Performance

Have you ever wondered why it's called 'exam performance' rather than 'exam achievement' or 'exam attainment'? Perhaps because your work will be judged by a stranger who is an expert in the field you are competing in. In that sense, you're not a million miles away from those stranger who is an expert in the field you are competing. In this sense, you're not a million miles away from those who put themselves forward as performers for X Factor or Pop Idol. This What Makes Examiners Weep looks at how to put in a winning performance.

Outline the relationship between hydraulic radius and the discharge of a river.

Does this actually say ‘wetted perimeter’? It’s hard work to tell, which is a pity as there is a mark at stake.

This says…?

Little pictures do not really seem to say, ‘I am 17, and I am serious about my performance…’

A bad look

It would be unfair for an examiner to take marks away from you because your work is messy, or hard to read.

But put yourself in the place of a teacher-examiner who cannot decide if a geography essay is worth, say, 10/20 or 11/20 (based purely on the quality of the geography). This is often the case when work is assessed using level mark-bands. Now, imagine how you would feel if reading this particular essay had been difficult and time-consuming — you were forced to hunt asterisks, hurdle over crossings-out and even broke off your marking at one point to find your magnifying glass (see Figure 1). Having struggled through the essay, which mark will you finally award? Honestly. Will it be 10 or 11?

A smart strategy for short answers

Explain the economic and social consequences of migration for a source country you have studied.

First candidate

Examiner comment: both economic and social addressed so 4 marks can be awarded.

Second candidate

Examiner comment: it is unclear what the social consequences are.

Figure 1 A bad look

What your answer looks like

• When teachers really like an essay, they write a comment like ‘this was a pleasure to read’. Think about why work might be enjoyable to read — an easy-to-follow argument, and handwriting that didn’t give them eye-strain.

• Think of your exam script as a conversation with the examiner. In conversation, we are often influenced by other people’s body language, and the way they dress, as much as by what they say. Appearance does matter and people do judge books by the cover. On the day of your geography exam, you’ll probably check your appearance in the mirror before leaving home. But the examiner sees only your script. How does it look?

Figure 2 Which answer might get full marks?

What can I do? My work always looks this way!

• Slow down a little. Think more, write less, get it right the first time you put it down. Avoid crossing-out and over-writing.

• Plan ahead. Planning an essay means you are less likely to realise you’ve left something out and have to cross out large sections or attach extra sheets.

• Try to write a little bigger, or smaller, if teachers are forever telling you your handwriting is too tiny to read, or so large that bundles of extra pages get tied to your exam scripts. Practise handwriting. If you were going to run a marathon, you would practice running long distances. If you have a 2-hour exam ahead, you need to get used to writing for long periods of time. Do not type every homework essay if there are hand-written exams waiting for you at the end of the year. Use it or lose it.

Geography spelling top tips

• Some technical terms are commonly misspelt, including hydraulic radius and trade bloc, as well as everyday words like trade bloc and desert. Pay attention to tricky words like trade bloc, area and ink smudges. If your writing is hard to read print out important words that you are sure you cover both sides of the argument.

• If teachers are forever telling you your handwriting is too tiny to read, or is so large that bundles of extra pages get tied to your exam script. Don’t sabotage your own work always looks this way!

What makes examiners weep

Instead of saying ‘I can’t do that’, say ‘I can’t do this’. This is so much better. If you say ‘I can’t do that’, the examiner automatically thinks you are not going to do it. If you say ‘I can’t do this’, the examiner will think that you will be able to do it.

Figure 3 What makes examiners weep

How does this actually look?

A bad look

What are the criteria for making the X Factor?

Use bullet points if you have to but make sure you cover both sides of the argument.

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