

Notes on Writing a Critical Essay (Nov 2018)

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The Critical Essay Question (CEQ) is a crucial component of the Essay style paper. Worth 40 marks (=> 40 minutes), it must be passed to pass the exam as a whole.

The question always starts with “In essay form, critically discuss this statement from different points of view and provide your conclusion”. This already indicates areas you need to emphasise in your essay:

“Critical” discussion means being able to weigh up the strengths of arguments, particularly those in the literature but also your own ideas (often informed by your own clinical experience).

“Different points of view” means a variety of perspectives. It often includes the pros and cons of the assertion(s) of the quote, but can also usefully include points of view such as a psychiatrist, treating team, service user, carer, NGO member, manager, economist, or politician. It could include views of the lay public or the media, or of the anti-psychiatry groups such as Scientologists. It could incorporate an evidence based/scientific approach or a more intuitive/humanistic one (the science vs the art of psychiatry). It could also include perspectives on an idea at different periods of time in history (including contemporary) or different cultural views. I’m sure you can think of other points of view that could also go into an essay.

“Your conclusion” is self-evident, but not always easy to do well. You need to bring together the information in the body of the essay with your distillation of the information you have outlined and how you view the assertion(s) of the quote.

The CEQ is marked according to a predetermined scoring key. There are 10 potential domains that can be used for marking, with each domain scored 0-5. Not all of these domains need to be used, and each domain that is used is given a weighting for that particular question. This gives the examiners flexibility in marking to be as relevant as they can be for that particular quote. While you won’t know what domains are being used and what the weighting is for each domain that is used, the general approach to all essays is the same (this is not the same as a “generic essay”, which is a “rubber stamp” essay where you have a predetermined format and fill in the blanks for that quote...an approach particularly hated by examiners and unlikely to do well).

I will go through each of the 10 domains. Please read in conjunction with the CEQ Generic Scoring Key on the College website [https://www.ranzcp.org/Files/PreFellowship/2012-Fellowship-Program/Exam-Centre/Essay-style/Master-CEQ-Scoring-Key-v5-\(5-Prof-levels\)-180220.aspx](https://www.ranzcp.org/Files/PreFellowship/2012-Fellowship-Program/Exam-Centre/Essay-style/Master-CEQ-Scoring-Key-v5-(5-Prof-levels)-180220.aspx)

Note that not every domain will be marked for any one CEQ. The norm is that 4-5 domains will be selected by the examiners. You won’t know what the precise domains are, but the principles of writing a good essay are the same for any essay. A well structured, clearly reasoned and well written essay covering a broad range of views relevant to the quote and coming to an appropriately thought out conclusion will always do well. Practice trying to hit all the marking domains unless they clearly aren’t relevant to the quote.

The first domain is your ability to write clearly in formal English. This includes spelling and grammar, but also not having too many cross-outs or corrections (in handwritten papers). You should write clearly and in paragraphs (I would avoid bullet points), with double spacing to make it easier to read. This domain is not usually worth a lot of marks (typically 10%), but they are easy to get if you can write well and easy to lose if you don’t.

The second domain is your ability to come to grips with the meaning of the quote. The process of writing any essay should start with the question “What is the author saying?”. I would add “to a psychiatrist”, given that you are being asked to consider the quote from a role as a junior consultant psychiatrist (which is the standard for the exam). This tests your ability to understand the quote and what it is all about, which is usually a lot more than the words of the quote itself. Outlining what you believe the quote is all about is an important task of your introductory paragraph, but the whole essay really fleshes out how you interpret the meaning of the quote.

The third domain is your ability to develop a number of strands of argument that address the issues raised by the quote. This forms the body of the essay, and is where you introduce different points of view and the underlying evidence that supports or refutes aspects of these perspectives. This is a key part of the “critical reasoning” requirement of the essay. Here is where you lay out the information that you will later bring together and summarise in your conclusion.

The fourth domain is the accuracy of the information that you introduce. This is another component of critical reasoning, with the crucial supporting evidence that you introduce being factually correct. It is vitally important to use evidence to support statements that you make, otherwise you just get a waffly opinion. To do well in this domain, you have to demonstrate plenty of accurate information that supports the assertions you make. However, don’t be wrong. For example, if you are referring to treatment guidelines for a disorder and you can’t remember if they were from RANZCP, the APA or NICE, it is better just to talk about “Treatment guidelines recommend...” than guess the wrong one.

