

## **Coming to grips with the nuts and bolts in answering essay-type questions**

(Relevant to AAT Paper 2 – Business Communication and Organization and Management)

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This article provides guidance to candidates on dealing with essay-type questions in Paper 2: Business Communication and Organization and Management of the AAT Examination. First we cover the common pitfalls found in candidates' answers and then refer to the competence expected of candidates. We then use a sample essay-type question from the examination to illustrate.

### **Common pitfalls in candidates' answers**

Time and again, many candidates have had difficulty in completing the required writing tasks within the time allowed in the examination, not least because they have failed to organize and present their answers in grammatically correct and complete sentences with suitable paragraphing. A number of them have failed to set out their answers in an appropriate layout for the type of business correspondence (such as a letter, memorandum, proposal, report, etc.) required in the question.

### ***[Learning Point No. 1 – Write correct and complete sentences with suitable paragraphing along the layout of various common business correspondence.]***

Essay-type questions in this paper test candidates' ability to apply their acquired knowledge, within the context of a given business problem or scenario, to the specific requirements of a question. It often seems that many candidates rush to write down their answers to these essay-type questions without knowing exactly what they have been asked to do. As a result, the answers they give are, in most cases, inappropriate and sometimes even entirely irrelevant, leading to their failure in the examination. Candidates must read the question very carefully and analyze the information given. Before starting to write their answers, they should get into the habit of taking a couple of minutes to think about the question, the requirements and the basic facts relevant to the given problem/scenario. Particular attention should be given to the following:

✓ **Types of answers** required

Candidates should understand the meaning of the following key words specifying the question requirements: identify, describe, explain, differentiate (compare and contrast), discuss, comment, analyse, evaluate, etc.

✓ **Level of details** expected

Candidates should be prepared to determine, and contain if necessary, the scope and amount of details to be included in the answers. To do this, they must think about the marks allocated to respective questions and the time left for answering them in the examination.

✓ **Relationship amongst different pieces of information** set out in the question

Candidates should tune in to the relevance of the nature of business in relation to

the problem/scenario presented in the question, the role asked to be assumed (e.g. in the capacity as the human resources manager, finance manager, etc.) vis-à-vis the audience / addressee(s) (e.g. the board of directors, staff members, supplier(s), customer(s) etc.) when answering the question, and the time scale and urgency of the problem / scenario being referred to. This helps candidates stay focused on the question's main theme and identify the key issues to be covered in their answers.

- ✓ **Relevance of the concepts and theories** to be applied to the given problem or scenario

Only material which is explicitly asked for and / or directly applicable to the given problem / scenario should be cited as answers. To avoid giving superfluous answers, which score no marks, candidates should be clear about the substance of concepts and theories and their applicability. Simply reproducing relevant definitions and descriptions stated in the study text without proper explanations as to how they can be applied to the situation is usually insufficient and leads to loss of marks.

***[Learning Point No. 2 – Spare a minute or two to think about the specific requirements of a question before putting down your answers in writing.]***

The most common weakness among those who performed poorly in Paper 2 has been that they fail to finish studying the whole syllabus adequately. From reviewing past examination papers, candidates should be aware that questions are always include elements of the whole syllabus. Candidates invariably lose marks if they miss any part of the syllabus from their studies. In particular, a large number of candidates focus narrowly on business communication (BC) topics without paying the same attention to Organization and Management (O&M). They seem to think that with their English writing skills and BC knowledge, which they consider to be fairly good, they will be able to pass even if they do not attempt all O&M questions. The plain fact is that such an approach generally leads to failure.

Candidates should note that the O&M part usually accounts for about one third of the overall mark in each of the three sections of the paper. Without an understanding of the basic knowledge of O&M concepts and theories covered in the syllabus, they will find it hard to give correct answers to questions on O&M issues. This not only causes them to lose marks in the multiple-choice section and the compulsory short answer section, but also adversely impacts on their performance in the essay-type section. Even though they only have to answer two out of three optional essay-type questions, these questions may incorporate both BC and O&M issues. Candidates who fail to answer the O&M part will have a chance of losing one-third of the marks allocated for the question. In other words, unless they perform brilliantly in all BC questions, their chance of passing in the essay-type questions section is remote.

***[Learning Point No. 3 – Be acquainted with all key concepts covered in the syllabus and prepare adequately for questions on O&M. ]***

### **A sample question testing both BC and O&M**

Candidates may be asked to complete a business writing task and elaborate on an O&M topic with examples. A typical scenario is given in the following essay-type question:

*You are Billy Chan, marketing manager of Happy Face, a renowned chain store selling confectionery such as sweets and chocolates in Hong Kong. There are about 100 confectionery items and all of them are freshly imported from Europe. Each of these items is specially blended and flavoured to suit the tastes and preference of customers in Hong Kong. Happy Face has earned a good reputation for selling a wide choice of well-liked gifts, not only for children, but also for colleagues, friends and family members. Since last summer, Happy Face has formed a fan club to foster customers' loyalty. So far, about 1,000 customers have joined the fan club as members.*

*To celebrate the first anniversary of the club, Happy Face plans to offer new confectionery items at a special discount to club members with a view to enhancing the goodwill of the company and increasing sales.*

#### **REQUIRED**

*To get the plan moving, the general manager asks you to do the following:*

**(a) Write the sales letter in your capacity as the marketing manager of Happy Face informing members of the good news. Your letter should attract readers' attention and encourage them to make orders. You may add any relevant information where necessary.**

**(17 marks)**

**(b) Name and explain the four Ps in Happy Face and, in respect of each of these Ps, suggest an area for improvement.**

**(8 marks)**

**(Total: 25 marks)**

After spending some minutes to read and mull over the narrative and requirements of the above question, candidates should understand that they need to:

- complete the required sales letter and give advice on marketing management issues in the role of the marketing manager of a well-established retail business selling one single product (confectionery) mainly for gift-giving purposes;
- employ some of the common strategies, as illustrated in the study text, to arouse readers' attention and create an incentive to buy when writing the sales letter, e.g. by asking a question, putting forth an offer subject to certain conditions, etc.; and
- think of relevant examples of possible improvement areas with reference to the

four Ps (Product, Price, Place and Promotion) of the company, e.g. limited edition of a trendy confectionery product; price cut for bulk purchase, free delivery service to customers' work-place; promotion campaign targeted at first-time customers, etc.

### **Conclusion**

Candidates can score higher marks in essay-type questions if they can take on board the above learning points and practise answering as many past examination papers as possible in preparation for the examination. They should work out their study plan well in advance and be self-disciplined in time management throughout their revision period, which may take weeks or even months.

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