



Advanced GCE

Government and Politics

(3834/7834)

Notes for the Research Essay

(Unit 2696)

(Amended following the change to the template requirement)

(Updated March 2005)

OCR ADVANCED GCE IN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

TEACHER SUPPORT

UNIT 2696 GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS RESEARCH ESSAY (COURSEWORK)

This module is designed to encourage independent research and thought.

The time spent on the essay is to be determined by individual centres. A specific concentrated time period of three to four weeks for example, might be allocated to the essay and the study of other modules be put to one side during this period. Alternatively, centres might prefer to allow students to prepare the essay over a longer period. This would allow the continuation of teaching of the other modules. Some centres may choose to start in the period after students return after AS exams, others after a January module.

Whatever the approach adopted, it is imperative that centres and students realise the importance of planning, preparation, organisation and timing. The essay constitutes 30% of the A2 total.

Centres should encourage students to engage in different areas of research so as to foster independent research and thought. It is perfectly acceptable for students to select similar topic areas, however, it is strongly recommended that the essays have a clearly different focus.

THE AREA OF RESEARCH

The essay should constitute an area of research which is of genuine interest to the candidate. The subject must be drawn from an area on the specifications. Students might consider examining a subject which is of personal relevance. If they are members of a pressure group or that is an item of local interest of political significance, these could form the basis for an essay. Similarly, if a candidate has a personal contact, such as with a Member of Parliament, trade union or political party, these too could be exploited for the same purpose.

Centres can be of considerable assistance here in that teachers should advise on the suitability of topics chosen. Relevant factors include whether the subject is likely to provide sufficient scope for research and if sources are widely available to the students. Centres may build up resource banks for use on an annual basis on in certain topic areas. Consideration must also be given to the extent that the subject area is of political relevance and to the scope provided for analysis and evaluation.

As stated at the outset, the aim of the study is to encourage independent research and thought. Consequently, an essay which focuses on a contemporary development in politics would generally be well received. Students might consider an issue of current controversy, such as the fox-hunting debate, and consider what insights into British politics, the issue provides. This could include consideration of the role of parties, pressure groups, parliament and government. A teacher might help select some of the issues which are likely to meet these requirements at the start of the process of subject selection and suggest that students keep a scrapbook of newspaper cuttings and articles for later use in the writing of the essay.

Please ensure that the subjects selected have a sharp political focus. Warn students of the dangers that certain topics involve. A discussion of European Monetary Union should naturally focus on the political arguments not the economic. Similarly avoid topics with a sociological bias, such as the causes and solutions of crime. By the same token avoid topics

which are too historical. These are likely to inhibit the capacity for original thought and the demands of the subject specification. As a general rule, events before 1979 (and to some extent even later) might be deemed to fall into this category.

A further rationale behind such a consideration is the word limit. The limit of 2500 words is likely to prove a critical factor in influencing the choice of topic. This limit poses great restraints on the suitability of titles. Broad topic areas could be covered but they are likely to pose considerable problems to students in deciding what to include and what to exclude when writing the topic. For example if a student were to contemplate "Does the UK need an electoral reform?", it is likely the candidate could feel swamped by the amount of detail and argument available on the topic. If however the candidate considered "Does the use of AMS in Scotland and Wales support its adoption for the UK General Elections?" this is unlikely to pose as many problems in terms of dealing with content. In essence, it is suggested that students select titles with a narrow focus. Topics with a contemporary focus are likely to meet these requirements as well as helping to demonstrate independent research.

The title of the research essay can be simply drawn down from an area of the syllabus such as "*Prime Minister and cabinet*" or be phrased as a question. In the event of the former, it is imperative that the candidate identifies areas of controversy and states hypotheses to be tested so as to invite analysis and evaluation. Too descriptive an approach will not allow access to the higher mark bands.