The fifth domain is all about the breadth and maturity of your essay, important considerations for all essays. This is where you need to incorporate different points of view, particularly being able to step outside of psychiatry to consider an issue in relation to the rest of medicine (if appropriate) and, crucially, outside of the medical model altogether. It is important to be able to bring in perspectives from different areas such as sociology (e.g. Durkheim’s views on suicide or the importance of the sick role as developed by Parsons), the history of psychiatry, cultural models of illness, philosophy, anthropology, popular culture, consumerism etc. You can think about issues in our own culture’s perspective, such as controversies about what constitutes a psychiatric illness and how this might be similar to or different from the understanding of illness in other fields of medicine. This domain is also where you are marked on your ability to be an advocate for an issue as a psychiatrist.

The sixth domain is specifically about your understanding of ethical issues relevant to the quote. You may need to consider conventional principal based ethics (such as Beauchamp and Childress’ Autonomy, Beneficence, Non-maleficence and Justice), but also broader ethical views including classical absolutism (such as Kant) and utilitarianism (such as Mill). Point out where different ethical views are in conflict (which they usually are) and how you would balance this. Think about broader moral issues (such as personal and social behavior and how we determine what is “right” or “appropriate”) or issues such as professionalism, which may be much more relevant to the quote than a Beauchamp and Childress framework. Where relevant, also think about medicolegal issues such as patient rights and access to complaints processes (we have the Health and Disability Commission, but Australia has similar processes). Where appropriate, you might introduce, in broad principals, aspects of legislation (such as our Privacy legislation or MHA) or case law (such as Tarasoff) that are important.

The seventh domain is about a patient centered approach that incorporates the supports around the patient and is focused in recovery. This domain is not relevant to all essays and is more likely to be part of essays involving a focus on the individual than the whole population. Quotes which bring up issues if treatment are likely to incorporate this domain. If you are going to hit this domain, you need to do it properly and not just a generic spiel. To do well, you need to be able to look at an issue from the perspective of the patient and their family and be able to link this to clinical practice. RANZCP position statements on issues relating to treatment and recovery may be a useful resource, but need to be able to be linked relevantly to the quote.

The eighth domain is being able to incorporate a relevant clinical context into your understanding of the quote. It might be based on your understanding of how care should be provided (such as an RANZCP Clinical Practice Guideline) or your own firsthand experiences (either how you have seen issues addressed by a consultant or other team member, or your own direct experiences of working with patients and families).

The ninth domain is the conclusion. It is how you bring together the strands of the points you have made and weigh these up in a summary form. Whatever conclusion you come to, it needs to be substantiated by the information you have presented earlier in the essay and you need to be able to justify your perspective.

The tenth domain is an elective one, where the examiners can introduce a new domain (specific to that question) if they want to. If this is used, it can't account for any more than 10% of the final marks available.

How to Write a Critical Essay

- 1) Look at the essay question in your reading time. Some people like to do the essay first, some last. I would suggest doing it first as you have to pass it to pass the exam. You will be freshest at the start of the exam and you will be able to make sure you allocate 40 minutes to the task and not try and rush it in 20 minutes at the end of the MEQs.
- 2) Allocate the first few (I would suggest five) minutes of the essay to jot down ideas on rough paper. Think about what the quote means and all the points that flow out from it (this often comes to me as a series of questions, which you can tackle in the body of the essay). There are often a few key words that really form the backbone of the quote and give you a basis for your essay. Jot down ideas about how to structure your essay and the main points you want to cover. Note supporting references (studies, guidelines, quotes, etc). By then, you should have some sense of how you feel about the assertion(s) of the quote and how you are going to want to conclude.
- 3) The essay needs to start with an introductory paragraph. I always start by asking myself "what is the author saying (to a psychiatrist)". This is the most crucial step of the whole essay writing process, as it sets up the rest of the essay. There is no right answer as to what the quote is really about, but you need to consider it broadly and with its underlying, implied or deeper meanings. You need to think about how the quote is relevant to the practice of psychiatry, but also all those broader historical/social/cultural issues that require you to step outside your role as a psychiatrist and think about other perspectives.
- 4) The introductory paragraph should outline your understanding of what the author is saying in the quote. Definitions of key words can often be helpful, but aren't always required (particularly if the wording of the quote is self-evident). If you do define terms, make sure these are concepts that you expand on in your essay.
- 5) The quote may just focus on one issue, or it may be a compound quote that brings up a number of separate issues, each of which needs to be addressed.
- 6) Don't forget that as well as the quote itself, you will be given some additional contextual information in the form of the author, when it was published and the source of the publication (such as a particular journal article). This can give you additional information that you can incorporate into your introduction if appropriate. However, remember that it is the quote itself that is all important and you won't do yourself any favours by going off on a tangent about the journal or other source. Note that Mock CEQ writers don't

always quote sources in their practice essays (to make it easier to use fewer sources than the examiners have to draw on). The real CEQ will always give a source below the quote.

