Questions matter

Notes and guidance: Paper 3 essay

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Introduction

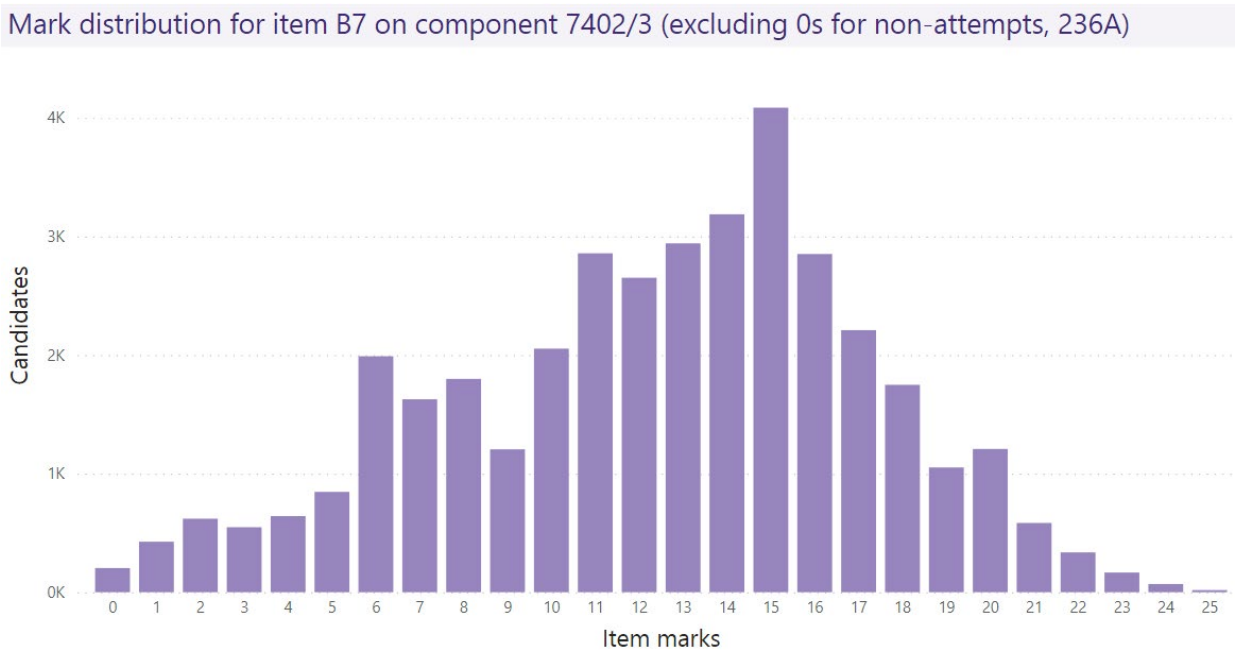
The A-level Biology Paper 3 exam requires students to write a 25-mark essay. This is an exercise in synopsis and assesses students' ability to bring together principles from at least four different areas of the specification.

There is a choice of two essay titles.

Examiners look for:

- evidence of knowledge and understanding of A-level Biology
- selection of material relevant to the title and drawn from different areas of the course and
- the ability to present an argument coherently and logically, using appropriate biological language.

The biology essay discriminates well. The graph below shows the spread of marks for all students in the biology essay of 2023.



Key features of the essay

- Students are expected to bring together different ideas from at least four areas of the specification.
- There are 13 marks for AO1.
- The theme of the essay is normally 'the importance of'.
- There are 12 marks for addressing this theme (the AO2 element).
- Students are expected to spend about 45 minutes on the essay.
- Content should contain A-level detail as defined by our specification.
- Students need to use correct terminology.
- Errors in grammar or punctuation, or bad handwriting, are not penalised.
- Students do not need to write an introduction or conclusion.

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Expectations of the levels mark scheme

Students' essays are read, annotated and marked holistically using a levels mark scheme.

There are five levels, and each essay is matched to the level that best fits. The mark is then refined using the statements within that level.

The full levels of response marking instructions are given in Appendix 1. This section looks in detail at the expectations of the criteria of each level.

