Writing examination essays

The principles of good essay-writing contained in this course are equally valid for examination essays. The difference is that an exam essay needs to be more tightly structured, more precise and concise, and to cover ground more quickly than a supervision essay.

Practising all the skills outlined in this course is the best preparation for writing good examination essays. But below is some more specific advice.

Before you go into the examination:

- Spend some time studying past exam papers in your subject. Make sure you are familiar with the rubric and the type of questions used.
- Read the marking criteria carefully. They are published on the MML website so that you can find out exactly what examiners are looking for. Where do you think your essays place you at the moment on the marking scale? What do you need to improve to move up the scale?
- Read the examiners’ reports for your papers. These are held in the MML Library. They contain very useful advice to candidates, and outline some of the common pitfalls you should avoid at all costs.
- Practise writing timed essays. This is a crucial part of revision and should not be skipped. At earlier stages in your revision, allow yourself to consult your notes while planning and start the clock when you have finished your plan. By the time you go into the exam, you will have all this information in your head and will be able to write your essay in the time allowed.

In the examination room:

- Pay particular attention to the question, as under exam conditions it is more likely that you will misread it.
- Make sure you really answer the question in front of you, not the one you wish had been set! Examiners are strict on this issue and will penalize you if your material is not fully relevant to the question.
- If you cannot initially see a question you can answer, do not panic. Sometimes the best and most original essays are produced when you try to bring your knowledge to bear on a topic which isn’t the most obvious match. Do take care, however, to justify your adoption of an unusual angle on the question.
- Spend at least 10 minutes thinking and planning before starting to write. A shorter, better argued essay is preferable to a longer, more wishy-washy one.
- You will usually have just enough time to write an introduction, 3-5 substantial paragraphs and a conclusion. So your plan should include a) your core statement, b) 3-5 major points contributing to your argument, and c) points you will cover in your introduction and conclusion.
- Allow time to check over your work at the end. Avoid irritating your examiners with silly mistakes or illegible handwriting.