

Writing a ‘critical discussion of studies’ essay

This sort of essay is relatively common and requires you to take a critical look at studies conducted within a particular area of psychology. You can go wrong with this sort of essay if you ignore the ‘studies’ part and just write a general essay about the topic. The best essays are always those that focus clearly on the requirements of the question.

The essay question you are attempting is this:

Describe and critically discuss at least two studies of conformity (10 marks).

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?

This question is easy to analyse as the topic is very clearly identified:

Describe and critically discuss at least two studies of conformity.

The requirements are also clearly laid out for you. We need to notice that there are two distinct requirements here:

Describe and critically discuss at least two studies of conformity.

Those are the question’s requirements then. What we must do now is work out how the marks are going to be awarded by the examiner. 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...at least two studies of conformity.** ‘Describe’ is an AO1 term that means ‘give an account of’. You’ll be earning AO1 marks every time you show knowledge and understanding of studies of conformity by giving an accurate and detailed account of what took place.
- **Critically discuss...at least two studies of conformity.** ‘Critically discuss’ is an AO2 term that means ‘comment on, drawing particular attention to the limitations’. So you will get AO2 marks for stating and justifying negative criticisms of the studies you have described.

What else do we need to know? What about this phrase ‘at least two’? Is it important? Yes it is. The examiner is placing an additional requirement on your answer. There must be at least two studies in your essay. If there is only one then you will not have met the requirements of the question and your mark will automatically be restricted. Does that mean you could put in five or six? In principle, yes but in practice this is not a good idea. You only have 15 minutes or so in the exam to write your essay. If you tried to describe and critically discuss five or six studies either it would take you much longer than 15 minutes or you would do a very superficial job of it. In an essay like this two or three studies is best.

What material should we use then? We need at least two research studies (NB. not *explanations* or *types*) of conformity. So the material we could include here would be:

- Studies of conformity e.g. Jenness (1932); Sherif (1935); Asch (1952); Crutchfield (1956); Perrin & Spencer (1982)

You'll need to select the studies that allow you to write the best essay. This is harder than it sounds because you need to think through not just what you know and can describe but also what you're going to say about it to earn AO2 marks. It's best if you can make different AO2 points about each study because you won't get more marks for making the same points over and over again.

Although there are other approaches we could take, we're going to write this essay by choosing two or three studies and using the concept of external validity to critically discuss them.

The AO1 skill we're practicing here is the skill of **describing studies** accurately and in detail. You'll be doing this well when you can present, in your own words, a narrative account of how a particular piece of research was carried out including the following information: the aim of the study, the method the researchers used to gather the data and the results they obtained. Here's an example of how this could be done for Jenness's (1932) study:

Jenness (1932) conducted a study to see whether pressure from a group could change individual judgements. He showed student PPs a jar full of beans and asked them to estimate how many there were. The students first estimated individually. Then they were put in a room together and asked for a group estimate. Finally they were asked for another individual estimate. Jenness found that the second individual estimate tended to be closer to the group judgement than the first individual estimate.

The AO2 skills we're practicing here are **interpreting research results** and **critically evaluating** research studies. You've practised the first skill in a previous essay so we'll focus on the critical evaluation. You'll be doing this well when you can state a problem with a research study and then follow that up with an explanation of the effect this problem might have on our ability to trust the results of the study. Here's how it could be done for Jenness' (1932) study:

Jenness's study shows that a group can influence an individual's judgement. However, a problem with Jenness' study is that the PPs were all students in a university setting. Students are generally young and in a university setting may feel like they are expected to fit in with the views of others. Consequently they may be more likely to conform than older people or people in less formal situations. We must therefore be cautious when generalising Jenness's findings.

It's important that the examiner can follow your reasoning when you present a criticism. In the example above there are some important words and phrases that help you make it clear to the examiner what your reasoning is:

- **'However...'** indicates that what follows in some way conflicts with what came before. Here it serves to 'flag up' that a criticism is coming.
- **'A problem is...'** makes it clear that you are stating a criticism. Other useful phrases for this are 'one limitation of...is...', 'one weakness of...is...' and 'the validity of...is limited by...'
- **'Consequently'** and **'therefore'** link the different propositions in the argument, showing the logic that underlies the criticism. This serves to justify the criticism, and all criticisms in a psychology essay must be justified.

So what should you put in your essay? This time we're looking for you to apply those two AO2 skills (interpreting; criticising) to two studies of conformity. Your essay will be assessed using the criteria below. The first three are compulsory. If you're confident with them you can have a go at the last. In order to do this you will need to do some additional reading about internal validity. A useful concept to research for this is 'demand characteristics'.

Assessment objective	What I'm looking for...	Have you done this?
AO1 – knowledge and understanding of studies of conformity.	Accurate and detailed description of two studies of conformity <i>excluding</i> Jenness (1932). Descriptions give details of aim, method and results. Results are described in terms of trends and figures are given.	
AO2 – interpretation of research findings.	Appropriate conclusions drawn given the aims of the study. Conclusions are clearly flagged with appropriate phrases.	
AO2 – critical discussion of research studies based on external validity.	Attention is drawn to factors that limit the external validity of the studies (sample; setting). Criticism is clearly flagged with appropriate phrases An explanation is given of the effect of the limitation on the validity of the study.	
AO2 – critical discussion of research studies based on internal validity (OPTIONAL).	As above, but criticism focuses on factors that limit the internal validity of the studies.	

You will need to deal with each study individually 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. A plan would look more like this:

AO1*Jenness (1932)**Beans in jar**Ind. Estimate → group est → ind. est*AO2*Sample - students**Setting - uni**Limits generalisation***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.