Collins Study Skills in English

ANSWERING EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

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## Contents

The aims of the book .................................................. vi

What kind of student are you?. ....................................... 7
Questionnaire .......................................................... 7

**Chapter One**  What do the examiners want? ................. 9
Section 1    Facts for schoolchildren ............................. 9
          The problem of relevance .................................. 9
          Exercises on relevance ................................. 10
          *Exercise 1 — The wrong answers* .................. 11
          *Exercise 2 — Checking relevance* ................. 12
          *Exercise 3 — A relevance exercise for your own subject* 13
          The problem of classifying ............................. 13
          *Exercise 4 — Jane's reasons* ....................... 14
          *Exercise 5 — For and against* ...................... 14
Section 2    Arguments for adults ............................... 15
          What is a planned argument? ......................... 16
          *Exercise 6 — Plan or list?* ....................... 16
          Relevance and argument ............................ 17

**Chapter Two**  The form of the examination paper .......... 18
      *Exercise 7 — How careful are you?* ................. 19

**Chapter Three**  A closer look at questions ................. 21
Section 1    The vocabulary of questions — Glossary ........ 21
          *Exercise 8 — Some difficult words* .............. 23
Section 2    Instructions and some simple arguments .......... 24
          Definitions ............................................. 25
          Descriptions ......................................... 25
          Discussions .......................................... 28
          Comparing and contrasting — comparison answers .... 30
          *Exercise 9 — Drawing plans for arguments* ....... 31
Section 3    Choosing a question ............................... 31
          Easier questions: how to recognise them ............ 31
          More difficult questions ............................ 32
          Quotation questions .................................. 32
          Faulty questions ..................................... 32
          Is this my question? Identifying topics .......... 33
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Thinking through a question</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 10 — Your routine</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 11 — Geoff’s routine</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Displaying your knowledge</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 12 — Selling the packet</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 13 — Judging a pass answer</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 14 — Judging a fail answer</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 15 — Judging your own answers</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Techniques of display</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Section 1 Definitions</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 16 — Which words should you define?</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples of sentences used to define and explain</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 17 — Defining ‘cost’</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definitions inside the answer</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 18 — Adding information</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 19 — Your own definitions</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Section 2 Checking relevance</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 20 — Recognising irrelevance</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Section 3 Planning</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 21 — Planned or not?</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Section 4 Making points</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 22 — What’s the point?</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Section 5 and 6 Reasons and examples</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 23 — The landlady’s daughter</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Section 7 Explanatory words and phrases</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 24 — School to university</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using these phrases and words in your own answer</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Section 8 Concluding</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise 25 — Conclusions</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Working on your own examination papers</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>A trial examination</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>The real examination</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological preparation</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical preparation</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad luck</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helping the examiner</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The all important question of timing</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Routine</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The panic button</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix One  Attitudes to learning  .................................. 66
Section 1  Introduction  .................................................. 66
Section 2  Comments on the questionnaire  .................... 66
Section 3  The two kinds of students  ................................. 68
  Exercise 26—Factors that contribute to success and failure  72
Appendix Two  Revision techniques  ................................. 75
What should I revise?  .................................................. 75
Organisation  ............................................................ 76
Concentration  ............................................................ 76
Places and tools  ......................................................... 76
Different methods of revision  ........................................ 77
Appendix Three  Anxiety and stress  ................................. 80
Appendix Four  Advice on particular subjects ..................... 82
Appendix Five  Information on examinations and examining bodies  86
Answer Key  ............................................................. 89
Chapter Five  Displaying your knowledge

Exercise 12—Selling the packet

Suppose you had to buy some glue to mend the chair in your room. Inside the hardware shop you picked up two packets of glue. You looked at the packets and tried to decide which one was best. The glue formula seemed the same on each packet. Then you looked at the instructions and information and the way they were set out. Packet A seemed better than Packet B in every way. Draw a line linking the good points with Packet A and the bad ones with Packet B. The first two lines are drawn for you.

A

Name clearly visible
Seems to have two names
Badly printed and difficult to read
Printed information clear and easy to read
Words and sentences short so easy to understand
Long sentences and words—very puzzling
Formula in the middle of instructions
No examples or illustrations, but a list of other glues produced by the company, which you are not interested in
Formula, instructions and examples of use separately explained
Clear examples and pictures of how to use the glue
Information muddled
Obviously well thought out packet, pleasant to look at

B

It is obvious which one you will buy.
Perhaps you can think of your examination questions in the same way.
Do you display your knowledge and make it easy for the examiner? Or do you take the formulae and instructions that you have spent so many lonely hours preparing, and put them on a packet that no-one would want to buy? Think about your work and decide if you do take trouble to display your knowledge. Then go on to work through the next exercises.
Let us turn now from glue packets to our real subject, examination answers. Suppose you are now an examiner with a pile of scripts to mark. The students have begun by writing an answer to 'Does democracy require an opposition?' The first paper you read is quite a good one.

