

CHAPTER 16

Essay Writing

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How to Write the AP Psychology Essay

Every year around the beginning of June, high school and college psychology teachers gather at a university for one purpose: to grade AP psychology essays. These readers are assigned to one of the two essay questions and go through careful training to ensure they grade your writing fairly and consistently. Readers go through several reliability checks during the reading to make sure each essay is read fairly. This is a unique experience for many of them, just as writing the AP psychology essay might be a unique writing experience for you.

Writing an effective essay response on the AP psychology test may require you to modify the way you usually answer an essay question. These essays are graded in a very specific way, and your writing should take this difference into account. Essay graders strive to be very consistent and objective, so the tests are graded in a systematic way. The entire grading system is set up to ensure that every student's response is given a fair reading. Understanding how the tests are graded should give you insight as to how to use your writing time best. This chapter will provide an example of an AP-style essay question and a rubric (a guide readers use to grade student responses) similar to the ones used in the grading of the test. A fictional student response is provided with an explanation of how the rubric would be used to grade that response. Finally, some general suggestions are provided about writing AP psychology essays.

Sample Essay Question

Professor Reiman, a social psychology researcher, is interested in expanding on Solomon Asch's conformity research. Professor Reiman decides to place participants into a room with three confederates who know about the experiment. In the room, the group is asked to compare the size of geometric figures. The participants are randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the first group, the three confederates are introduced to the participant as introductory psychology students. In the second group, two of the confederates are introduced as introductory psychology students, but one is identified as a graduate student in perception

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research from a prestigious college. During the experiment in both conditions, the confederates all give the same wrong answers to some of the size comparison questions. Professor Reiman keeps track of how many times the participant conforms to the incorrect answers of the rest of the group. In this experiment:

- (A) Identify the independent variable, the dependent variable, the operational definition of the dependent variable, and at least one confounding variable controlled for by the experimental design.
- (B) Explain the principal difference between Professor Reiman's study and Asch's original research about conformity.
- (C) Predict the level of conformity in the first group relative to the level of conformity in the second group based on your knowledge of Asch's research and social psychological principles. Identify what psychological principle you base your prediction on.

After reading the question, stop and think about what it is asking you. You are allowed to make notes on the question sheet, and many students find making a simple outline at this point and organizing their thoughts helpful. All essay questions imply a certain organization for your answer. **Use this implied organization, do not ignore it.** You might be tempted to create a unique organization for your answer. However, your reader is not giving you points based on organization, so the time you spend on this is wasted. In addition, if you answer a question out of order, you increase the chances the reader might misunderstand what you are trying to say. In this case, the format of the question indicates you organize your essay into three main parts: A, B, and C. You do not need to label these parts A, B, and C. (In fact, make sure you do not just write your answer as an outline.) However, the question writer is giving you a hint about how best to organize your response. Write your essay in this organization. In addition, notice the essay does NOT ask you to review Asch's studies on conformity in detail. For the last two parts of the question, having a basic knowledge of Asch's study would be helpful. However, you could write a detailed description of this research and not answer this question directly. Do what is asked of you in an essay. Adding information the question does not ask for (even if it is accurate information) is a waste of time and will not get you additional points. Do not spend time writing an introduction or conclusion for your essay, since grading rubrics do not give points for introductions or conclusions. You may want to write your answer to this question before going on in this chapter to the scoring rubric for this question. When you are ready, examine the following rubric for this essay question and notice how the points are scored:

Rubric for Sample Question

This is an 8-point question. Four points are possible in part A, 1 point in part B, and 3 points in part C.

- (A) Identify the independent variable, the dependent variable, the operational definition of the dependent variable, and at least one confounding variable controlled for by the experimental design.

Point 1—Independent variable—The essay should identify the different introductions of the confederates as the independent variable. In the first condition, all the confederates were introduced as psychology students. In the second condition, one of them was identified as a graduate student in perception. This was the only designed difference between the groups and is thus the variable the experimenter is trying to manipulate, the independent variable.