Appendix 3 includes annotated examples of student essays in each of the Extended Abstract, Relational, Multistructural and Unistructural levels.

Extended Abstract

Marks	Level	Level descriptor
21–25	Extended Abstract Generalised beyond specific context	Response shows holistic approach to the question with a fully integrated answer which makes clear links between several different topics and the theme of the question. Biology is detailed and comprehensive A-level content, uses appropriate terminology, and is very well written and always clearly explained. No significant errors or irrelevant material. For top marks in the band, the answer shows evidence of reading beyond specification requirements.

- The statement 'a fully integrated answer which makes clear links between several different topics and the theme of the question' does **not** mean that the topics chosen have to link to each other in order to flow like a story. It means that each topic has to address the theme of the title (ie 'the importance of'). 'Several different topics' means at least four.

- The second statement means all topics are at A-level standard as defined by the specification.

- The third statement means there cannot be any significant errors or any irrelevant material.

- The fourth statement means that to score 24 and 25 marks the essay **must** include material that is beyond the specification, and this **must** be at least A-level standard.

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Some important things to note about this level

1. An essay that does not contain any material beyond the specification **cannot** gain more than 23 marks.
2. Inclusion of material beyond the specification does not automatically qualify an essay as Extended Abstract: all other conditions of this level must also be met.
3. An essay with one significant error or one irrelevant section cannot be Extended Abstract, no matter how good the rest of the essay is.
4. In this level, the theme (ie 'the importance of') must be addressed at A-level depth in every topic covered.
5. If a student writes about more than four topics, all of those topics are considered when marking. Examiners will not only consider the 'four best topics' students write about.
6. An essay with fewer than four topics does not count as Extended Abstract.

Example essays that would meet the Extended Abstract criteria

Essay A	Essay B	Essay C	Essay D
Covers four topics, all with correct A-level depth, one of which is beyond the specification, the theme is addressed at A-level depth in all topics, and no significant error and/or no irrelevant section.	An essay that covers four topics, all with correct A-level depth, the theme is addressed at A-level depth in all topics, and no significant error and/or no irrelevant section.	An essay that covers four topics, with correct A-level depth, the theme is addressed at A-level depth in all topics, although one topic is slightly weaker and no significant error and/or no irrelevant section.	An essay that covers four topics, all with correct A-level depth, although there is one topic where the terminology used is slightly weaker, the theme is addressed at A-level depth in all topics, and no significant error and/or no irrelevant section.

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Relational

Marks	Level	Level descriptor
16–20	Relational Integrated into a whole	Response links several topics to the main theme of the question, to form a series of interrelated points which are clearly explained. Biology is fundamentally correct A-level content and contains some points which are detailed, though there may be some which are less well developed, with appropriate use of terminology. Perhaps one significant error and/or, one irrelevant topic which detracts from the overall quality of the answer.

Relational essays are mostly at A-level standard, the theme is addressed in most topics and there may be one significant error and/or one irrelevant section.

Some important things to note about this level

1. An essay can have one significant error **and** one irrelevant section.
2. If there is more than one significant error and/or more than one irrelevant section, an essay cannot access this level.
3. An essay with no attempts at the theme (ie 'the importance of') cannot access this level.
4. An essay with fewer than four topics cannot access this level.

To determine a mark within this level an examiner will use:

- the number of topics covered with correct A-level depth
- the number of topics with the theme addressed at A-level depth and
- the presence of one significant error and/or one irrelevant section.

Example essays that would meet the Relational criteria

Essay A	Essay B	Essay C	Essay D
An essay with four topics, all with correct A-level depth, the theme addressed at A-level depth in all topics, but with one significant error and/or one irrelevant section.	An essay with four topics, with mostly A-level depth, the theme addressed at A-level depth in all topics and no significant error and/or no irrelevant section.	An essay with four topics, with mostly A-level depth, the theme addressed at A-level depth in most topics and one significant error and/or one irrelevant section.	An essay with four topics, with mostly A-level depth, the theme addressed at A-level depth in only one topic and one significant error and/or one irrelevant section.

