

Advice for students on how to approach HL discursive style questions

Note: The suggestions that follow are intended to help you in the process of writing answers to discursive-type questions. They provide a scaffold to help develop your skills of writing a coherent and logically-flowing answer. Remember that there is no such thing as ‘the’ right answer, but by thinking critically about how you structure your writing, you can improve your ability to communicate your learning and thinking.

1. Before you start construct a plan

This might take the form of a mind-map with headings and subheadings. In constructing your plan you might consider questions such as –
What theories or concepts are relevant? If there’s a relevant key thinker you can draw on? What kind of evidence can you use? Can you link all of these to the question?

Knowing at the outset what your main points are means that you will have a structure for your answer in place before you begin writing.

2. Consider how the question is phrased when brainstorming your response

A plan should take into account if you are being asked to consider a particular stance/theory or perspective or if you are being asked to discuss a range of ideas/perspectives/examples. Also pay attention to the verbs used e.g. *examine*, *evaluate*, *discuss*. Be sure to become familiar with what these terms mean and how they differ.

<i>Discuss</i>	Explore different concepts, facts, perspectives or arguments on a topic and then come to your own conclusion/viewpoint, supported by appropriate evidence or reasons
<i>Examine</i>	Look closely at an argument or concept in a way that uncovers its origins, assumptions and relationships
<i>Evaluate</i>	Collect and examine data to make judgements and appraisals; describe how evidence supports or does not support a judgement; identify the strengths and limitations of evidence; make judgements and draw conclusions on the extent to which a view is supported by the evidence.

3. Keep in mind an appropriate structure when shaping your response

- Your answer should be composed of a series of paragraphs, logically sequenced, with one key point made in each
- Support and illustrate your arguments with relevant evidence and examples. This is your chance to show off what you know and use the information and readings you have studied in class.
- You can make connections or links between learning from any part of the specification if you can make it relevant to the question you are asked.

4. Engage critically with the question asked and the relevant theme/ issue/ data

Critical thinking is at the heart of studying Politics and Society. This means that your attitude and your mindset throughout your study and your writing should be one where you are seeking to examine a question critically and from different perspectives rather than looking for easy answers or offering a superficial examination of issues or data.

5. Be precise, concise and to the point.

Be concise: reduce what you want to say to its essence. You will not be rewarded for including detail that doesn't help answer the question. Practice the skill of answering extended questions in approximately 3 handwritten pages.

6. Know the value of an effective introduction and conclusion

- A short introductory paragraph can effectively set out the main the argument to follow and the key stance or position on the question that will be adopted.
- Similarly, a conclusion will draw together the points that have been made in the preceding series of paragraphs by arriving at a resolution of the arguments that have been made. Do not introduce new data or evidence here. Now you're summing up what it all means.
- Before writing your conclusion take a few minutes to review your essay. Your conclusion needs to tie it all together.

7. Use evidence to persuade and convince

Use the big thinkers, and/or data, evidence, examples to back up your argument and to convince the reader that what you're saying is relevant and valid.

8. Use connectives to support an appropriate style of writing

- Using connectives helps to lend discipline to your style of writing.
- Refer to the bank of appropriate phrases/ connectives attached as an appendix to this document and practise using these.

9. Write objectively, seeing different points of view and weighing up opposing arguments

- The ability to write dispassionately and objectively and to avoid emotional or subjective arguments is important.
- This relates also to considering data and being aware that data can sometimes be manipulated to support a certain position/view.

10. Do stay on the topic!

- Answer the question. Be careful not to include extra data or details that are not relevant to the question.
- Keep referring back to the title. One way to do this is to include a key sentence in each paragraph that links directly to the question asked. This helps to anchor the answer to the task at hand and to avoid the answer straying off the point.

Appendix:

Developing students' thinking and writing skills in Politics and Society

Introduction:

The assessment arrangements for Politics and Society require of students the ability to write extended answers to questions that demonstrate:

- '(the) capacity to form reasonable and logical argument- clarity and coherence in argument and management of ideas' (Spec. p. 59);
- 'skills in critical, discursive and independent thinking and in using qualitative and quantitative data in coming to conclusions' (Spec. P.60).

Candidates who demonstrate a high level of achievement 'present logical arguments and ideas which are clearly based on evidence' (Spec. p. 61).

Therefore, it is important that students are acquainted with the language that will enable them to express their knowledge and understanding in a coherent manner.

Three strategies for helping to improve student writing:

The following three resources may be helpful in this regard:

1. Key words/ phrases/ connectives
2. Sentence starters
3. Writing frames

1. Key words/ phrases/connectives

Providing students with opportunities to practise writing by referring to a bank of appropriate phrases/ connectives can develop their ability and confidence in writing.

A bank of key words relating to specific subjects is of value, particularly when it is made visible to students and referred to regularly. Therefore, it is worth thinking about pre-teaching students certain terms/phrases that might help students in articulating their thinking and structuring their writing.

