tokar E 1975 The effects of quality of preceding responses on the grades assigned to subsequent responses to an essay question, *Journal of Educational Measurement*,12,115-17

Carol Johnston, Teaching and Learning Unit, Faculty of Economics and Commerce.

Examination Essay Marking Guide for Subject Coordinators

In order to encourage a greater degree of consistency across markers in relation to essay sections of examination papers the following may be helpful.

- 1) For each question establish marking criteria
- 2) Arrange for a meeting of all tutors who are involved in the marking process in order to review marking criteria
- 3) Prior to the meeting select two high, four medium and two low scoring answers from the scripts
Give each piece of work a mark but do not write it on the answer
- 4) Photocopy these answers to distribute to markers.
- 5) Discuss the relative importance of each criteria. Then ask markers to mark each answer using the distributed criteria. This could be done either prior to the meeting or at the meeting. Discuss how each person marked and why. Pay particular attention to the medium standard examples as this is where the biggest discrepancies often occur. Where a marker is too parsimonious with marks or too generous ask them to bear this in mind when they mark and to adjust accordingly. Remind markers that they are not giving away sheep stations and that they are not ever likely to see the perfect answer.
- 6) If practical, markers should mark one question across all students rather than the whole script for a particular group of students. This way if a marker is 'mean' with marks all students suffer equally and it is easier to adjust the marks.
- 7) Advise markers to keep the criteria in mind when they mark but at the same time to keep an open mind in relation to the student who adopts a different but still correct approach.
- 8) Emphasise the importance of keeping to marking deadlines
- 9) Make yourself available to assist markers if they have a problem
- 10) Distribute the Examination Essay Marking Guide for Tutors

Example of criteria for an examination essay with matching grade descriptions

Criteria

- Introduction provides the framework for the essay as a whole
- Relevant theories/literatures are chosen, outlined and located in an appropriate context
- The essential points of those theories/literatures are brought out and related to reveal an overall grasp of the topic in question
- The essential points of those theories/literatures are brought out and related to reveal a command of the arguments
- The relevant arguments are related together to achieve an appropriate analysis and synthesis
- The essay is organised and achieves a balance between context, theories, literatures, discussion, analysis and synthesis.
- English style and spelling correct

H1 Outstanding

The introduction is outstanding, clearly and appropriately framing the essay as a whole; extensive and relevant theories/literatures are creatively chosen, outlined and located in an appropriate context; there are no significant omissions; the essential points of those theories/literatures are brought out and related to reveal an outstanding overall grasp of the topic in question and an excellent command of both the detail and the subtlety of the arguments; the relevant arguments are related together in a clear manner which achieves a convincing overall analysis and synthesis and also reveals elements of originality. The essay is outstandingly organised, achieving an excellent balance between context, theories/literatures, discussion, analysis and synthesis; the English, including style and spelling is excellent.

H2 Very Good

The introduction is good, clearly and appropriately framing the essay as a whole; the most important theories/literatures are outlined and located in an appropriate context; there are no significant omissions; the essential points of those theories/literatures are brought out and related to reveal a good general overall grasp of the topic in question combined with a good command of the detail and the subtlety of the arguments; the relevant arguments are related together in a clear manner which achieves a good overall analysis and synthesis without being original; the essay is well organised, achieving a good balance between context, literatures, discussion, analysis and synthesis; the English, including style and spelling, is good.

H3 Good

The introduction is adequate, providing a reasonable frame for the essay as a whole; the major theories/literatures are outlined and put in an adequate context; the major points of those literatures are reasonably brought out and related in a way which reveals some grasp of the topic in question; there is some grasp of the detail and the subtlety of the arguments; the relevant arguments are related together in an adequate manner, and there is some degree of analysis and synthesis but no originality; the essay is adequately organised achieving some balance between context, literatures, discussion, analysis and synthesis; the English, including style and spelling, is satisfactory.

PASS Satisfactory

The introduction is weak, providing only a limited frame for the essay as a whole; some relevant theories/literatures are outlined, but this outline is patchy, unclear, and/or not located in an adequate context; some major points of those theories/literatures are brought out, but there are significant gaps, misunderstandings, and/or little grasp of detail or subtlety; the relevant arguments are related together in a manner that is weak and does not achieve a reasonable synthesis; the essay is poorly

organised, with inadequate balance between context, theories/literatures, discussion, analysis and synthesis; the English, including style and spelling is adequate.

High FAIL

The introduction is very weak, barely providing a frame for the essay as a whole; there is some mention of relevant theories/literatures, but this outline is very patchy, unclear, and/or very inadequately placed in context; a few points of those theories/literatures are brought out, but there are major gaps, misunderstandings, and no grasp of detail or subtlety; the relevant arguments are not properly related together, and to the extent they are this is done in a manner that is weak, with no analysis, synthesis; the essay is very poorly organised, with no proper balance between context, literatures, discussion, analysis and synthesis; the English, including style and spelling is very poor.

Low FAIL

The essay has a weak introduction, providing little or no frame for the essay as a whole; there is little mention of relevant theories/literatures, and any outline of these is highly restricted, unclear, and/or with no sense of context; the character of the theories/literatures is not properly brought out, the relevant arguments are scarcely related together, and there is no proper analysis and synthesis; the essay is disorganised, with no balance between context, theories/literatures, discussion, and synthesis; the English, including style and spelling, is unacceptable.

Adapted from the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University