Point 2—Dependent variable—The student should identify conformity as the dependent variable. Professor Reiman manipulates the independent variable to see how it affects conformity, the dependent variable.

Point 3—Operational definition—Professor Reiman operationally defines conformity as the participant agreeing with the wrong answers of the confederates. Do NOT award a point if the student identifies the operational definition as conformity. Conformity is the dependent variable.

Point 4—Confounding variable—The main element of the experimental design mentioned that would control for potential confounding variables is the random assignment. Randomly assigning participants to the two conditions would control for many possible subject(participant)-relevant confounding variables (students do not need to use this term, examples are enough). A student might say “random assignment would control for the possibility that participants might misunderstand the directions” or “might be in a bad mood at the time of the study” or “might have hostile reactions to psychology students,” and so on. Any example of a subject-relevant confounding variable is correct.

(B) Explain the principal difference between Professor Reiman’s study and Asch’s original research about conformity.

Point 5—Difference—The main difference between Professor Reiman’s and Asch’s study is the inclusion of this particular independent variable. In one of the conditions, Professor Reiman identifies one of the confederates as a graduate student in perception.

(C) Predict the level of conformity in the first group relative to the level of conformity in the second group based on your knowledge of Asch’s research and social psychological principles. Identify what psychological principle you base your prediction on.

Point 6—Level of conformity in the first group—The student receives one point for demonstrating his or her understanding that most of the participants in the first condition would conform to the group’s wrong answers. This condition is similar to Asch’s original study, so the results would be similar.

Point 7—Level of conformity in the second group—The student receives another point for predicting the level of conformity in the second group, with one confederate identified as the expert. The student should predict a higher level of conformity in this group due to the addition of the authority figure.

Point 8—Social psychological principle—The student should identify obedience as the social psychological principle acting in this case in conjunction with

conformity. Stanley Milgram's obedience studies demonstrate that the presence of an authority figure increases compliance, including conformity. To get the point, the essay only needs to identify obedience as the principle behind the prediction; the student does not need to cite other evidence to prove the position.

Interpreting the Rubric

Notice how the rubric directs the readers to look for points that correspond to correct answers, not mistakes you make. You might be relieved to know that you will not be penalized for saying something incorrectly or even making a factual error. Readers look for points and ignore incorrect information. This rule has one exception: Do not directly contradict yourself. Readers will not give you a point if you directly contradict something you wrote earlier. The rubric shows you how you should write your essay; it is organized in the way the question implies. If you organize your answer in this way, the reader can go through your response and look for the points in order. This is not just to be kind to the reader (although that is a nice thing to do). It increases your chances of getting points because it makes your responses more clear. The more clearly you communicate to the reader, the better your chances of getting points. In addition, providing examples and definitions increases the chances a reader will understand your explanation of a concept.

Use the sample essay question and rubric to grade the following fictional student essay.

Fictional Student Essay

Professor Reiman picked a valuable psychological topic to study. Her experimental design includes many valuable elements but also includes several problems. In this essay, I will critically examine Professor Reiman's experiment to determine the most likely results.

The independent variable in this experiment is prestige. In one condition, all the confederates are introduced as psychology students. In the other situation, one of the confederates is a graduate student in perception. This change is the independent variable. The dependent variable is whether the people change their answers or not. This is also the operational definition. One of the confounding variables in the study is the presence of the confederates. For an accurate study, Professor Reiman should not use confederates in the research, she should use a random sampling of people not familiar with her research.

The only major difference between Professor Reiman's study and Asch's research is the fact that she had one of the people in one of the groups pretend to be a graduate student in research. That is the principal difference.

I think people would conform in both groups but more in the second one than the first. Most of the people in the first group would conform to the wrong answers because speaking out

against the group is hard. However, more people would conform in the second group because not only is the majority saying the wrong answer, the graduate student in psychology is saying the wrong answer too. The participants in the study would consider that person to know what he or she is talking about.

In conclusion, Professor Reiman's study is a valuable addition to the world of psychology. She proves that people are too easily swayed by experts. This can become dangerous if those experts do not know what they are talking about.