Type of word or phrase	Technical term	Examples
Connecting words or phrases that explain why something happens	Causal connectives	As a result, this leads to, this results in, therefore, because of this, consequently, for that reason
Connecting words that are used to compare two ideas and show they are similar	Comparing connectives	Likewise, similarly, in the same way, equally

Connecting words that are used to give an example or cite example of something	Illustrating connectives	As shown by, this is evidenced by, for example, in the case of
Words or phrases that acknowledge contradictions	Contradictive connectives	It could also be argued, on the other hand
Words or phrases that acknowledge different viewpoints or ideas	Contrastive connectives	Whereas, unlike, alternatively, (e.g. X argues...whereas Y disagrees with this and suggests...

Further suggestions

It is helpful to think about the different levels of thinking required by students of Politics and Society when helping students to write extended pieces. For instance, a key skill is the capacity to consider data, draw conclusions and use this data to support particular arguments or points of view. Therefore, the ability to think analytically and evaluatively is important. The need to think reflectively is also important when considering data. This kind of thinking is also important in completing the citizenship report.

Consider how the phrases in the table below may be of use:

Analysing/evaluating	
To begin with ...	I now know that ...
At first ...	One problem is ...
Firstly ...	A possible reason for this...
Initially ...	Research shows...
There are several reasons why ...	The result is ...
In order to ...	As a result ...

When students maintain reflective portfolios/ / logs/ journals etc., the table above might be of use to help them to develop their thoughts and extend their writing capacity.

2. Sentence starters

The following table illustrates some types of connectives and ‘sentence starters’ that may be helpful to students:

<p>Writing about change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social/ cultural/ economic/ political changes that resulted were • Clear evidence of change can be seen in ... • The first signs of this were ... • We can see how things changed when.... • Over time • Eventually 	<p>Illustrating a point</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example • Such as • For instance • As revealed by • In the case of
<p>Adding to/reinforcing a point</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition.... • Furthermore • Besides... • Also.... • Another important point to bear in mind is ... • Moreover • It could also be argued... 	<p>Emphasising importance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Above all • In particular • Especially • Significantly • Indeed • Notably
<p>Making judgements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It seems to me ... • I base my view on ... • It may be that ... • There is evidence here that ... • My reasons for ... are ... • I conclude that.. • I contend that.... 	<p>Writing about evidence/ data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This point tells us that • This point suggests that ... • It is possible to infer that ... • This might be evidence for • A source that supports this view is ...

3. Writing frames

For many students, 'writing frames' can provide a scaffold to help improve their writing. A writing frame is a device that is designed to help students structure their answer to a question. Students need the appropriate vocabulary if they are to make sense of data; they also need a stock of appropriate sentence starters and connecting phrases if they are to be able to write with fluency and clarity. Typically, writing frames provide a series of paragraph prompts and/or a series of 'sentence starters' and 'connectives' to help them construct an answer.

The following are advantages that may be derived from the use of writing frames:

- They provide a type of 'scaffolding' on which to build an answer.
- They may help some students to write a more extended answer than they would be capable of in the absence of a 'frame'.
- They direct students' writing in a purposeful way.
- They can be used to ensure that students address all the essential elements of an answer.
- They are a proven strategy in the development of pupil literacy.
- Frames can be differentiated to 'stretch' the more able.

If writing frames are to be used productively, teachers need to be aware of potential drawbacks associated with their use:

- Frames can serve to limit the thinking of some students.
- Frames may be off-putting for students who may prefer visual or other learning styles.
- Over-use of frames may stifle students' ability to think critically.
- Frames may generate a sameness in the responses and result in predictable and formulaic answers.

In Example 1, the emphasis is on ‘modelling’ a series of paragraphs to provide substantial guidance to students in writing an answer. Note how this process also develops sequencing skills.

Example 1:

Question – What is meant by ‘class privilege’? How does class privilege work in Irish society and what are the consequences that flow from class privilege in terms of life chances? Your answer should draw on two theorists you have studied.

(Draft NCCA HL sample question, August 2016)

Paragraph 1- Introduction: The term ‘class privilege’ is related to ideas about social class. It means ...

Paragraph 2- Karl Marx is an important figure in terms of how we understand ‘class privilege....

Paragraph 3 – When thinking about how ‘class privilege’ operates, it is useful to consider some relevant data. For instance, Kathleen Lynch’s research on class and the education system reveals that.....

Paragraph 4 – These findings lead me to draw some conclusions about how class privilege works in Irish society....

Paragraph 5- The key consequences that flow from ‘class privilege’ in terms of life chances are that...

In Example 2, the degree of prompting is less substantive in terms of ‘content’, but a series of ‘connectives’ and other relevant phrases is provided.

Example 2 :

Question: What are the personal qualities and political strategies that are associated with being most effective when working to bring about social change? In your answer, refer to examples of people and/or groups who have had a positive impact on society and critically evaluate the strategies they adopted with particular reference to their use of the media. (Draft NCCA HL sample question, August 2016)

Paragraph 1 – Introduction: Firstly, let’s consider who are the groups and individuals that come to mind when we think about social change or those who have made a positive impact on society?

*Paragraph 2 - These examples provide evidence of the many different strategies that can be used when working for social change.
For example.... Likewise.... On the other hand...*

Paragraph 3 – Research shows that the media can be a powerful tool when used by groups or individuals working for social change as shown by...

Paragraph 4 – It seems to me that there are also key personal qualities needed such as ...

Paragraph 5 – I conclude that...