

## Improving your commentary 2: using evidence

You are learning how to...	In the context of...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use evidence effectively in your psychology essays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forensic, atypical and developmental psychology</li> </ul>

### Keep it concise and relevant

Evidence is used throughout psychological writing to evaluate the claims made by psychological theories. The secret to using evidence effectively is to restrict yourself to what is relevant to your purpose in writing. Often, your purpose is determined by the exam question you are answering.

Here are some common errors that students might make when answering the question ‘**Describe and evaluate Bowlby’s maternal deprivation hypothesis**’. Try to identify the problems with each example. Bear in mind what the *question* is asking the student to do.

*Bowlby’s MDH is supported by his own study. Bowlby’s (1946) aim was to examine the relationship between early deprivation and later behaviour. He interviewed 44 juvenile delinquents and a control group of 44 disturbed children. They were asked about themselves and their family and life history. Their families were also interviewed. He looked at whether the children had ever been separated from their mothers. Bowlby used the data from the interviews to classify some of the children as affectionless psychopaths. He found that the affectionless psychopaths had often been separated from their mothers in infancy whereas those who were not affectionless psychopaths were less likely to have been separated. This supports the MDH.*

*Bowlby (1946) looked for a relationship between affectionless psychopathy and maternal deprivation. He found that young offenders with an affectionless character were more likely than non-affectionless offenders to have been separated from their mothers.*

*Bowlby’s finding that affectionless psychopathy in offenders is linked to maternal deprivation supports the MHD because the MDH predicts that maternal deprivation will impair the individual’s later ability to form social relationships, leading to antisocial behaviour. However, we must question whether it was ethical of Bowlby to label some of the children as affectionless psychopaths as this might have led to stigmatization and other undesirable effects of labeling.*

*Bowlby’s MDH predicts an association between maternal deprivation and delinquency. The strongest support for this prediction comes from Bowlby (1946) who found that juvenile thieves with an ‘affectionless’ character were more likely than a comparison group to have been maternally deprived early in life. However, Bowlby classified children as ‘maternally deprived’ with as little as two weeks’ separation.*

### **Too much detail**

The first example gives far too much detail about the aim and method of the research. This level of detail might have been appropriate if the question had specifically asked about *studies* of the MDH but since the focus here is on evaluating the MDH it is more appropriate to focus on findings and conclusions.

### **So what?**

The second example is much more to the point but it doesn't explain whether and how the finding described supports or challenges the MDH. It's almost as if the student is saying to the examiner, 'here's the evidence; *you* work it out!' The examiner will not do this. She will say, 'so what?' and move on without giving you a mark.

### **Irrelevant criticism**

The third example starts well by avoiding the issues that spoil the first two. The student then tries to enhance their commentary by drawing attention to limitations of Bowlby's study. This is potentially a good strategy but they blew it by highlighting an issue with the research that is irrelevant to their purpose. The question here is whether Bowlby was correct about the effects of maternal deprivation. Whether or not his study was ethical has no bearing on this, important though ethics are in research. Again, with a different question (e.g. 'describe and evaluate research into the effects of deprivation') this material could have been relevant.

### **Relevant criticism but not brought back to the main issues**

The last example avoids all of the previous errors. Unfortunately, whilst the student has brought in a relevant criticism of the research they haven't explained how this methodological weakness undermines the study's support for the MDH. Consequently, whilst the criticism is appropriate, it is still not made relevant to the question.

### **When using evidence to evaluate a theory, try to:**

- 'Set up' your evaluation by indicating what the theory predicts.
- Outline the research, focusing principally on the results.
- Explain the extent to which the results support or challenge the theory.
- Where relevant, draw attention to methodological weaknesses (or strengths) of the research.
- Explain (1) how these might have affected the results and therefore (2) the extent to which the study's support for/challenge of the theory is strengthened or undermined.

### **Now you have a go...**

Write a paragraph in which you use Bowlby (1946) to evaluate the MDH and draw attention to how limitations of the study limit its support for the MDH. Use the good parts of the examples to give you ideas about how to express things concisely.

Use the following studies to evaluate the theories indicated. Use the structure and phrasing suggested above.

- The social learning theory of offending – Bandura et al (1963)
- The family systems theory of schizophrenia – Bateson (1965)
- The core knowledge view of infant cognition – Baillargeon et al (1985)

Practice this way of writing in other areas where you know your evaluation tends to be weak.