Essay A would be at the top of this level and D would be at the bottom.

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Multistructural

Marks	Level	Level descriptor
11–15	Multistructural Several aspects covered but they are unrelated	Response mostly deals with suitable topics, but they are not interrelated, and links are not made to the theme of the question. Biology is usually correct A-level content, though it lacks detail. It is usually clearly explained and generally uses appropriate terminology. Some significant errors and/or more than one irrelevant topic.

Multistructural essays may be lacking in A-level detail, the theme is not addressed, there are only three topics and there may be some significant errors and/or some irrelevant sections.

Some important things to note about this level

1. An essay can have some significant errors **and** some irrelevant sections and still be Multistructural. There is no number assigned to the word 'some.'
2. If all the topics include only superficial A-level detail, the essay cannot access this level.
3. If there is more than one significant error and/or more than one irrelevant section, an essay cannot access the levels above this.
4. An essay with no attempts at the theme (ie 'the importance of') cannot score above this level.
5. An essay with three topics cannot score above this level.

To determine a mark within this level an examiner will use:

- the number of topics lacking in A-level depth
- the number of topics with the theme not addressed at A-level depth and
- the number of significant errors and/or the number of irrelevant sections.

Example essays that would meet the Multistructural criteria

Essay A	Essay B	Essay C	Essay D
An essay with four topics, all with correct A-level depth, the theme not addressed at A-level depth in any topics, and no significant errors and/or no irrelevant sections.	An essay with three topics, all with correct A-level depth including material beyond the specification, the theme addressed at A-level depth in all topics, and no significant errors and/or no irrelevant sections.	An essay with four topics, all with correct A-level depth, the theme addressed at A-level depth in all topics, but with two significant errors.	An essay with four topics, only one of which shows correct A-level depth with the rest being superficial, the theme not addressed at A-level depth in any topics, two significant errors and two irrelevant sections.

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Essay A would be at the top of this level, and D would be at the bottom.

Unistructural

Marks	Level	Level descriptor
6–10	Unistructural Only one or few aspects covered	Response predominantly deals with only one or two topics that relate to the question. Biology presented shows some superficial A-level content that may be poorly explained, lacking in detail, or show limited use of appropriate terminology. May contain a number of significant errors and/or, irrelevant topics.

Unistructural essays may have only superficial A-level detail, the theme is not addressed, there are only one/two topics and there may be a number of significant errors and/or a number of irrelevant sections.

Some important things to note about this level

1. If there is at least one topic with some superficial A-level detail, an essay can count as Unistructural, albeit at the bottom of the level.
2. If there are many significant errors and/or many irrelevant sections, an essay cannot access levels above this.
3. If all the topics include only superficial A-level detail, the essay cannot score above this level.
4. An essay with only one/two topics cannot score above this level.

To determine a mark within this level an examiner will use:

- the number of topics with superficial A-level depth
- the number of topics with the theme not addressed at A-level depth and
- the number of significant errors and/or the number of irrelevant sections.

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Example essays that would meet the Unistructural criteria

Essay A	Essay B	Essay C	Essay D
An essay with two topics, both with correct A-level depth including material beyond the specification, the theme addressed at A-level depth in all topics, and no significant errors and/or no irrelevant sections.	An essay with three topics, all with correct A-level depth, the theme addressed at A-level depth in all topics, but with many significant errors.	An essay with four topics, all with superficial A-level depth, the theme not addressed at A-level depth in any topics, and no significant errors and/or no irrelevant sections.	An essay with one topic, showing superficial A-level depth, the theme not addressed at A-level depth and three significant errors and four irrelevant sections.

Essay A would be at the top of this level, and D would be at the bottom.

Unfocused

Marks	Level	Level descriptor
1–5	Unfocused	Response only indirectly addresses the theme of the question and merely presents a series of biological facts which are usually descriptive in nature or poorly explained and at times may be factually incorrect. Content and terminology is generally below A-level. May contain a large number of errors and/or, irrelevant topics.

Unfocused essays contain only GCSE-level material/facts, the theme is not addressed, and there may be a large number of significant errors and/or a large number of irrelevant sections.