Exercise 13—Judging a pass answer

As you read the paper, keep the following questions in mind.

1. Does the student know what he is writing about?
2. Are the facts relevant?
3. Has he tried to plan the argument?
4. Does he make his points clearly?
5. Does he give reasons for his points?
6. Does he support his points with examples?
7. Has he explained the argument clearly?
8. Has he answered the question?

and most important of all

Does Democracy Require an Opposition?

Democracy is a system of government where the power lies with the people of the country. Abraham Lincoln called it 'government of the people, by the people and for the people'. In other words it is a form of government where all the adult people of a country make their own laws for their own benefit and in this way govern themselves. As all the people cannot meet in the Parliament or legislative assembly, they have to elect representatives they trust who make laws for them. This is called representative democracy.

Most countries of the world call themselves democracies today but only some have oppositions or opposition parties. In the democracies that have copied Britain, the electors vote for members of political parties and the leaders of the majority party form the government. The elected representatives of the minority party or parties are the opposition.

The opposition has several valuable functions in a democracy. In the first place it provides criticism of the government by exposing corruption and unlawful use of power. Government Ministers are very aware that their faults will be noted and publicised by the opposition. Secondly the opposition members sit in the legislative assembly with the government members and together they debate and argue the laws, making sure they are properly considered before they are passed. A third point is that an opposition represents the views of a large minority of people in the country; that is all those who did not vote for the government party. They can also represent racial minorities or religious groups, as, for example, the Scottish Nationalists or the Pan Malayan Islamic Party in Malaysia. In addition the opposition provides an alternative to the present government, so that if the people disagree with government policy they can vote for the opposition parties in the next election. If it has helped to make law, any new government will be aware of the problems of the country. Perhaps the most important reason for the existence of an opposition is that it is an easy and peaceful way to change one government for another and there is no need for violence, army takeovers, shootings and so on. The 1981 elections in France changed the
policies from rather conservative to very socialist ones but there was no violence.

It must be remembered however that this system only works if both government and opposition keep the rules of the constitution. The opposition does have a great deal of power and it must use this power responsibly for the good of the country.

On the other hand there are two types of state which call themselves democracies who maintain that no opposition is required.

The first is the Marxist type. In Marxist or Communist states there is only one party, the Communist party, which is the political expression of Marx's phrase 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. Logically, since this party represents the 'people', any opposition can only be against the 'people'. The functions of the Western-type opposition are here replaced by organised self-criticism within the party, as happens in the People's Republic of China. Sometimes this 'self-criticism' seems to work, as in the German Democratic Republic, but in other countries, for instance Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and, to a certain extent, Poland in 1981, violent rebellions have taken place, partly because there was no opposition mechanism that could bring about a peaceful change.

The second type of state with no opposition is found among Third World countries, especially in Africa. Here a strong central government is needed to develop the country economically, and opposition parties are often either discouraged or actively repressed. However, here again political change is often violent, as when the Ghanaian army took over from President Kwame Nkrumah in 1966.

Both these types of state claim to be democratic, elected by the people, but because there is often little personal freedom in them and criticism of the government may not be allowed, many people would not agree they were true democracies.

To conclude, whether we decide that democracy requires an opposition or not depends very much on the meaning we give to 'democracy'. Most people would say that it has to include the right to form and belong to responsible opposition parties.

Now you have to mark the paper:
a) Give the student a mark out of five for each of the following questions, remembering that 1 = fail, 2 = pass, 3 = credit, 4 = distinction.
b) Complete the evidence for questions 2 and 6.

The first question is done for you.

1 Does the student know what he is writing about?
   Evidence—He defines the word 'democracy' clearly and explains 'opposition'.
   Mark 4 / 5

2 Are the facts relevant?
   Evidence—'Democracy' is mentioned ______ times and 'opposition' ______ times. There is very little irrelevant material.
   Mark / 5

3 Has he tried to plan the argument?
   Evidence—He gives points for and against.
   Mark / 5

4 Does he make his points clearly?
   Evidence—The first sentences in paragraphs 3 and 5 make his main points.
   Mark / 5
5 Does he give reasons for his points?
   Evidence—He gives five reasons for the value of an opposition and two against.
   Mark [ ]/5

6 Does he support the points with examples?
   Evidence—He mentions _______ countries.
   Mark [ ]/5

7 Has he explained the argument clearly?
   Evidence—He uses phrases such as 'In the first place', 'secondly', 'on the other hand', 'an example of this'.
   Mark [ ]/5

8 Has he answered the question?
   Evidence—He gives his answer to the question clearly in the conclusion.
   Mark [ ]/5

   total mark [ ]/40

To transfer this to a percentage multiply by 10 and divide by 4:

\[
\frac{\text{mark}}{4} \times 10 = \% 
\]

Exercise 14—Judging a fail answer

Read the next candidate's answer to the same question.

