

Politics and International Relations

Guide to Examinations for Undergraduate Students 2019-20

There are three kinds of assessment in Politics & International Relations for the Tripos: closed exam papers, usually taken over three hours and for most of which you are expected to answer three questions; pairs of long essays; and the dissertation. This guide is oriented towards the first of those assessments: the three-hour exam. Its purpose is partly to give a formal account of the rules around these examinations, to dispel any ambiguities.

The more specific aim of this guide however is to give students a better understanding of what constitutes a good exam essay. There are formal marking criteria in Politics & International Relations, and these are worth reading carefully; nevertheless, these criteria are written in a general and abstract way so as to be applicable to all exams in Politics & International Relations, and the level of practical detail in them is limited. This guide aims to convey more discursively what distinguishes essays across the different marking ranges.

Examinations – the formal procedures

Students taking honours exams in Politics & International Relations will take exams in each year. Within History & Politics, the Tripos exams are Part IA, Part IB and Part II in consecutive years. Within HSPS, they are Part I, Part IIA and Part IIB. In practice, the difference matters little – the exams for each paper are the same. These exams are independent of each other: they are not summed to produce a single average across the three years. Within each Part, a single class is calculated on the basis of the papers taken in that year: first, upper second (2.1), lower second (2.2), third, or fail. An unclassified degree can be awarded by the University in cases in which a student was unable to take their exams, or did so under extremely detrimental conditions.

The rules that determine which class is awarded to a student are the ‘classing criteria’, and these are publicised on the department website. A combination of average marks for each paper and requirements for a combination of marks across all papers determine the overall class. For example, to qualify for a 2.1, a student taking the Politics & International Relations track within HSPS Part II must be taking four papers; have an average mark of at least 60.0 (rounded to one decimal place); have a mark of at least 60 for at least two of their four papers; and have no paper mark at 39 or lower. While it’s worth being aware that there are classing criteria of this sort, knowledge of them doesn’t really affect how best to prepare for or write in exams.

More relevant is knowing that the mark for each paper you take is calculated as the mean average of the marks for each of your essays on that paper. For most papers taken by examination, three essays are required; each is awarded a mark out of 100 and the paper mark is the mean of the three, rounded to the nearest whole number. (The main exceptions are POL9 and POL17, for which there is only one essay, and the mark for the paper is the mark for the single essay; POL6, which has a mixed assessment format; and POL3, for which there are two essays.) This is relevant to know because one incomplete or unstructured essay out of the three can have a significantly detrimental effect on the overall mark for the paper. According to the marking criteria (on which, more below), an essay that consists of only a single paragraph can at most receive a mark of 20, while a radically incomplete essay can receive at most a mark of 39. It is not uncommon to see exam scripts in which a student has written two thorough, detailed essays and only the beginnings of one essay, sometimes as a few bullet points, with the last one presumably written with the time

running out. If the spread of marks for the three essays is 75, 75 and 18, this would result in a mark for the paper of 56 – a result that falls far below the potential of a student who is capable of writing first class essays. It is important to prepare broadly enough to answer three topics well and, in the examination, to spread your time evenly between questions. Spending 70 minutes on an essay in a three-question exam in order to make that extra point while leaving only 50 minutes for another essay will almost certainly lose you more marks in the overall assessment than you might gain.

Each exam script is double-marked – that is, it is reviewed by two academics. If there is a significant difference between the assessments of these two markers, there is consultation between the markers. If the difference is not resolved through consultation, the script is read by an external examiner.

The mark for each paper is released automatically to students along with the overall class awarded soon after the examinations committee has met, which happens around the end of the third week of June for second and third year exams, and in late June or early July for first year exams.

The qualities of a good exam essay

Many of the features of a well-developed supervision essay will also be found in good exam essays. The overall format of the two is not necessarily different. Nevertheless, exam essays are generally shorter, due to the time constraints of writing. While supervision essays should include adequate referencing, bibliography and (often) quotation, these are not expected in the same way in an exam essay. Quotation, where relevant, is useful but not essential – paraphrasing with a note to an original source or interpretation is often just as helpful. No one expects full referencing and citation in an exam answer.