Some important things to note about this level

1. If there are a large number of significant errors and/or a large number of irrelevant sections, an essay cannot score above this level.
2. If all the topics include only GCSE detail, the essay cannot score above this level.

To determine a mark within this level an examiner will use:

- the number of topics with GCSE depth, and
- the number of significant errors and/or the number of irrelevant sections.

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Example essays that would meet the Unfocused criteria

Essay A	Essay B	Essay C
An essay with four topics at GCSE depth, and no significant errors and/or no irrelevant sections.	An essay with three topics, all with superficial A-level depth, the theme not addressed in any, but with a large number of significant errors in each topic.	An essay with one topic showing GCSE depth, the theme not addressed and one significant error and three irrelevant sections.

Essay A would be at the top of this level and C would be at the bottom.

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Key cut-off points for each level

Unfocused (1–5 marks)	Unistructural (6–10 marks)	Multistructural (11–15 marks)	Relational (16–20 marks)	Extended Abstract (21–25 marks)
Maximum of 5 marks: • if content is only at GCSE level.	**Maximum of 10 marks:** • if essay deals with only one or two topics, even if those topics are addressed at an advanced level • if essay contains only superficial A-level detail.	**Maximum 15 marks:** • if the theme has not been addressed, or not addressed at A-level depth • if there are only three topics • if all topics are lacking A-level detail.	No matter how good the rest of the essay is, **maximum 20 marks:** • if there is one error and/or one irrelevant section • if the theme is addressed in all but one of the topics.	**To reach this level:** • every topic chosen must have A-level detail at the correct depth • the theme must be addressed at A-level depth. **Maximum 23 marks:** • if there is no material beyond the specification, no matter how good the rest of the essay is. **To score 24 or 25 marks:** • the essay must have already got to 23. For example, one piece of beyond-specification material will not turn an otherwise Multistructural essay into a 25-mark essay.

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Selecting topics

Number of topics

Students must select a minimum of four topics to write about. They may choose to write about more than four topics, but they do not gain extra marks and risk running out of time to cover each topic and its importance in sufficient A-level depth.

Relevance of topics

Students need to look carefully at the specific wording of the question when choosing topics.

For example, the title of one of the essays from 2019 is 'The importance of bonds and bonding in organisms.' The important word to note here is 'in' and not 'between' organisms. Therefore, selecting to write about topic 3.4.5 'Species and taxonomy' in terms of courtship behaviour leading to the formation of a bond between a male and female of a species would be an irrelevant topic.

For more information refer to the 'What constitutes an irrelevant section' section.

Covering the specification

Students must be familiar with the specification to ensure they are covering four discrete topics.

For example, consider the 2023 essay title 'The importance of interactions between organisms and their environment.' One student might choose to write about the following four areas:

1. The effect of surface area to volume ratio of organisms and their interaction with their environments.
2. The interaction between xerophytic plants and the air.
3. The interaction between the haemoglobin of organisms and the environment in the lungs and at the tissues.
4. The interaction between plants and their environment in the cohesion-tension theory of water transport in the xylem.

These are topics 3.3.1, 3.3.2, 3.3.4.1 and 3.3.4.2 respectively. These all come from 3.3 'Organisms exchange substances with their environment' but are acceptable as four separate topics.

Another student might choose to write about the following four areas:

1. The interactions between bacteria and their environment in the nitrogen cycle.
2. The interactions between bacteria and their environment in the phosphorus cycle.
3. The interactions between mycorrhizae and their environment in facilitating the uptake of water and inorganic ions by plants.
4. The interactions between organisms and their environment leading to eutrophication.

All four of these areas come from one topic (3.5.4 'Nutrient cycles'), and so would be classed as only one topic, limiting this essay to a maximum of 10 marks.

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How much should a student write?

