



Improving the quality of argument in GCSE Business Studies

What does it mean to write good business studies answers? How should this be shared with students? The aim of this article is to remove some of the mystery and guesswork about how to do well in business studies by presenting a straightforward, accessible template for gauging the quality of written work.

Identifying an underlying pattern to work will have the benefit of bringing together the relatively disparate aspects contained within business studies and thus give the subject more coherence. In addition, establishing a shared language about the nature of the subject (rather than just the subject *content*), presents tremendous opportunities for meaningful dialogue about improvement, both between teachers and between students and teachers.

The framework

The framework grid in *Figure 1* establishes key criteria for assessing written answers in business studies – structure, business language, relevance, logic chains and evaluation. There are three different levels for each criterion.

Structure

This row in the framework is concerned with making students feel secure about the overall shape of their written work. This should help them focus on the depth of answers and not skate over too many lines of argument or simply concentrate on one side of an issue. It encourages students to consider both sides of an issue (level 2) and provide a conclusion (where appropriate).

Figure 1: The framework

		Level 1	✓?	Level 2	✓?	Level 3	✓?
Overall: What does my work look like?	Structure	State one point (one side)		State two or four points (usually both sides)		And sums up/writes conclusion (<i>not always needed!</i>)	
Describing: What's in my work?	Business language	One term per paragraph		Two terms per paragraph		Three terms per paragraph	
	Relevance	Arguments are true of any business		One argument is definitely about this business		More than one argument is definitely about this business	
Explaining: Why is it like that? What might happen next?	Logic chains	One step		Two steps		More than two steps	
Summing up: What is more important or more likely? And why?	Evaluation	Make a judgement and relate it to the business		Make a judgement and relate it to the broader business context		Make a judgement and relate it to the business and/or the broader context in more than one way	

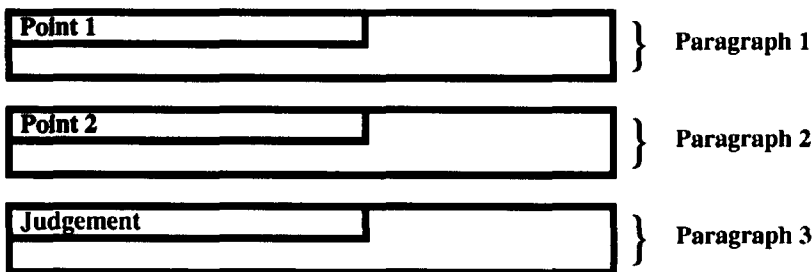
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The term "point" in the framework represents an answer to a question that stands up on its own. For example, when discussing the disadvantages of being a sole trader, the fact that sole traders face unlimited liability would be a possible point. Points are concise, snappy and usually contain business studies concepts and/or terminology. Points start paragraphs, provide a focus for them and act as a springboard for explanation. Points can be advantages, disadvantages, factors, impacts, reasons or positive and negative aspects.

students is that if they could have written the response *before* studying business studies, then the terms in their answer are much less likely to count as good business language.

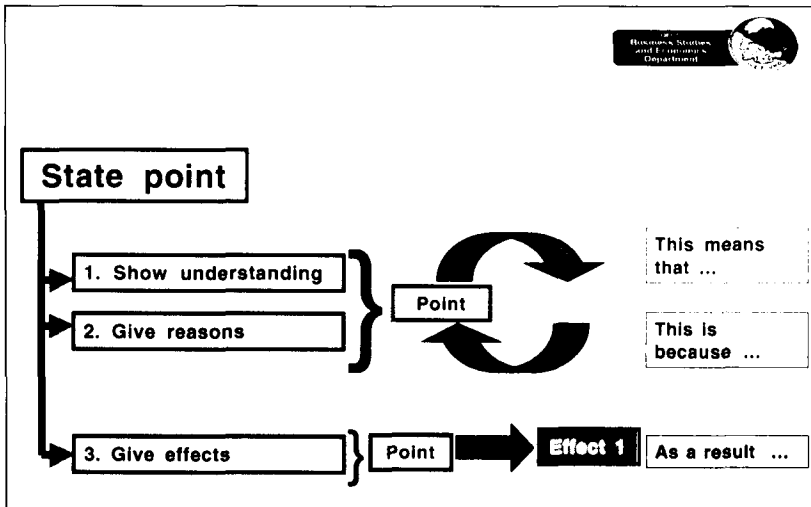
Figure 2: Structuring an answer



Relevance

Good business studies writing always relates specifically to the business under discussion. To get to level 1 in the framework, the answer must clearly be correct. To move to level 2, some detail must be integrated into the answer that makes it true for that particular business. Level 3 encourages students to relate their answers in more than one way to the context. A straightforward test for students to check for relevance is to replace the name of the particular business (if it has been used) in the answer with the name of another business. If the answer still makes sense, it is likely that the relevance is relatively weak.

