

Writing a 'discuss factors' essay

Several A-Level topics specify 'factors in' a range of processes (e.g. conformity and obedience) and it is not unusual for essays to be set asking students to discuss these factors. This type of essay presents a particular challenge because it is very broad and in the limited time available you couldn't properly discuss all possible factors. Consequently you need to be selective, which requires planning. This essay will be about defiance of authority because it's a topic that many students seem to neglect in their preparation.

The essay analysis question you are attempting is this:

Explain and discuss the role of situational and dispositional factors in defiance of authority (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?

The topic here is clearly:

Explain and discuss the role of **situational and dispositional factors in defiance of authority** (10 marks).

The requirements are:

Explain and **discuss** the role of situational and dispositional factors in defiance of authority (10 marks).

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:

- **Explain...**factors in defiance of authority. 'Explain' is an AO1 term meaning 'give an account based on cause and effect'. You'll be earning AO1 marks every time you show knowledge and understanding of the situational and dispositional factors that affect defiance of authority by identifying them and describing how they increase or decrease a person's tendency to resist authority.
- **Discuss...**factors in defiance of authority. 'Discuss' is an AO2 term that means 'comment on from a number of different points of view'. So you will get AO2 marks for looking critically at each factor and considering the arguments for and against its significance in terms of research evidence.

What should go into this answer then? The question requires us to consider two types of factor. Dispositional factors are internal to the person, and situational factors are external to the person. We need to make sure both types are fully discussed. Suitable material would be:

- Dispositional factors: personality (e.g. authoritarianism; empathy); upbringing & personal values.
- Situational factors: presence of legitimate authority; social support; lack of buffers; responsibility cues.

What's very important is covering both types of factor clearly – if you don't, your mark will automatically be restricted. By you also need to ensure that you choose the factors which will allow you to meet the AO2 requirement by discussing. So you need to consider what evidence you can use to drive your discussion. What many students fail to realise here is that, whilst there are studies specifically of defiance of authority, much of the evidence relating to obedience can also be made relevant here, provided you focus on the reasons why people *didn't* obey.

The AO1 skill we're practicing here is the skill of **explaining psychological processes** accurately and in detail. You'll be doing this well when you can present, in your own words, an account of a factor that makes people more or less likely to disobey authority, along with an explanation of how the factor produces its effect. Here's an example of how this might be done for the situational factor 'presence of legitimate authority':

One situational factor suggested to affect defiance is the presence of a legitimate authority figure. The authority figure acts as a cue for the person to remain in an agentic state, which makes them obedient. Consequently, defiance of authority is much more likely when the authority is not physically present.

The AO2 skill we're practicing here is **discussing psychological processes**. You'll be doing this well when you can present arguments for and against a factor having a significant impact on defiance and justify your arguments, for example, by using evidence. Here's how it could be done for 'presence of legitimate authority':

The importance of the presence of the authority figure is supported by Milgram's (1963) study where the experimenter left the room and issued instructions by telephone. In this study, only 22% of PP gave maximum shock, so 78% of them were defiant to some extent. Some were publicly defiant and openly refused to obey the orders. Others were privately defiant and 'cheated' by pretending to give the shocks. However, in Hofling et al's (1966) study the 'doctor's' orders were issued by telephone and 21/22 nurses still obeyed, suggesting that in some situations the absence of the authority figure does not increase the chance of defiance.

Note that the writer is using evidence from what are normally considered studies of obedience. However, they are presented as studies of defiance because the disobedient PPs are focused on and the writer frequently uses the word 'defiant' to draw the examiner's attention to this. Because this is a discussion we need to show the examiner that we are thinking critically and considering several different points of view. In the paragraph above this is achieved by several key phrases:

- 'The importance of...is supported by' shows that the writer is evaluating the factor and using evidence to do so.
- 'However' signals that a contradictory or challenging point is about to be made.
- 'Suggesting that...' shows that the writer is interpreting the evidence.

So what should you put in your essay? In an essay like this you should probably attempt a full discussion of three or four factors. This time we want you to discuss three factors. At least one must be situational and at least one must be dispositional (and your essay must make clear which is which). 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 thinking about the weight of the evidence for situational and dispositional factors.

Assessment objective	What I'm looking for...	Have you done this?
A01 – Knowledge and understanding of factors that affect defiance	Three factors are included, at least one situational and one dispositional (<i>excluding</i> presence of authority figure). Each factor is clearly identified as situational or dispositional. A clear and accurate account is given of what each factor consists of and how it acts to increase or decrease the probability of defiance.	
A01 – Knowledge and understanding of studies of obedience/defiance.	Studies of obedience/defiance are included in the essay. Only relevant details are given to illustrate the issues; lengthy descriptions of the studies are avoided.	
A02 – Discussion of factors in defiance.	For each factor, arguments are presented for and against its importance in terms of defiance. Arguments for and against are clearly flagged using appropriate phrases. All arguments are justified or supported with evidence.	
A02 – Drawing conclusions from discussions (OPTIONAL).	An overall conclusion is drawn regarding the relative importance of situational and dispositional factors in defiance. The conclusion is justified with reference to the evidence cited.	

You will need to discuss each factor in turn 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:

A01

Presence of authority

Maintains agentic shift

Defiance less likely

A02

Support: Milgram exp. absent

Challenge: Hofling

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.