



Start writing essays

Different approaches to examination essays

Jane Van Hool:

Is there anything you should avoid when writing examination essays? Brian Walden.

Brian Walden:

I suppose the greatest single error is the belief that what you want to do is to get down a lot of things called 'facts'. Again, I'll choose Hitler as an example. Adolf Hitler was born in 1889 in Braunau, in what was then and is now, Austria, etc. His father's name was Alois, he loved his mother and all that, and so on and so on, I could go through Hitler's whole career like this. Just sticking a lot of it down doesn't greatly impress the examiner, especially if, and this will often be the case, the question you're being asked is, why did the Germans elect Hitler to power. Be careful about when he was born and what his father's name was, or whether he loved his mother or not. It's not strictly relevant to the question involved, and just sticking down a lot of facts, unconnected facts, like raisins stuck in a pudding, or currants in a bun. Yeah, examiners look for that and think 'Oh God, here's another one of those tedious answers. Dull, never really answers the question properly at all.' That's the thing to watch out for - to be producing facts, when you ought to be producing arguments. Someone who's going to answer the question which says 'Why did communism fail?' says, 'Oh hang on, I'm not sure communism did fail. I want to quarrel with the question. I certainly want to talk about it, I want to explain why it is people think that communism did fail, but I want to say myself that I'm not at all sure, I want to put some arguments the other way.' The examiner will read that one. He won't be getting many like that, I can tell you. Of course, don't deride the question. If the question is, 'Why did communism fail?', it's probably permissible to say, 'I'm not sure it did', but you must first say, 'Let me tell you why people think it has.' In other words, let the examiner know that you think this is a perfectly okay question to be asked. You mustn't sneer at the question. But to be polemical in answering it, yes, I don't think that's a bad idea at all, far too few students do it, probably, I think, because of fear.

Jane Van Hool:

Matthew Kelly describes his approach to examination essays. Matthew Kelly:

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You have a finite time, which is what we want. Read the question, you go 'Okay, what do I know about that?' And then you go, 'Doesn't matter what I know about it, let's look at the question again.' And you look at the question again. The second time you read the question is really interesting because it's not what you thought it was the first time. This is the way I used to do it. I would write down my plan at the beginning, on the question paper, write down everything I know. And also it's great to just write stuff down quickly, you know. Because if you kind of elongate it and, then ...

Jenny Bardwell: (interviewer)

Agonise, yeah.

You, you agonise, and you forget stuff that you really do know. So, look at the question and go 'Yeah, I know this, this, this, this and this.' And then it'll help you to weave it after that