Figure 3: Logic chains



Logic chains

The logic chains row in the framework is about the number of stages that thinking moves through in an answer. *Figure 3* sets out the basic ideas behind this concept.

There are at least two ways to look at this aspect of a student's work. First, it is possible to set out a string of interconnected consequences. This is the purpose of the "what might happen next?" prompt. Useful language here for students might be connecting phrases such as "as a result...", "this means that..." and "so...". An answer that

The place of points at the start of paragraphs in an evaluative answer is illustrated in *Figure 2*. Students could perform a quick visual check to assess whether their answer follows this pattern. This is purpose of the "what does my work look like?" prompt question in the framework.

set out that a business with falling costs might experience a rise in profits, and so the firm might find it easier to attract investors would therefore represent a two-step chain.

Business language

Assessing the frequency of use of business language is a pretty good proxy measure of an individual student's ability in business studies. A useful test for

The other main method for explaining is to give a reason for – or to show understanding of – the previous statement in the chain. This may consist of simply defining or explaining a concept. For example, if an advantage of growth is that a firm could benefit from economies of scale, the next step in the argument might be to say what economies of scale are. Useful language here can be "this means that..." or "this is because..."



Figure 4: Applying the framework in practice

<p>Question: John and Anwar are currently operating Designs for U – a clothing retailer -- as a partnership but are considering becoming a private limited company. Recommend whether or not they should become a private limited company (Ltd). (10 marks)</p>	
<p>Student answer (actual text, but my italics)</p>	<p>Commentary</p>
<p>The advantage of an Ltd is the Ltd has <i>limited liability</i>. This means that if the business becomes <i>insolvent</i> then the owners only lose what they put into the business. As a result all personal position are safe.</p> <p>Another advantage is that <i>separate legal identity</i> this means if the Designs for U gets sued John and Anwar wont get sued. As a result Designs for U will have to pay [...cannot read this...] to John and Anwar.</p> <p>The disadvantages are that theres a lot of paperwork. As a result this is time consuming so John an Anwar will be less <i>productive</i>.</p> <p>Also the <i>share</i> cannot be sold on the <i>Stockmarket</i>. This means John and Anwar will only be selling shares to the family as a result less <i>capital</i> is available.</p> <p>My conclusion is that it would be a good idea because the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and they are a <i>small business</i> with a <i>very competitive market</i> so they need security.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four points are identified, two for and two against becoming a limited company. The points occur in the first sentence of each paragraph. A conclusion is provided. This answer reaches structure level 3 in the framework. • Business terms are in blue italics (added by me). Paragraph 4 contains three terms but paragraphs 2 and 3 contain only one. The level awarded would depend on how teachers choose to use the framework. It could be awarded level 2 if an average is taken, or level 3 if the paragraph with the maximum number of terms is considered. • Up to the final paragraph the answer only earns level 1 for relevance since the arguments could be true of any business. However, in the final paragraph specific reference is made to the features of the Designs for U business, hence it achieves level 2. • Paragraphs 1, 3 and 4 are three step logic chains. Paragraph 2 is a failed three step chain. Level 3 would be awarded. • The final paragraph might just about achieve level 2 for evaluation. The crucial phrase here is "so they need security". Without this phrase, the judgement would be unsupported. Special facts about the business are used to say why security (and presumably limited liability) is important in this case.

should expand into a particular market might be supported by the argument that the marketing director has experience in that area. For level 2, inclusion of the broader external context is rewarded. This could involve referring to the state of the economy, the competition in the market or the level of consumer demand.

Using the framework

Figure 4 illustrates how the framework might be applied to make sense of an actual piece of student writing.

