

A-level Biology essay

Training guide for teachers

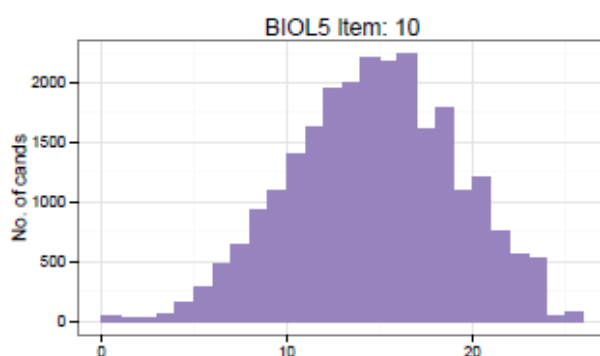
This guide is designed to help teachers to plan their teaching to prepare students for the essay in A-level Paper 3. It has been designed for a number of teachers in the same department to work together, but could be adapted for single teachers, or for use with students.

Throughout the development of our new A-level Biology specification, we spoke to teachers and university experts. We were told that extended writing was an important skill that students should be developing.

The 25 mark essay has been an element of AQA A-levels for many years, going back several specifications. It is at its heart a synoptic essay. Students who write in detail on one single area will not gain high marks. They must demonstrate their ability to draw concepts together from the whole course and relate them to the title given.

At first, teachers may worry that this is difficult for their students and will mean a large amount of marking. In many ways, essays are a much more positive way of assessing than other forms of question that cover large areas of the specification. As there are two titles, students can pick the one that best fits their knowledge of biology to show what they know.

The biology essay produces a very satisfactory range of marks from all candidates, showing that it allows candidates of all abilities to demonstrate their knowledge. The graph below shows the spread of marks for all candidates in the biology essay in 2014.



As would be expected, it is difficult, but not impossible, to gain full or almost full marks in the essay. What is perhaps even more reassuring is that very few students gain few or no marks. This shows how even the weakest candidates can gain marks by writing something on the essay and shows that it is worth putting time into preparation of all students.

Our assessment guide contains five elements:

- a training schedule – showing how a CPD session could be run with teachers
- marking guidance for the A-level Paper 3 essay
- a presentation – covering the major points of the essay
- a set of past paper essay titles and the indicative content from the mark schemes
- a set of specimen answers that have previously been marked.