- 7) I don't suggest outlining how you are going to structure your essay in the introductory paragraph ("I am going to talk about X then Y and finally Z") as this doesn't attract marks. It is better to just get in to the meat of your essay and have a structure which is self-evident. You certainly want to be clear in your own mind (and on your rough notes) what the structure of your essay will be before you start writing.
- 8) Now you come to the body of the essay. This is where you chose a number of ideas or strands (the Guide to the CEQ by Lisa Lampe on the RANZCP website <https://www.ranzcp.org/Files/PreFellowship/2012-Fellowship-Program/Exam-Centre/Guide-to-the-Critical-Essay-Question-2015-Congress.aspx> suggests three strands). These strands will flesh out the information that you want to look at to critically evaluate aspects of the quote (with points for and against for each strand). This is where you incorporate the different points of view (whatever they may be), the ethical considerations, the broader historical/social/cultural perspectives and the clinical context (including, where appropriate, the patient centered approach and recovery model). These are all the big ticket items mentioned above and this is where you will spend the most time in essay writing.
- 9) Lisa Lampe's Guide suggests that the strands you chose should be chosen because they cover areas that you know a lot about (and thus can quote supporting evidence), are areas that are novel (showing that you can think outside the box or incorporate a range of perspectives) or that are particularly important to the quote.
- 10) Before you start writing, you should have in mind the conclusion(s) you are going to draw at the end of the essay. The information in the body of the essay needs to flow in an organized, structured, understandable way that then leads on to and justifies the conclusions that you are going to make at the end. It is not a good strategy to simply shotgun lots of ideas, with no vision of where you are heading.
- 11) Whatever points you make, you are likely to be considering the pros and cons of each point. Depending on how much you are writing, you may well want a paragraph or two for each. Sometimes, the pros or the cons will seem much greater and you will want to write much more on one than the other. That can be fine for some quotes. You don't have to be 50:50 in how you look at pros and cons (particularly if the weight of evidence is strongly in favour of one perspective) but you do need to be balanced and show that you have carefully considered an opposing view(s) and evidence for that.
- 12) Make sure that the points you make are relevant to the quote. I have emphasized that you need to think broadly, but you must also keep your essay relevant to the quote and not hare off into tangents that show beautifully what you know about a topic but which aren't actually relevant to the quote and so don't score marks.
- 13) For every point you make, you need to think about supporting evidence. This might be a study, a meta-analysis or a guideline, but it could be a quote from an influential person, a theory (such as Durkheim's ideas on suicide) or your own clinical experience. It is hard to do well in the CEQ if you can't demonstrate that you have a good knowledge base that you can bring to bear to critically evaluate the quote.
- 14) Make sure you cover enough points and have an appropriate coverage of each. An essay is unlikely to do well if you suffer from "poverty of ideation", and don't have much to discuss in your essay. It can also be a problem if you write three pages on one aspect of a point, showing you know a lot about that particular

point but not leaving yourself much time or space to look at other points you should consider and so not getting a lot of marks.

- 15) Don't forget the broader historical/social/cultural context. This usually involves stepping outside of the medical model.
- 16) Don't forget ethical (and, where relevant, medicolegal) issues.
- 17) Don't forget to incorporate a clinical context if it is relevant to the quote (it usually is).
- 18) At the end of the body of the essay, you need to draw everything together with a conclusion. This is not the place for any new information (this should have been outlined already in the body of the essay). It is the place where you synthesise the material you have outlined and come to a balanced conclusion. Like the introduction, it is an important part of the essay and is often not well done.
- 19) Lisa Lampe's guide outlines that you can agree with the assertion(s) of the author in the quote, disagree with it (them), partially agree or even come up with an entirely different viewpoint. You need to be able to weigh up the arguments for and against the assertion(s) of the author; "On the one hand.....but on the other hand" or "in support of this....but against this". Whatever you do, it needs to be justified by the information you have presented, usually in the body of your essay.
- 20) Use paragraphs to help with the structure of your essay. Watch your spelling and grammar. The most common problems are mixing up tenses and singular/plural. This can be a particular challenge if you have English as a second language.
- 21) Keep the style of your essay writing professional and non-emotive. It is supposed to be a piece of academic writing, the kind of thing you might see in Australasian Psychiatry if you are unsure about style. Avoid emotional arguments, dramatic statements or the use of the exclamation mark.
- 22) Time management is crucial in the essay style exam, much more so than the MCQ paper. Budget 40 minutes and stick as closely to that as you can. It is not the end of the world if you go a couple of minutes over on the CEQ, but you will struggle if you spend an hour on the essay and leave yourself short for the MEQs.