

An illustration of a young woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a light blue sweater, sitting at a desk in a library. She is focused on writing in an open notebook with a pen. A desk lamp with a white shade is positioned to her right, casting a warm glow. In the foreground, there is a white mug with steam rising from it. The background is filled with stacks of books on shelves, creating a studious atmosphere.

# How AQA A-Level Psychology Is Marked

AQA A-Level Psychology uses a **levels-based mark scheme** for extended-answer questions. Examiners do not tick off individual points — instead, answers are judged **holistically**, with the overall quality of the response determining which level best matches the answer.

# What Does "Holistic Marking" Mean?

Holistic marking means examiners assess the **overall standard** of an answer rather than counting isolated facts. A well-developed answer with fewer high-quality points can often score better than a longer answer with many brief, underdeveloped points.

## Depth of Understanding

How well the student grasps the concept beyond surface-level recall

## Quality of Explanation

Clarity and development of ideas, not just listing facts

## Accuracy of Terminology

Correct and precise use of psychological language throughout

## Balance of AOs

Appropriate weighting of knowledge, application, and evaluation

# A01 – Knowledge and Understanding

## What It Tests

Students demonstrate knowledge of psychological theories, studies, concepts, and terminology. A01 questions reward accurate detail, clear explanations, and correct use of specialist language.

## Examples in Practice

- Describing Milgram's obedience study
- Explaining the Working Memory Model
- Defining operant conditioning
- Outlining the stages of attachment

**i** A01 is the foundation — without accurate knowledge, application and evaluation cannot be effective.

# A02 – Application

Students apply psychological knowledge to scenarios, examples, or real-life situations. Marks are awarded for **direct links** to the scenario, use of psychological terminology, and clear explanation of how theory relates to the example given.



## Attachment Theory

Applying attachment concepts to a family scenario involving a child's behaviour



## Conformity

Explaining conformity pressures in a workplace or group decision-making example



## Research Methods

Using methodological knowledge to analyse or design a practical investigation

# A03 – Analysis and Evaluation

A03 is where high marks are often won or lost. Students must **analyse, evaluate, and discuss** psychological ideas and research — not simply describe them. Strong A03 responses use evidence, balanced arguments, and clear conclusions.

## Evaluating Validity

Critically assessing the internal and external validity of a study or method

## Strengths and Weaknesses

Discussing the limitations and advantages of a theory or explanation

## Comparing Explanations

Weighing up competing theories or models against one another

## Research Support

Citing specific studies or evidence to support or challenge a claim

# Typical Level Descriptors

Examiners use level descriptors to place answers into bands. Understanding what separates each level helps students target their writing more effectively.

**1**

## Top Levels

Detailed and accurate knowledge · Effective application · Well-developed evaluation · Strong evidence · Specialist terminology · Logical, coherent discussion

**2**

## Middle Levels

Reasonable understanding · Some accurate detail · Some evaluation present · Mostly clear terminology · Partial development of ideas

**3**

## Lower Levels

Limited knowledge · Basic descriptions · Weak evaluation · Inaccurate terminology · Poor organisation

# What Examiners Look For

## → Stay focused on the question

Avoid generic answers — every point should directly address what is asked

## → Use terminology accurately

Precise psychological language signals depth of understanding

## → Develop A03 paragraphs

Evaluation must be explained and linked, not just stated

## → Include chains of reasoning

Build logical arguments that lead to clear, justified conclusions



# Common Reasons Students Lose Marks

Many students lose marks for avoidable errors. Recognising these pitfalls is the first step to avoiding them in the exam.

1

## Descriptive without evaluation

Writing about a study or theory without critically analysing it

2

## Unexplained points

Making a claim without developing or justifying it

3

## Ignoring the scenario

Failing to link AO2 answers directly to the given example

4

## Vague terminology

Using imprecise or everyday language instead of specialist terms

5

## Repeating evaluation points

Stating the same criticism in different words rather than adding new points

6

## Ignoring command words

Not responding to "discuss", "evaluate", or "compare" as instructed

# Exam Tip

AQA rewards **quality over quantity**. A smaller number of well-developed, clearly explained points will usually score higher than a long answer filled with brief statements and limited explanation.

## ❓ Avoid

Long lists of undeveloped points, vague terminology, and descriptive writing without evaluation

## ✓ Aim For

Fewer, well-explained points with accurate terminology, clear AO2 links, and developed AO3 evaluation