Top exam tips for IB geography

Part 2

7 Refer to information given

Referring to the information and data provided in the question can improve your answers. For example, quote back some figures from the table, some places from the map, some statistics from the graph etc. Paper 2, section A questions often have such a stimulus to start the line of questions and this will also be important for the section C question on an infographic. Paper 1 questions based on your optional themes have a resource booklet that will use a map, photograph, diagram etc. as the basis for questions. Use specific examples from any of these sources to support your answers. For your 10-mark answers and your HL essay in paper 3, regularly referring to the terms in the essay question will help you structure your answer and keep it focused on the relevant issues.

8 Define and describe

Make sure you get those 'easy' marks for 'define' and 'describe' questions. When you are asked for a meaning or definition, a good rule is to avoid using any words that are included in the key term. For example, if the question asks you to define the infant mortality rate, do not state that it is 'the rate per 1000 live births of mortality of infants.' Instead, try to provide an alternative for all the key words, such as:

It is the number of deaths per 1000 live births of children under the age of 1 year.

For 'describe the pattern' questions, which might refer to a graph/map/table etc. don't forget to use some describing words. Do not just list the figures. You could make a list of adjectives and adverbs that you can use, such as gradually increasing, rapidly decreasing, concentrated, sparsely distributed etc.

6 Use examples in all answers

Try to include examples or specific detail in all answers. Apart from some 1-mark questions that might ask you to 'state' or 'identify', a good rule is to try and include some real-life geographical examples or detail in all answers. For example, whenever you have to write a definition or meaning, giving an example will help show your understanding and secure your mark, even if your definition is not a typical textbook explanation. An example of a good response defining immigration would be:

Immigration is when people move into an area, e.g. Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon escaping the civil unrest in Syria.

Try and get into the habit of using your case studies or real-world examples in any question where you think they might help explain. Don't just save them for the essays.

9 Anomalies score points

For the short answer 'describe the pattern' questions often found in paper 2, the priority is to describe the general trends and back up your answers with specific examples from the information given. However, identifying an anomaly that doesn't fit into the pattern will usually score a point according to the mark scheme. For the 10-mark answers in papers 1 and 2, as well as the essay in paper 3, considering anomalies is also a useful way of incorporating some analysis and evaluation into your writing. Consider the following, which introduces an anomaly:

Breaking this usual correlation between high GNI PPP and a stage 4 contractive population pyramid is the anomaly of Qatar. It has one of the highest GNI figures in the world but it has a low median age of around 33 and a wide base to its pyramid showing a young age dependency ratio. Qatar doesn't fit the usual trend because…

Theory of knowledge

1 How reliable are the statistics and data used in geography case studies?
2 Can our personal values affect how we present geographical issues?
3 Does a lack of science make human geography less rigorous?

10 Know your timings

Work out the timings for each exam paper and practise timed answers. This will help you to feel confident about the timings before your actual geography exams:
● Paper 1 Geographic optional themes: SL 1 hour 30 minutes, HL 2 hours 15 minutes. This is about 45 minutes for each theme question, each worth 20 marks, which equates to just over 2 minutes for each mark.
● Paper 2 Core geographic perspectives — global change: 1 hour 30 minutes (both SL and HL). With a total of 50 marks for paper 2, this equates to just under 2 minutes for each mark.
● Paper 3 HL geographic perspectives — global interactions: 1 hour. With a total of 28 marks, this equates to approximately 2 minutes per mark.

We all work at different speeds but it is important to spend the approximate time allocated for each section of the exam, as this should maximise your scoring potential. However, most of you will complete the short-response questions in under 2 minutes per mark but you will need more time than this for the longer essay-style questions. Practise your 10-mark essay-style answers for papers 1 and 2 in timed conditions. For paper 3, you will likely have to incorporate some planning time as well.

Richard Overens has taught geography in Hong Kong for 17 years. He has examined for IB geography and written texts for both SL and HL.