
Helping pupils with exam questions

Many pupils lose confidence in exams when faced with questions which appear complex or are set in unfamiliar contexts. They fail to do themselves justice even though their science knowledge and understanding is sufficient to answer questions correctly. Use the following hints and tips to make explicit to pupils how to read, understand and deal with exam questions.

- Most questions have a common theme. A question is often divided into introductory information, part (a) and part (b), and sometimes parts (c) and (d). Each of these parts may be divided into sections (i) and (ii) and sometimes more. The parts are usually related by a scientific idea or theme. In many questions the context of the question changes between the sections. This can confuse pupils and as a result they do not complete the question. Advise pupils that the introductory section and part (a) including the subsections are always related. Use suitable example questions to show that the parts are always linked to each other but can be tackled one at a time.
- Many pupils often find the first part of the question difficult and give up at this point. This may be because of an unfamiliar context or even chemical name. Encourage pupils to read the remaining parts of the question, because this should help them clue into the specific science the question relates to.
- Advise pupils to look at the marks for each part of the question to avoid writing more than is necessary. Tell them not to get stuck on a part of the question which might only have one mark, but to move on to the next part. It is important to encourage pupils to break down the provided information into clauses when practising test questions. Remind pupils that they have been taught about clauses during English lessons. Teach pupils that, after each clause break, they need **to stop briefly and think about the information provided**.
- Tell pupils to use diagrams, where provided, to help them understand the information. Get to stop and think about what the information might mean eg What are the units in the table or graph? How does the diagram (table or graph) link to the information given? Can I use the information to help answer the question?
- Some parts of a question may be highlighted in **bold print**. Pupils need to know the importance of bold print. It is used to help to focus the answer. For example: *Give **one other answer*** means do not give more than one; if they do, pupils are likely to lose marks.
- Highlight key vocabulary, command words or important information.
- Remind pupils about PEE (Point, Evidence, Explanation for Extended answers).

The language in examinations

The following words are not science specific but are used a lot in a number of subjects and in exam questions. It is generally assumed that pupils understand the meanings of these words, even though they don't often hear them outside the school environment.

Word	How would you explain this to pupils
appropriate	
estimate	
criteria	
relatively	
factors	
specifically	
complex	
proportional to	
rate	
negligible	
valid	
relevant	
objective	
terms	
data	