The key requirement of any essay, however, is that it must be *an answer to the question*, and an answer which displays relevant knowledge of the material. You will often encounter in the exams questions that are closely focused (with only specific exceptions - such as POL9's gobbets). Questions on exam papers in Politics & International Relations tend not to have the format of a quote, followed by an instruction to 'discuss' the quote. It is crucial to understand, specifically, what the question is asking and to address this from the outset. Be alert in particular to how your answer may be different if the question is asking for a yes/no answer (in which case, you need to come to a yes/no answer – or an explanation of why a yes/no answer is not possible), or is asking about the extent to which something is true, or is asking for a causal or some other form of explanation.

An example

- * Was war central to Machiavelli's political thought?
- * To what extent was war central to Machiavelli's political thought?
- * Why was war so central to Machiavelli's political thought?

The three questions require knowledge of much of the same material to answer, but good exam essays will address that material in a way that focuses on what specifically the question is asking. An answer to the first question would look at whether key features of Machiavelli's political thought are about war, directly or not; if it decides they are, it will answer the question positively with reference to texts and appropriate contexts/examples to prove the case. An answer to the second question will assess the place of war alongside other themes in Machiavelli's thought, and will evaluate their *relative* significance, perhaps across a number of his arguments; its conclusion will make an overall statement of that relative

significance, perhaps with reference to an overarching interpretation of what Machiavelli's political thought in general might actually be. An answer to the third question will necessarily bring in Machiavelli's context to explain the significance of war to his thought; it can assume the centrality of war, and will instead focus on how Machiavelli's context intersects with his political writings, particularly with respect to war.

In general, the examiners for Politics and International Relations papers do not have a conception of a standard *essay structure*, and no such conception guides their marking. Some students prefer to start with an overview of their own answer; others prefer to explain key concepts in their opening section; and some prefer to begin by outlining how the question would be answered from a particular perspective before engaging critically with that perspective. It is fine to choose your own preferred mode of explaining your argument, as long as it culminates in an answer. Some signposting in the essay can however be helpful, especially if the argument is complex. For example: "I have shown that one possible interpretation of Hobbes's concept of representation is problematic. I will now turn to an alternative, drawing upon the discussion in Chapter XVI of *Leviathan*."

The *relevant material* to bring out in respect of an answer to a question will necessarily be *selective*. No question on any examination paper will be asking you, even indirectly, to write everything you know about the issue at hand. Each will be asking you for an argued response. The most important skill in writing good exam answers is carefully selecting what you take to be the central points of emphasis and the appropriate evidence to make your case. This is often as much about what you leave out, than what you put in, and doing so effectively will both give the examiner a good sense of what you do and do not know and understand, and provide you with the focus to actually answer the question, rather than talk around it with too much background noise. It can be helpful to state briefly at the outset what material you are not going to discuss, and why, especially if that material is potentially relevant.

Equally, an essay can move to its focus straightaway. Opening sections that provide general background to a text are often unnecessary. Some of the commonest faults in examination scripts in general are spending too much time introducing the issue, too much time writing around it or saying what 'I will say' and so on, and too small a proportion of the essay actually offering an answer to the question set. Unfocused historical or woolly and generalist narratives in particular are to be discouraged. There are a few exceptions: POL3 encourages you to begin with a thesis statement of your argument, and POL16 also has a somewhat more prescribed essay format. It's valuable of course to consult the paper guides and if in doubt to consult the course organiser.

Part of the knowledge that you are expected to have is that of *the relevant academic literature*. This involves relating particular arguments or interpretations to specific authors, who are mentioned in the essay. That is not to say that the essay should necessarily be structured through a discussion of secondary texts: do be careful not to allow the essay just to become a literature review in which your own argument is only tacked on at the end. Nevertheless, good answers will engage critically and contextually with relevant academic literature. Although many different sub-fields of politics and international relations can sometimes appear to weigh the balance of texts and contexts differently, all examiners routinely expect students to show appropriate knowledge of primary texts where relevant, and certainly an awareness of both standard or conventional alongside critical secondary scholarship where appropriate. Deploying these resources in the form of an argument that actually moves through problems, implications, tensions and issues that follow from certain sorts of answers to the question, will help you think through your own specific response.