Examples of this sort based upon the AS modules are included below;

- What factors explain the outcome of the European Parliament elections in 2004?
- What were the main policy differences between the Labour and Conservative parties 2001 general election campaign?
- What evidence was there of media bias in the 2001 general election campaign?
- How and why did the position of the political parties on the question of Europe differ in the 2001 (2005?) election?
- What insights into the ideology of the Conservative/ Labour / Liberal Democrat party does an examination of their conference provide?
- What insights into party structure does an examination of the Conservative/ Labour / Liberal Democrat party conference(s) provide?
- Does the 2001 general election illustrate the need for state funding of the political parties?
- Have the trade unions seen their power increase with a Labour government?
- Has the Countryside Alliance been an effective pressure group?
- Why is Direct Action on the rise in the UK?
- Has incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights improved the protection of civil liberties in the UK?
- Has Blair adopted a presidential style of government?
- Has the work of Departmental Select Committees in 2004-5 proved their worth?
- Has the work of the House of Lords in 2004-5 proved the need for a second chamber in the UK?
- Has the Labour government continued the Conservative reforms of the Civil Service?
- Should there be home rule for Yorkshire?
- Has devolution been a success?
- Was the Nice Summit a success for the UK?
- What are the political arguments for and against European Monetary Union?
- Will enlargement of the EU delay political integration?
- Does the EU constitution threaten UK sovereignty?

Centres might encourage titles from the A2 part of the specification in order to assist preparation for this part of the course. Past AS and A2 question papers also provide a useful source for possible Research Essay titles.

SOURCES

Candidates are expected to list at least five substantial sources. Students are expected to go beyond standard textbooks in order to reach the higher markbands. That said, students are encouraged to use textbooks as a starting point and as source of ideas. They should help provide an analytical framework which can be further developed with the use of other sources. Specialist sources might include journals such as the Talking Politics and The Economist. Many students make good use of newspaper articles from the quality press and journals such as Parliamentary Affairs. Increasingly students are able to make good use of the Internet and this can provide a host of information in a very quick time. The former Broadsheet newspapers run excellent archive services which are real boon to those undertaking research.

Primary research is encouraged but it is not regarded as essential. Letter writing and visit to MPs' surgeries are useful methods to employ. Teachers should however warn against an over reliance on replies from MPs. They should be regarded as the last flourish to an essay rather than its core. The record of MPs replying to students' letters is variable. As a general rule, MPs are duty bound to reply to constituents but less inclined so to do for those from outside. Similarly, questionnaires though well intentioned, rarely provide the level of sophistication for meaningful analysis and evaluation. Letters to pressure groups can be a useful source of information, more often than not, educational material is to be found on the group's website and consequently Internet search and e-mail might be a quicker option. Students should always be aware of the inevitable bias to be found in material from these sources.

THE WRITING OF THE ASSIGNMENT

It is imperative that the essay has a clear focus and structure. As the Board no longer approves titles, candidates can in fact set their title after having done their research and the realisation of what would be a manageable title. In this regard the title may be finalised towards the end of the research period. Students may have a general area of research in mind, only to find that certain hypotheses cannot be adequately tested whilst others can. In this respect, students may have a working title which is altered towards the end. It is perfectly acceptable for a student to state which aspects of a topic they intend to investigate and those they cannot due to the confines of the word limit. It is however of critical importance that the student provides an effective answer to the question / title they set themselves. If a centre has any doubts about the suitability of a title they can seek advice from the Board.

The essay as a whole should read well and fit together. It is recommended that the essay follows the normal structure for an essay with an introduction, the main body of the essay and a conclusion. The introduction and conclusion should be approximately 150 words in length respectively. Students should make use of paragraphs to separate arguments and make sure these are supported by evidence. The use of a word processor can greatly help improve the structure of the essay.

It is recommended that candidates be given a copy of the assessment matrix for A2 available in the specification. This is the generic marksheet which will be used for the marking of the essays and candidates should thus be aware of the assessment objectives of the paper. Therein there are clear indications of the skills required to reach the higher mark levels...*"a thorough and accurate knowledge, ability to make comparisons, skill in interpretation and analysis, ability to recognise bias and faulty argument, a balanced well focus argument*

*etc...*If a candidate is able to successfully apply these criteria to an essay, they will do well. A one-sided, descriptive account of an issue for example is unlikely to do well. Candidates then must resist the temptation then to merely present their own personal view an emotive issue such as fox-hunting.

Please note the distribution of marks for the research essay is as follows;

AO1	(Knowledge and understanding)	mark out of 24
AO2	(Analysis and evaluation)	mark out of 48
AO3	(Presentation and communication)	mark out of 18

There is then a greater number of marks for analysis and evaluation and the consequences of this should be outlined to students.

Essays should include footnotes and a detailed bibliography. **The number of words used must be clearly stated.**

Please note the word limit is 2500 words.

Lengthy appendices and extensive footnotes should not be included as a means of circumventing the word limit.

Students must be warned of the penalties for plagiarism.

The use of a word processor is not essential however it is recommended as it will considerably assist the candidate in editing drafts and working to the headings etc.