The exam is designed to allow 45 minutes to write the essay. An example of a breakdown of this time would be:

- Planning – 5 minutes
- Topic 1, AO1 content and AO2 (ie 'the importance of') – 10 minutes
- Topic 2, AO1 content and AO2 (ie 'the importance of') – 10 minutes
- Topic 3, AO1 content and AO2 (ie 'the importance of') – 10 minutes
- Topic 4, AO1 content and AO2 (ie 'the importance of') – 10 minutes.

Students will not have time to write everything they know about a topic; nor should they, as this may mean they end up writing an irrelevant section. They should write enough to cover the AO1 element of that topic in relation to the title, the AO2 element (ie the importance of that topic in relation to the title), and then stop, moving on the next topic.

What is expected for the AO2 element of the essay?

The AO2 element of the essay is where the student will address the theme of the essay (ie 'the importance of').

The stronger responses will address this at A-level standard. Weaker responses will only touch on it in a superficial way, often in one summary sentence.

For example, neither 'and without ATP we would die' nor 'if muscles could not contract, prey would not be able to run away from predators' is at A-level depth, and so neither is worthy of contributing to the 12 marks assigned as AO2.

Students also need to know when to stop writing. Without focus, it can be easy for a student to take the AO2 element of a topic too far and it no longer be relevant to the title of the essay.

Different ways of addressing the AO2 element of the essay

A student can address the AO2 element of the essay in different ways, depending on the essay title.

Explaining the importance of a topic by detailing a knock-on effect

For example, to address the 2023 essay title 'The importance of membranes in the functioning of cells' a suitable AO1 topic would be 3.5.1 'Photosynthesis'.

A student might correctly detail how the thylakoid membrane is involved in the production of ATP and reduced NADP in the light-dependent reaction. They might then outline that the thylakoid membrane is important in the function of these cells as these products are required for the light-independent reactions, with reduced NADP being used to reduce glycerate 3-phosphate into triose phosphate (with reduced NADP becoming oxidised in the process), and ATP being hydrolysed to release the energy for this reduction.

This is where they need to stop. It would not be appropriate to include a description of the whole of the Calvin cycle, how many cycles it takes to make glucose, that glucose can be modified to make other biological molecules, or condensed into starch for storage, or to go

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onto to discuss how glucose is used by consumers as a respiratory substrate, which can then be used to generate ATP for muscle contraction. All of this is correct biology but none of it relates to the importance of the membrane in the functioning of photosynthesis in plant cells.

Explaining the importance of a topic by detailing what would happen without it

For example, take the 2020 essay title 'The functions of enzymes and their importance in organisms.'

A student might select the topic 3.6.2.2 'Synaptic transmission' and write about how acetylcholinesterase is used in a cholinergic synapse or neuromuscular junction to hydrolyse acetylcholine. To illustrate the importance of this, it would be acceptable to detail what might happen within the synapse or neuromuscular junction if this could not happen and the consequences of this in terms of increased stimulation.

Explaining the importance of a topic by using another specification topic

If another part of the specification is chosen, it must be used in an AO2 context to explain the importance of the first AO1 area chosen. It is **not** acceptable to have AO1 followed by more AO1 from a different topic area.

For example, take the 2023 essay title of 'The importance of membranes in the functioning of cells.'

A student might choose topic 3.6.2.2 'Synaptic transmission' and choose to write about the importance of the membranes in a neuromuscular junction. One way of addressing the AO2 element would be to outline the importance of the membrane in terms of unidirectionality. A second way could be to introduce a new topic, for example, 3.6.3 'Skeletal muscles are stimulated to contract by nerves and act as effectors', to address the importance of the first topic chosen. A student might do this by outlining that depolarisation of the sarcolemma leads to muscle contraction by transverse tubules allowing synchronous release of calcium ions from the sarcoplasmic reticulum to all parts of the muscles tissue, enabling rapid muscle contraction.

A lengthy description of the sliding filament hypothesis and ratchet mechanism is not AO2. It is AO1. A full description of the sliding filament hypothesis and ratchet mechanism is no longer about the importance of membranes: it is an answer to a different AO1 question.

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What constitutes a significant error?

Significant errors cannot be ignored.