Does Democracy Require an Opposition?

Man has evolved democratic institutions as the highest form of society. Today democracy means we have freedom of speech and movement and transfer of peoples if they wish from country to country. These are the benefits of the twentieth century.

Other forms of government are the monarchy, where the power is descended through a family. This power is usually limited in some way by some form of representative government so that the power of the monarch cannot become tyrannical and if these limitations are truly representative of the people as a whole then we might call the monarchy a democracy. There are also government by an oligarchy and of course the Communist governments, which are monolithic.

In a democracy the adult population elect representatives to legislate for them in the legislative assembly or Parliament, as it is termed in the UK. In the USA it is termed the House of Representatives. Adults are those over 18 years old, unless they are mad or serving a long term prison sentence. In Britain elections are held at least every five years. Voting is not compulsory as it is in some countries. The representatives are usually members of political parties and the voters choose their representatives according to the political party they wish to vote for. The majority party forms the government and the minority party or parties form the opposition. Political parties may range from the very conservative or reactionary to the 'far Left'. In Communist countries only one party is allowed—the Communist party—and there is no opposition.

The party that has most representatives forms the government. The other parties are in opposition. The opposition criticises the government, debates new laws to be
passed with the government and represents the views of the minorities. If the present government is defeated, then the opposition becomes the majority and forms the new government. Before 1981 the UDF were in power in France but in 1981 M. Mitterrand’s Socialists won the majority of the votes and became the government.

Try to judge this answer by the same standards as the first one.

a) Give the student a mark out of five.

Note: 1 = fail, 2 = pass, 3 = credit, 4 = distinction.

b) Complete the evidence as far as you can.

Remember that there is no one 'correct' answer to this exercise. This is not a test of you as an examiner, but an attempt to make you realise the problems of an examiner.

1 Does the student know what he is writing about?
   Evidence—He tries to define ‘democracy’ but _________

   He does/does not explain ‘opposition’.

   Mark □/5

2 Are the facts relevant?
   Evidence—'Democracy' is mentioned ______ times and
   'opposition' ______ times.

   Mark □/5

3 Has he tried to plan the argument?
   Evidence—__________________________

   Mark □/5

4 Does he make his points clearly?
   Evidence—It is difficult to find any main points.

   Mark □/5

5 Does he give reasons for his points?
   Evidence—He describes some functions of an opposition
   but does not say if they are necessary in a democracy.

   Mark □/5

6 Does he support the points with examples?
   Evidence—He only mentions ______ countries, though
   he obviously knows something about French politics.

   Mark □/5

7 Has he explained the argument clearly?
   Evidence—There are very few explaining words and
   phrases.

   Mark □/5

8 Has he answered the question?
   Evidence—Is there a conclusion?

   Mark □/5

   total mark □/40

To transfer this to a percentage, multiply by 10 and divide by 4:

\[
\frac{\text{mark}}{4} \times 10 = \% \]
Exercise 15—Judging your own answers

Look at several of your essays and old examination papers if possible. Write down your own opinion of your work in answer to the same questions.

1. Do I know what I’m writing about?
   *Evidence* — 
   Mark [ ] /5

2. Are the facts relevant to the question asked?
   *Evidence* — 
   Mark [ ] /5

3. Have I tried to plan the argument?
   *Evidence* — 
   Mark [ ] /5

4. Do I make my points clearly?
   *Evidence* — 
   Mark [ ] /5

5. Do I give reasons for my points?
   *Evidence* — 
   Mark [ ] /5

6. Do I support my points with examples? (including diagrams, graphs etc. if relevant)
   *Evidence* — 
   Mark [ ] /5

7. Do I explain the argument clearly?
   *Evidence* — 
   Mark [ ] /5

8. Do I answer the question?
   *Evidence* — 
   Mark [ ] /5

   total mark [ ] /40

Now find your percentage:

\[
\frac{\text{mark}}{4} \times 10 = \% 
\]
Now you can answer the question on page 37. Do you take trouble to display your knowledge?

The next chapter
The above eight questions make up the eight sections of the next chapter.

If after reading Chapter Six you need further practice in displaying your knowledge, or if you are an overseas student and would like help with the actual language, then it is suggested you study Academic Writing Course by R. R. Jordan (1980), Collins Study Skills in English.