Grading the Fictional Response

You may want to use the rubric explained earlier to grade this sample response (and/or the essay you wrote for this question) on your own. Before we begin discussing individual points, notice the introduction and conclusion to this sample essay. The student does not write anything in those two sections that directly addresses the question. These two sections did not help this essay. The student could have used his or her time more effectively by just starting the essay in the second paragraph where he or she starts answering the question directly.

Grading this essay using the rubric would result in the following:

Point 1—Awarded—The student correctly identifies the difference in the two groups as the independent variable:

“In one condition, all the confederates are introduced as psychology students. In the other situation, one of the confederates is a graduate student in perception. This change is the independent variable.”

Point 2—Not awarded—This student is unclear about the difference between an operational definition and the dependent variable.

Point 3—Awarded—The student identifies “whether people change their answers or not” as the operational definition. The student incorrectly says this is also the dependent variable, but the point is awarded for this correct identification.

Point 4—Not awarded—The student misunderstood that the use of confederates in this study is not a confounding variable. Researchers can and often do use confederates in research. It is not in and of itself a confounding variable.

Point 5—Awarded—The student correctly explains that the difference between this study and Asch's research is the inclusion of the graduate student in perception.

Point 6—Awarded—The student states, “Most of the people in the first group would conform to the wrong answers,” which corresponds with the findings in Asch's study.

Point 7—Awarded—The student predicts more of the participants exposed to the second condition would conform than those in the first condition.

Point 8—Not awarded—The student never states what psychological principle the prediction is based on. The essay explains obedience but never directly answers the question by stating the principle.

So, overall, this essay would get 5 out of 8 possible points.

General Hints and Tips for the Essay Portion of the Exam

Style/Organization Hints

1. Remember to think before you start writing and feel free to jot down a few notes. You should have timed some practice-essay responses before the test in order to have an indication of how much time you need to answer the questions. Use 2–3 minutes to organize your thoughts about each essay, but be careful not to spend so much time that you feel rushed later.

2. Do NOT write your answer in outline form. While readers do not give points for the use of full sentences, proper paragraph form, and so on, they are not allowed to give any points for an essay written as an outline. Write your essay in sentences and paragraphs. Do not label parts of your essay with letters; use paragraphs to show where you move from one point to the next.

3. Make sure you cover everything the question asks in the order it asks. Picture the likely rubric in your mind, and answer each part of the question in a clear, organized way.

4. Structure your essay so that it clearly shows you answered all parts of the question. Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence that indicates which part of the question you are answering.

5. Do not worry about an introduction and conclusion, unless writing one helps you organize your thoughts. Remember you get points for accurate information, not style or aesthetic considerations of your essay. Do not waste time repeating the question, the reader knows it well enough by now!

6. Try to write as clearly as you can in the time you have. Readers become expert in reading difficult handwriting, but undecipherable handwriting certainly will not help you get a better score. If you have time at the end of the test, look back through your response and rewrite any particularly messy words. If you need to add text in the middle of your response, clearly indicate where the additional text should go. Some students find leaving a little space between paragraphs for this purpose effective.

7. Use all your time. If you have extra time, use it to go back and make sure you said what you wanted to, add more examples for clarification, and rewrite any confusing sections.

Content Hints

1. Keep it simple. When asked to describe several methods of experimental control, for example, the graders will want the best and therefore most common ones. Do not waste time and energy explaining unnecessarily complicated techniques. For instance, write about random sampling; not stratified sampling.

2. Use psychological terms. Readers are looking for your psychological knowledge, not what these terms mean in other contexts. In all cases, use the term, define it clearly, and give an example if possible.

3. Make sure your context is clear. Sometimes whether you get the point or not is determined by whether you are using an example in the right context. For instance, you might give a great example of retroactive interference. However, if you place it into the paragraph discussing state-dependent memory, you may not get the point if the reader is not sure you know which concept the example applies to.

4. If you feel clueless about part of an essay, do not despair. Do your best—write something, if at all possible. You might hit on what the rubric asks for. If not, you will not be penalized for trying. Do not worry—missing one part of the essay question will not doom your score.