An example

1. "Many civil wars that have occurred over the modern period are between ethnic groups, pitting an ethnic minority against members of the national majority ethnic group who have migrated into the region in which the minority is concentrated..."
2. "Fearon and Laitin have shown that many modern civil wars are between ethnic groups, pitting an ethnic minority against members of the national majority ethnic group who have migrated into the region in which the minority is concentrated..."
3. "Rejecting the usefulness of the greed/grievance distinction that had dominated previous literature on the topic, Fearon and Laitin argue that many modern civil wars follow the pattern of geographically-concentrated minority ethnic groups coming into conflict with migrants into their subnational region who come from the majority ethnic group. Although this analysis does not help us understand why some situations of this sort become violent and others do not, it does provide a useful generalisation for understanding many long-standing civil wars..."

The first of the texts above may be accurate about the topic (modern civil wars), but it does not convey knowledge of the literature. The second text, through its attribution, identifies a specific piece of literature. The third text not only attributes the argument but also contextualises it and makes a critical evaluation of its usefulness.

It is a common problem in exam essays that students often write long summaries of secondary texts without bringing in their own evaluation or explanation of why they consider the argument of the secondary text plausible. You are expected to make *your own argument* once you have explored or explained these other interpretations. This may be an argument for why a particular author is correct or not; but equally, essays that are simply reviews of what other people have written about a topic are not doing this. Similarly, avoid simply listing multiple sets of authors in a way that diminishes the potential to show their differences or engage critically with their findings or interpretations.

Engaging with the literature also provides a way to show that you recognise *counter-arguments* to your own, but that you are able to evaluate them and show why they do not work as well as your alternative. In essays about the history of political thought, arguments and counter-arguments can be about interpretations of a particular author's meaning, and how others (contemporary to them, and contemporary to us) might have understood their meaning and why. Bringing these out can be helpful but is not always essential. In more abstract/conceptual essays about political philosophy and comparative politics, however, recognising and evaluating contrasting arguments and positions is typically necessary for a good essay. Your argument is better if it brings out the strongest counter-argument to your own, but can still show that your approach is superior.

The marking criteria

Marks for each essay in an exam script are awarded in accordance with the 'marking criteria', a short descriptive account of the qualities found in essays that fall within a particular marking range. It is worth reading through the marking criteria – they are reprinted at the end of this document – and the notes here are to explain what they mean in more detail in relation to the marking process.

The marking criteria include six sets of terms that are used to distinguish different ranges of marks:

- (i) Understanding. The essay shows knowledge of relevant material for the answer. This includes knowledge of the academic literature. It can also involve explaining concepts if

their meaning is not readily apparent: if you are using complex terms (eg author-specific jargon), it is valuable to show that you understand what those terms mean rather than just crediting it to a specific author.

- (ii) **Accuracy.** This is not just 'having the facts right', but also showing why the information presented is relevant to the answer. A high degree of accuracy involves the use of specific information as evidence for an argument, including (if relevant) a precise account of relevant literature. By contrast, an essay that, for example, misstates an argument in the literature will be evaluated as having limited accuracy.
- (iii) **Structure.** An essay has to be structured as an argument answering the essay question, which it provides.
- (iv) **Coherence.** The evidence presented in the essay has to lead to and be consistent with the evaluations made.
- (v) **A sustained focus.** The essay keeps its attention of what is required to answer the essay question.
- (vi) **Insight.** This is engaging critically with literature to draw conclusions that demonstrate your independent thinking. Insight that reaches plausible conclusions that go beyond the existing literature is 'originality'. This may, for example, involve showing how different authors' argument are complementary or contradictory in ways that are not obvious; explaining how there are logical gaps in an argument; or by applying a theory or argument from one issue area to another in an effective manner.

An essay that demonstrates clearly all six qualities receives a mark of 70 or higher, with a high degree of insight and accuracy required for a mark of 80. An essay that does not demonstrate significant insight but which clearly has the other five qualities receives a mark in the range 65-69, while essays that display some but not decisive evidence of all the qualities (i)-(v) receives a mark in the range 60-64.

An essay which is largely accurate and has some focus, but shows some but limited understanding, structure, coherence or is not sustained receives a mark in the range 50-59. An essay that has some focus but has significant inaccuracies, or significantly lacks one of structure or coherence receives a mark in the range 40-49. Essays that receive a mark of 21-39 are those which are largely irrelevant, incomplete, or are not making an argument. Wholly irrelevant or very short (1 paragraph or less) essays receive a mark of 1-20. 0 is given where there is no essay.