A significant error is an error that detracts from the biological accuracy, or correctness of the student's answer. It could be a whole paragraph, or just one or two words. Examples could include:

- 'Depolarisation occurs when sodium ions move into an axon of a neurone by active transport.'
- 'Beta cells of the pancreas release glucagon in response in increase blood glucose levels.'
- 'DNA polymerase forms hydrogen bonds during DNA replication.'

If there are multiple errors in one topic based on one theme, examiners will class that section of writing or paragraph as one significant error, rather than penalising the student multiple times. Similarly, examiners do not penalise exactly the same significant error in an essay twice.

Examiners can, and do, ignore minor errors. These can be what examiners sometimes refer to as 'slips of the pen.'

For example, a student is describing photosynthesis, and correctly refers to NADP and reduced NADP in the light-dependent reaction, but in their description of the light-independent reaction states that NADP is used to reduce glycerate 3-phosphate into triose phosphate. Reading the paragraph as a whole, they clearly meant *reduced* NADP is used to reduce glycerate 3-phosphate to triose phosphate and this error does not detract from what they are telling the examiner.

The sample marked essays in Appendix 3 contain examples of significant errors, but also examples of where errors have been ignored.

What constitutes an irrelevant section?

An irrelevant section is a whole paragraph or several lines, not just one word. Anything written in an introduction is ignored.

An essay title can contain direction that will limit the topics students should write about. For example, with the 2019 essay 'The importance of bonds and bonding in organisms' students needed to note that this is 'in organisms' and not 'between organisms.' Therefore any discussion of interactions between organisms (say during reproduction or courtship) would be irrelevant, as would any discussion of processes occurring outside an organism, such as PCR.

This also applies to addressing the theme (ie 'the importance of'). For example, with the 2021 essay title, 'The importance of complementary shapes of molecules in organisms' a student might correctly select topic 3.1.5.2 'DNA replication' and write an AO1 section about complementary base pairing at the correct A-level depth. However, to illustrate the importance of complementary shapes of molecules in DNA replication, they might choose to discuss how they are important in PCR from topic 3.8.4.1 'Recombinant DNA technology'. This would not be relevant, as the essay title states 'in organisms' and PCR takes place *in vitro*.

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Students need to know when to stop, and it can be easy for them to get carried away. This could be by linking one topic to another, and then another, and so on. Whilst the biology may all be correct, and the topics may link to each other, they may no longer link to the title of the essay, and therefore may no longer be relevant.

For example, taking the 2023 essay 'The importance of membranes in the functioning of cells' a student might choose topic 3.3.3 'Digestion and absorption', and correctly write about how the membrane is involved in co-transport mechanisms for the absorption of monosaccharides. The importance of the membrane here is that the channel proteins and carrier proteins within the membrane allow the transport of glucose into an epithelial cell, even against a concentration gradient. This sets up a concentration gradient between that cell and an adjacent capillary, thereby allowing glucose to move by facilitated diffusion into the blood. This could even be taken one step further, still within this title, by stressing the importance of this membrane action is that it allows other cells to function, by providing a respiratory substrate for glycolysis or to allow for glycogenesis.

But the answer should go no further than that. Lengthy AO1 descriptions of glycolysis, or even the link reaction, Krebs cycle, and beyond, no longer relate to the importance of membranes in the functioning of cells. Instead, they relate to the importance of glucose in respiration or the importance of glucose in the functioning of cells.

What constitutes material beyond the specification?

To gain top marks in the Extended Abstract level material beyond the specification must be included. This material must be:

- **At least a paragraph, and not just one word.** For example, just knowing the name of an enzyme that is not listed in the specification is not sufficient.
- **At least at A-level depth, and not anecdotal.** An anecdotal example that would not be suitable would be something such as 'a male peacock will fan its feathers to attract a mate.'
- **An example that is relevant to the title and is not in the specification.** This could be a whole topic area that is not on the specification. For example, with the 2022 essay title 'The importance of cycles in biology' inclusion of the importance of the urea/ornithine cycle would count as material beyond the specification.

