

Writing an 'evaluate using evidence' essay

Because science is evidence driven, the instruction in an essay about a scientific topic to 'refer to evidence' should be superfluous. By now you should be very used to using evidence to support or challenge different arguments. However, an additional skill when using evidence is to incorporate a critical appraisal of the evidence you cite. Being able to do this helps you develop your discussions considerably, resulting in better AO2 marks.

The essay analysis question you are attempting is this:

Describe and evaluate one explanation of OCD. Refer to evidence in your answer.

Recall that before you start answering a question you need to ask yourself:

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

The question is a straightforward one with an obvious topic:

Outline and evaluate one explanation of OCD. Refer to evidence in your answer.

And it has clear requirements:

Outline and evaluate one explanation of OCD. Refer to evidence in your answer.

Those are the question's requirements then. The mark allocation should by now be obvious. Recall that an essay is assessed on two main objectives: knowledge and understanding (AO1) and commentary, analysis, criticism and evaluation (AO2). On PSYB2 a ten mark essay can earn 5 AO1 and 5 AO2 marks. So we can work out that you need to:

- **Describe**...one explanation of OCD. 'Describe' is an AO1 term meaning 'give an account of'. You'll be earning AO1 marks every time you show knowledge and understanding of an explanation of OCD by showing how it explains the process by which people come to show the symptoms of OCD.
- **Evaluate**...one explanation of OCD. 'Evaluate' is an AO2 term which means 'arrive at a conclusion about the value of something through a consideration of its strengths and weaknesses'. So you will get AO2 marks for identifying positive and negative criticisms of an explanation of OCD, justifying them and then drawing an overall conclusion about the explanation's value to psychology.
- **Refer to evidence**. This restriction means that some or all of your evaluation must be based on a consideration of evidence from research studies. This mainly affects your AO2 mark, but it also means that the examiner is offering a mark or two for knowledge and understanding of the evidence (AO1).

What should go into this answer then? One explanation is required, and the specification requires that you have studied two. No specific evidence is required but there does need to be some research evidence in your essay. So the material we could include here would be:

- Explanations of OCD: cognitive theory (attempted suppression); Biological theory (genes)
- Studies of the causes of OCD: e.g. cognitive: LaDouceur (2000); biological: Bellodi et al (2001); Pauls et al (1995); Rapoport & Wise (1987).

Given that the selection of which explanation to present is left up to you the obvious thing to do in the exam is to choose the one you can describe in most accurate detail. However, you must also consider which studies you know about and which will generate the best commentary, criticism and evaluation.

The AO1 skill we're practicing here is the skill of **describing theories** accurately and in detail. You'll be doing this well when you can present, in your own words, an account of how psychologists have explained the nature and origin of the symptoms of OCD. Here's an example of how this might be done for a cognitive theory of OCD:

Frost et al (2005) present a cognitive theory of OCD based on a sequence of events that goes: intrusive experience → interpretation → behaviour. The intrusive experience is a thought or impulse of an anxiety-provoking kind (e.g. 'there are germs all over my hands'). This gives rise to an interpretation of the experience (e.g. 'I will catch a disease and get ill or maybe die'). This, in turn, gives rise to ritualistic behaviour (e.g. handwashing and decontamination rituals) which serves to reduce the anxiety associated with the interpretation. At the same time the person may try to avoid the intrusive thought that started the process. Paradoxically, the attempt not to think about the obsession increases the probability that it will intrude again. In this way, the activating thoughts or impulses become frequent (obsession) and the anxiety-reducing behaviours become repetitive (compulsion).

The AO2 skill we're practicing here is **evaluating using evidence**. You'll be doing this well when you can identify evidence that supports or challenges a theory, present its key features, comment on how it provides support or challenges the theory and then consider how much weight should be attached to the evidence in the light of its likely validity. Here's how it could be done for this [current skill]:

Support for the cognitive explanation comes from LaDouceur et al (2000) who found that compared with a control group, OCD patients used more strategies to try and control their intrusive thoughts. This is consistent with Frost's view of the role of attempted suppression in OCD. However, the self-report method

used by LaDouceur may not have produced valid data as OCD patients may not have full insight into their own thought processes. Additionally, because the design of the study was quasi-experimental, we cannot conclude that suppression attempts play a causal role in OCD. Furthermore, LaDouceur's study sheds no light on what causes the intrusive thoughts to occur in the first place. Therefore this study does not fully support the cognitive view of OCD.

It's important that the examiner knows that you are evaluating so your use of evidence needs to be clear from your phrasing. In the example above a number of useful phrases are used:

- 'Support for...comes from' shows that the writer is using the material to frame an evaluation.
- 'This is consistent with' highlights where the theory and evidence agree.
- 'However' introduces some arguments that weaken the support of this evidence.
- 'Additionally' and 'furthermore' introduce further criticisms.

The final line brings the criticisms back to the cognitive explanation of OCD. This is very important because it was the explanations we were asked to evaluate, not the evidence. So any evaluation of the evidence must be made relevant to the question.

So what should you put in your essay? This time we're looking for you to apply all these skills to the biological explanation of OCD. Your essay will be assessed using the criteria below. **All the criteria must be addressed.** As you are planning your essay and organising your material, you need to be thinking about how well the biological approach explains OCD and how good its evidential support is.

Assessment objective	What I'm looking for...	Have you done this?
AO1 – Knowledge and understanding of biological explanations of OCD.	Accurate and detailed description of biological accounts of OCD. Both genetic and brain-based explanations should be presented. Description makes it clear how genetic and brain abnormalities might result in the symptoms of OCD.	
AO1 – Knowledge and understanding of studies of the causes of OCD.	Essay includes research evidence relating to biological explanations of OCD. At least one study should be into genetic influences. At least one study should be into brain abnormalities. Studies are not described in full detail; only details relevant to evaluation are presented.	

AO2 – evaluating theories using evidence	Attention is drawn to evidence that supports and challenges the biological theory. Use of evidence is clearly flagged with appropriate phrases. An explanation is given of how each piece of evidence supports or challenges the theory. An overall conclusion is drawn taking all the evidence into account.	
AO2 – bringing criticisms of research evidence into evaluation of theories	Where relevant, attention is drawn to factors that limit the validity of the evidence used to evaluate the theory. It is explained how this affects the ability of the evidence to support or challenge the theory.	

You will need to first present the theory and then discuss the evidence and evaluate so the above grid isn't an essay plan – it's there to help you plan more effectively by ensuring you include all the material you need to address.

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 without attribution. If you are quoting directly from a source you must cite the name(s) of the author(s) and the date of publication. 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.