Frequently Aired Quandaries

- (i) **Overlap.** There is a general rule that you are not allowed to repeat the same argument, using the same material, at length (meaning over more than one paragraph) within two exam essays in the same Tripos Part. If you do, the material provided in the overlapping text in the second and further essays will be disregarded. It is *not* a requirement that you don't discuss the same theorist, place or episode across more than one exam essay. In general, if you are answering the essay question, you will be very unlikely to be making the same argument as in another essay, which will have a different question.

It is perhaps most likely to occur with dissertations, where the choice of what argument to make is largely up to you, and may be covering material that it is substantively the same as material within a taught course. If this is so, you need to make sure you are

studying enough topics that don't overlap with your dissertation; or alternatively, that you can make arguments about the topic that aren't the same as the arguments made in the dissertation.

- (ii) **Referencing within exam essays.** In general within exam essays, you are expected to discuss relevant literature: using the name of a specific author enhances interpretive accuracy and demonstrates precise knowledge of the literature. You are not however expected to engage in full citation or references. In particular, you are not expected or encouraged to learn page numbers or publication details. Titles and years of publication are only worth remembering if that information is relevant to your argument. So, for instance, if you are discussing how a particular author's argument about the prospects for socialism changed after 1989, it is worth referencing the dates of publication. Otherwise, it is not.
- (iii) **Quotation.** Generally, extended quotation adds little to exam essays. It is not expected. Students who try to memorise quotations often make mistakes when writing them in exam essays, which creates unnecessary inaccuracies within the essay. It is also the case that learned quotations are often of limited relevance to the answer, and it takes away from the focus to reprint them. Key phrases however are relevant to know, especially for theoretical and conceptual discussions.
- (iv) **Handwriting.** There is no formal penalty for not writing clearly. However it is clearly to your advantage to write in such a way that every word can be read. Essays in which the examiner cannot read what various strings of text say often reduce the force and plausibility of their arguments. Where poor handwriting results from the speed of writing, it is often to your advantage to write less, but more clearly. Also consider whether writing on alternate lines helps improve legibility. In extreme cases where a large part of a script is illegible, the examiners can ask you to have the script typed up with an administrator.

The Marking Criteria

The marking criteria here apply to all exams in POLIS, except the exam in POL6 (Statistics and Methods). For the POL6 exam marking criteria, and the criteria for long essays and dissertations, please see the 'Marking and classing criteria' document on the POLIS website, which is linked to from the pages for second and third year students.

Mark	Quality of Answer
80+	An answer showing outstanding understanding that displays a very high degree of accuracy, insight, and style, and originality in responding to the question, and is well-structured. To fall into this range, an answer has to display all of these qualities.
70-79	An answer showing very clear understanding and a high degree of accuracy, which provides a cogent and well-structured argument focused on the question with a significant level of insight and a degree of originality.

60-69	An answer showing clear understanding and a good level of accuracy that provides a coherent, sustained, and well-structured argument focused on the question. To fall into this range, an answer has to display all of these qualities, and should not decisively show any of the negative qualities listed under the criteria for a 50-59. Answers where there is some evidence of the negative qualities listed under the criteria for a 50-59 will receive a mark between 60 and 64.
50-59	An answer that concentrates on the subject matter of the question, that displays relevant knowledge and is generally accurate, but which either shows significant limitations in understanding, or presents a discussion that is not focused on the question, or is partially unstructured, or where the discussion is not sustained through the course of the essay. To fall into this range, an answer has to display these positive qualities, and should not show any of the negative qualities listed under the criteria for a 40-49.
40-49	An answer generally relevant to the subject matter of the question, but one that contains a large number of inaccuracies, or shows significantly inadequate knowledge, or presents an unstructured and disjointed discussion. To fall into this range, an answer should not show any of the negative qualities listed under the criteria for a 21-39.
21-39	An answer that either displays a lack of crucial knowledge, or has no structure, or is radically incomplete, or is almost entirely irrelevant to the question, or contains an extremely high number of inaccuracies.
1-20	A single paragraph of conventional paragraph length, or an answer that is entirely irrelevant, should receive a mark not higher than 20.
0	No answer provided for a question.

Further Questions

This guide has been compiled by Dr Christopher Brooke and Jeremy Green, the Chair and Deputy Chair of Part II examiners in POLIS, and Dr Glen Rangwala, the Director of Undergraduate Education in POLIS. Further questions can be directed if they are specific to an individual paper to the relevant paper organiser or, if they are of a general nature, to the Department's undergraduate administrator on <ugadmin@polis.cam.ac.uk>.