

Revision Tips and Strategies

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What the job is:

- You are asked to spend an hour writing each answer – and we mean it – that’s enough! Extra-long answers are rarely better and often reveal weaknesses (and there is a word limit of 1500 words each essay).
- You have to answer two questions – so divide your attention and time accordingly
- Use your opening paragraph to indicate the central issue(s) you think the question is raising and how you will address it/them
- Have a list of points you want to make, think about the order you want to make them so that they add up into an argument, and use a new paragraph for each point.

Rules 1....to 20

- Answer the question, Answer the question,
- Do not copy politicians on the news – although do study them to see what it is like to avoid answering simple questions! But don't do as they do!
- And also think about how good people's questions are – are they open ended, or are they trying to force a particular answer?
- At least reflect a bit on questions: eg: Mrs Smith, have you stopped beating your husband? Does the government think it is acceptable to have failed to stockpile PPE? etc. Doing it helps focus your mind on what questions are searching for (or failing to search for!).

How to answer a question?

- One way to think about exam questions is that they identify a problem or issue that they want you to talk about. But they do not always say precisely what that problem is – because they are testing whether you know the material well enough to be able to see the issue they are pointing to.
- What examiners want to see is that you know what the issue is, or that you have ideas about what it might be, that you can describe it and point to the different ways it may be understood, and that you have a view about how best to understand it.
- Sometimes it helps to play around with the question a bit to see what's at issue

For example:

- ‘Despite its emphasis on consent, social contract theory covers a wide spectrum compatible equally with absolutism or popular government.’ How is this possible? Answer with reference to at least TWO texts you have studied.
- The question is pretty up-front about what it’s asking – how come social contract theory can come up with accounts as varied as Hobbes’s absolutism, Locke’s emphasis on freedom, or Rousseau’s popular sovereignty?
- But you don’t answer the question simply by saying Hobbes comes up with X and Locke with Y – it’s asking you to think about where their underlying assumptions differ and how that affects their argument

at least two?

- Should you do a third – or fourth writer – since it says ‘at least Two’ not ‘no more than two’?
- You don’t have much time – depth is better than breadth – and depth is the more challenging thing to attain. When people go for breadth its often because they don’t have much to say about any one person.
- So don’t try and do too much
- Keep it sharp, focused and clearly argued
- And then conclude with a brief paragraph that points to the way you have answered what you were asked

Don't:

- Don't keep referring directly to the question – if you set the answer up clearly in your first paragraph it will be clear that each point you make adds cumulatively to your answer to the precise challenge the question raises
- And you don't need to provide references or quotations – and if you do quote keep them brief and make sure you explain what you take them to demonstrate.

How to think more carefully about a question?

- 2017: 'What was the influence of Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws on EITHER Rousseau's Social Contract OR The Federalist Papers?'
- This is pretty straightforward BUT....
- Try the following:
- Turn it into a quotation: viz
- 'Montesquieu had a profound influence on Rousseau's Social Contract'
- And then ask: What would you have to believe, to believe that?

...the point is - that

- Thinking things through in this way gives you a different perspective on the question –
- It makes you think through the steps
- It encourages you to see the pros and cons of each move you make
- And... above all..
- It keeps you firmly focused on the question – you just keep digging deeper into the interpretation of their relative positions and how far it is plausible to see R as influenced by M.

Revision strategy: On responding to an exam paper

- Take a paper you haven't seen before
- Spend 10 minutes going through it to identify the two questions you think you want to answer
- Set them aside – chose the next two
- Try and say what those second two are really asking about and what you would be wanting to say
- And spend 10-15 minutes each on those second two questions
- THEN – turn to your top 2 and do the same

...and then?

- THEN – sit back and ask which of the four you now think would be the most interesting and creative answer
- Most people play safe – but playing safe when you first see something produces different results from when you have had a chance to think about things more deeply.
- It makes sense to play around, take risks when they aren't costly, and shake things up a bit – because you often have things to say that take a while to come to the surface!

Additional suggestions:

- When you are answering a question – write it down first, think about what you want to say, and then ask whether that ticks all the boxes – that is – if the question has the word misery in the title – you need to address that; if you are asked about critiques of private property – you need to talk about critiques not just (maybe not even) justifications.
- So go back to the question you have written down and make sure (tick off) each of the different components in the question.
- The golden rule is – if its in the question its because we want you to think and talk about it!

What is relevant

- ‘How does Hobbes justify absolute sovereignty?’
- Many historians will start the answer by talking about the civil war and how that broke out and what position Hobbes was in, and how he was in France, and...so on and so on.
- DON'T
- Its not what the question is asking; you get no marks for material that is not relevant to the question; and you should be focusing your attention on that! If its relevant, bring it into the argument you make – if it is not, leave it out!

On criticism and secondary literature

- What you are doing in answering a question is making an argument and deploying evidence to support that argument. Rehearsing what other people say is only relevant if you are asked to do so. Of course you can refer to them if they help your argument- or you can attack their position if that helps you make your argument – but don't discuss them for the sake of discussing them!
- It is your argument, your take on the question, your judgment that matters – we want to know what you know and what you want to argue – its as simple as that!