  There are very few examples in the specification, so these can be brought in as material beyond the specification, as long as they are at the correct level. For example, with the 2023 essay title 'The importance of membranes in the functioning of cells' inclusion of cholera or cystic fibrosis to illustrate the importance of transport across the membrane would count as long as they are at least at A-level depth. Topics included from the GCSE specification, at GCSE-level depth would not count as material beyond the specification. Examples of this would include (but are not limited to) control of body temperature, hormones in human reproduction and accommodation in the eye.

  Another example refers back to the topic discussed on page 13: This could lend itself to a potential beyond specification idea in terms of how acetylcholinesterase inhibitors result in higher concentrations of acetylcholine, leading to increased impulses being transmitted

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between neurones of the brain, which in turn, may temporarily improve or stabilise the symptoms of dementia in the treatment of Alzheimer's.

There are a few beyond-specification ideas that students could learn that might apply to several different essay titles, but any beyond-specification material included must be relevant to the title.

A student who is scoring at the top of the Extended Abstract level will most likely have been reading and researching beyond the specification throughout the two years of their A-level course of study. They will therefore have relevant examples at hand that they can bring into their essay.

Students sometimes use an example from an earlier question in the paper as material beyond the specification. This will rarely count as material beyond the specification.

Use of abbreviations

In all questions except the essay, the only acceptable abbreviations are those mentioned in the specification. In the essay, as long as the examiner understands what the student's abbreviation means it would not be penalised. Examples could be 'H bonds' for hydrogen bonds or 'rough ER' for rough endoplasmic reticulum.

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Appendix 1: Level of response marking instructions

Level of response mark schemes are broken down into levels, each of which has a descriptor. The descriptor for the level shows the average performance for the level. There are marks in each level.

Before you apply the mark scheme to a student's answer read the answer and annotate it (as instructed) to show the qualities that are being looked for. You can then apply the mark scheme.

Step 1 Determine a level

Start at the lowest level of the mark scheme and use it as a ladder to see whether the answer meets the descriptor for that level. The descriptor for the level indicates the different qualities that might be seen in the student's answer for that level. If it meets the lowest level then go to the next one and decide if it meets this level, and so on, until you have a match between the level descriptor and the answer. With practice and familiarity, you will find that for better answers you will be able to quickly skip through the lower levels of the mark scheme.

When assigning a level, you should look at the overall quality of the answer and not look to pick holes in small and specific parts of the answer where the student has not performed quite as well as the rest. If the answer covers different aspects of different levels of the mark scheme you should use a best fit approach for defining the level and then use the variability of the response to help decide the mark within the level, ie if the response is predominantly Level 3 with a small amount of Level 4 material it would be placed in Level 3 but be awarded a mark near the top of the level because of the Level 4 content.

Step 2 Determine a mark

Once you have assigned a level you need to decide on the mark. The descriptors on how to allocate marks can help with this. The exemplar materials used during standardisation will help. There will be an answer in the standardising materials which will correspond with each level of the mark scheme. This answer will have been awarded a mark by the Lead Examiner. You can compare the student's answer with the example to determine if it is the same standard, better or worse than the example. You can then use this to allocate a mark for the answer based on the Lead Examiner's mark on the example.

You may well need to read back through the answer as you apply the mark scheme to clarify points and assure yourself that the level and the mark are appropriate.

Indicative content in the mark scheme is provided as a guide for examiners. It is not intended to be exhaustive, and you must credit other valid points. Students do not have to cover all of the points mentioned in the Indicative content to reach the highest level of the mark scheme.

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An answer which contains nothing of relevance to the question must be awarded no marks.