To test this approach, the framework was introduced to five groups of GCSE Year 10 students across three schools for 4–6 lessons. Tests were given before and after the framework introduction, and control groups were used in each school. In all schools, the performance of the project groups improved significantly relative to the controls. The initial and final test contained an identical question. This

In any line of argument, both methods can be used in any sequence. At some points, consequences might need explaining; at others, further effects might need setting out which then require explanation.

Evaluation

Everyone knows that evaluation in business studies is about making a judgement. However, it is often relatively poorly specified. Good evaluation is often said to be mature or sophisticated, but what do these terms really mean?

In the framework, evaluation involves making a judgement, where appropriate, and then supporting that with further explanation within the particular context. In other words, evaluation is a judgement plus logic chain(s) plus relevance. A level 1 answer will refer to some aspect of the business to add weight to an argument. For example, a judgement that a firm

allowed similar lines of argument to be directly compared for individual students. Figure 5 shows extracts of the answers from three students.

The answers from the final test in Figure 5 show significant structural improvement. Arguments have become more logically structured with a greater number of business terms (in blue). Most begin with a clearly stated point that answers the question and provides a springboard for multi-stage explanation. Even the more able student (B) has improved by weaving in a strand of highly context-specific reasoning. The other two students are clearly thinking more deeply about the answers – the mention of "unstability for their family" in C's answer, for example, or the "making it less of a risk when introducing new ideas" in A's work.

Student responses to the framework were generally very positive. Here are a selection of comments.

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[I now] know it's better to refer to the business
[I am] more confident with longer questions
[It has] helped me write it so it is more flowing
[It's about] stating short points with key terms
and explaining them with logic chains
Made me think more about my work before I
write it
I know it's better to go into a lot of detail on
each point instead of writing lots of points
Taught me to write in a more organised way
Why didn't you tell me about this at the
beginning of the year

Conclusions

The framework is unlikely to improve the work of all students in every case, of course, but the evidence from the trial did indicate that for many it did make a significant difference. The great benefit of the framework is that it ties the form and the content of writing in business studies together, makes them explicit, and provides students and teachers with a transparent structure in which to set their thinking. The framework can help define exactly what business studies is.

The framework can act as a starting point and a road map for improvement. It is easier for students to work out what to do if there is a strong sense of overall direction and pattern. The framework has the potential to reduce the fear of the blank space below a question.

Many students persist in not using business terminology, and fail to explain their answers in sufficient depth. Many habitually do not provide conclusions to evaluative questions. Could this be because they do not see these things as fundamental? The framework helps tackle this through the integrated picture of business studies it provides. In the end it is a much more powerful way of leveraging change in student behaviour than exhortation alone.

It is surely one of the benefits of business studies

that it introduces students to a model for rational discussion and decision making, where it is important to consider different points of view, where the context is highly valued and where the argument is logically structured. In its specific emphasis on these vital issues, the framework is assisting in the development of the kind of values and skills that can help make students more effective democratic citizens.

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For a fuller version of this article, go to the EBEA website (www.ebea.org.uk) and select "members only". Look for "supporting resources for teaching business and economics" and select "February 07". As well as the full text of the article you will find a scheme of work.

If you would like to try out the strategies outlined in this article, send an email to Guy and he will send you all of the support materials.

Figure 5: Testing the framework

Question: John and Anwar are currently operating as a partnership but are considering becoming a private limited company. Recommend whether or not they should become a private limited company (Ltd).		
Student	Initial test	Final test
A	I think that John and Anwar should become a private limited company because they would get limited liability which is if the business goes bust they will not lose any of their own belonging.	I think that they should become a Ltd because this means they will receive limited liability meaning that if the company were to go bankrupt they would not lose personal possessions it is the company that will lose out making it less of a risk when setting up or introducing new ideas
B	Becoming a private limited company has its benefits as they would have limited liability where if the business goes insolvent they don't lose their personal assets – only what they invested, this security can be priceless to a new firm unsure if it will succeed.	John and Anwar are a relatively new business this means that they still risk going bankrupt if demand falls because they most likely have little retained profit, therefore operating as an Ltd would be recommended as they would have limited liability reducing the personal and financial risks of going insolvent as all those in business with limited liability don't lose any personal assets if the firm goes insolvent.
C	To begin, in a partnership they have unlimited liability meaning they could go bankrupt and lose everything not just what they put into the business.	Being part of a partnership means you have unlimited liability. This means that if the business goes bankrupt you may lose personal assets such as your house. As a result, there would be instability for their family which could lead to them being homeless.