Marks	Level	Level Descriptors
21–25	Extended Astract Generalised beyond specific context	Response shows holistic approach to the question with a fully integrated answer which makes clear links between several different topics and the theme of the question. Biology is detailed and comprehensive A-level content, uses appropriate terminology, and is very well written and always clearly explained. No significant errors or irrelevant material. For top marks in the band, the answer shows evidence of reading beyond specification requirements.
16–20	Relational Integrated into a whole	Response links several topics to the main theme of the question, to form a series of interrelated points which are clearly explained. Biology is fundamentally correct A-level content and contains some points which are detailed, though there may be some which are less well developed, with appropriate use of terminology. Perhaps one significant error and/or, one irrelevant topic which detracts from the overall quality of the answer.
11–15	Multistructural Several aspects covered but they are unrelated	Response mostly deals with suitable topics, but they are not interrelated, and links are not made to the theme of the question. Biology is usually correct A-level content, though it lacks detail. It is usually clearly explained and generally uses appropriate terminology. Some significant errors and/or, more than one irrelevant topic.
6–10	Unistructural Only one or few aspects covered	Response predominantly deals with only one or two topics that relate to the question. Biology presented shows some superficial A-level content that may be poorly explained, lacking in detail, or show limited use of appropriate terminology. May contain a number of significant errors and/or, irrelevant topics.

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Marks	Level	Level Descriptors
1–5	Unfocused	Response only indirectly addresses the theme of the question and merely presents a series of biological facts which are usually descriptive in nature or poorly explained and at times may be factually incorrect. Content and terminology is generally below A-level. May contain a large number of errors and/or, irrelevant topics.
0		Nothing of relevance or no response.

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Commentary on terms and statements in the levels mark scheme

The levels mark scheme for the essay contains a number of words and statements that are open to different interpretations. This commentary defines the meanings of these words and statements in the context of marking the essay. Many words and statements are used in the descriptions of more than one level of response. The definitions of these remain the same throughout.

Levels mark scheme word/statement	Definition
Holistic	Synoptic, drawing from different topics (usually sections of the specification).
A fully integrated answer which makes clear links between several different topics and the theme of the question.	All topics relate to the title and theme of the essay; for example, explaining the biological importance of a process. When considering, for example, the importance of a process, the explanation must be at A-level standard. 'Several' here is defined as at least four topic areas from the specification covered. This means some sentences, not just a word or two. It does not mean using many examples from one topic area.
Biology is detailed and comprehensive A-level content, uses appropriate terminology, and is very well written and always clearly explained.	Detailed and comprehensive A-level content is the specification content. Terminology is that used in the specification. Well written and clearly explained refers mainly to biological content and use of terminology. Prose, handwriting and spelling are secondary considerations. Phonetic spelling is accepted, unless examiners are instructed not to do so for particular words; for example, glucagon, glucose and glycogen.

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Levels mark scheme word/statement	Definition
No significant errors or irrelevant material.	A significant error is one which significantly detracts from the biological accuracy or correctness of a described example. This will usually involve more than one word. Irrelevant material is several lines (or more) that clearly fails to address the title, or the theme of the title.
For top marks in the band, the answer shows evidence of reading beyond specification requirements.	An example that is relevant to the title and is not required in the specification content. The example must be used at A-level standard.
Response mostly deals with suitable topics, but they are not interrelated, and links are not made to the theme of the question.	Not addressing the biological theme of the essay (eg importance) at A-level standard.

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Appendix 2: A-level Biology essay titles

This table lists the essay titles used in our A-level Biology exams since 2017.

Year	Question	Title
2017	07.1	The importance of nitrogen-containing substances in biological systems
2017	07.2	The importance of diffusion in organisms
2018	07.1	The importance of the control of movement in cells and organisms
2018	07.2	The importance of interactions between cells and between organisms
2019	07.1	The importance of DNA as an information-carrying molecule **and** its use in gene technologies
2019	07.2	The importance of bonds and bonding in organisms
2020	07.1	The functions of enzymes and their importance in organisms
2020	07.2	The causes and importance of variation and diversity in organisms
2021	07.1	The importance of complementary shapes of molecules in organisms
2021	07.2	The importance of ions in metabolic processes
2022	06.1	The uses and importance of ATP in organisms
2022	06.2	The importance of cycles in biology
2023	07.1	The importance of interactions between organisms and their environment
2023	07.2	The importance of membranes in the functioning of cells
2024	07.1	Phosphorus-containing substances and their importance in biological systems
2024	07.2	The mechanisms and importance of transport within organisms

Appendix 3: Marked and annotated examples of student responses

Appendix 3 is a separate booklet to be used alongside this resource.

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