



EXAM LITERACY GUIDE

Literacy is considered "the master skill" of secondary school and a critical, often underestimated, factor in GCSE exam performance across all subjects. High literacy levels are vital because modern, text-heavy exams require students to quickly read, comprehend, and analyse complex information under time pressure.



Exam Literacy – Why focus on it?

Focusing on exam literacy in your GCSE preparation

- ❖ gives students a process and set of steps to follow in an exam
- ❖ builds resilience and confidence in exams
- ❖ improves the quality and grade of students' written answers

Strategies for teaching exam literacy can be broken down into the following areas.



1. Breaking down the question



2. Dealing with the content, text or source



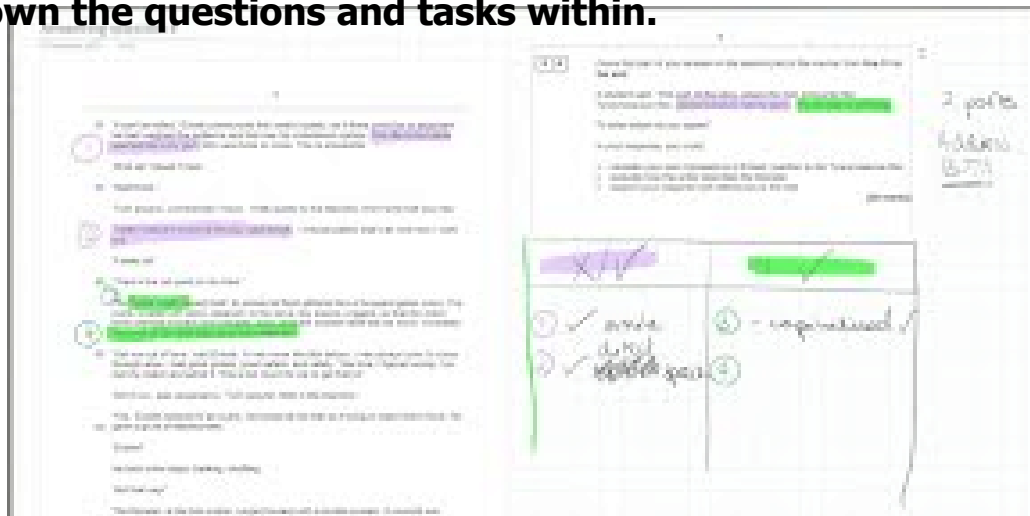
3. Writing an answer



Let's look at these in more detail.

1. Breaking Down the Exam Question

It is extremely important that every department and subject is explicit in the way they teach students to approach exam papers and break down the questions and tasks within.



Command words are the words in the exam question that 'tell' students what to do in their answer (e.g. 'describe', 'explain' etc.).

We should encourage pupils to **circle** the command words in practice papers and 'walking talking' mock papers.

Topic words are the words in the exam question that refer to the topic pupils should base their answer on.

Pupils should be encouraged to **highlight or underline** these words.

Example

Compare the use of **diamond** with the use of **graphite**, **explaining** each use in terms of the **bonding** and **structure**. In your answer you should use information from the diagrams above

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BUG the question

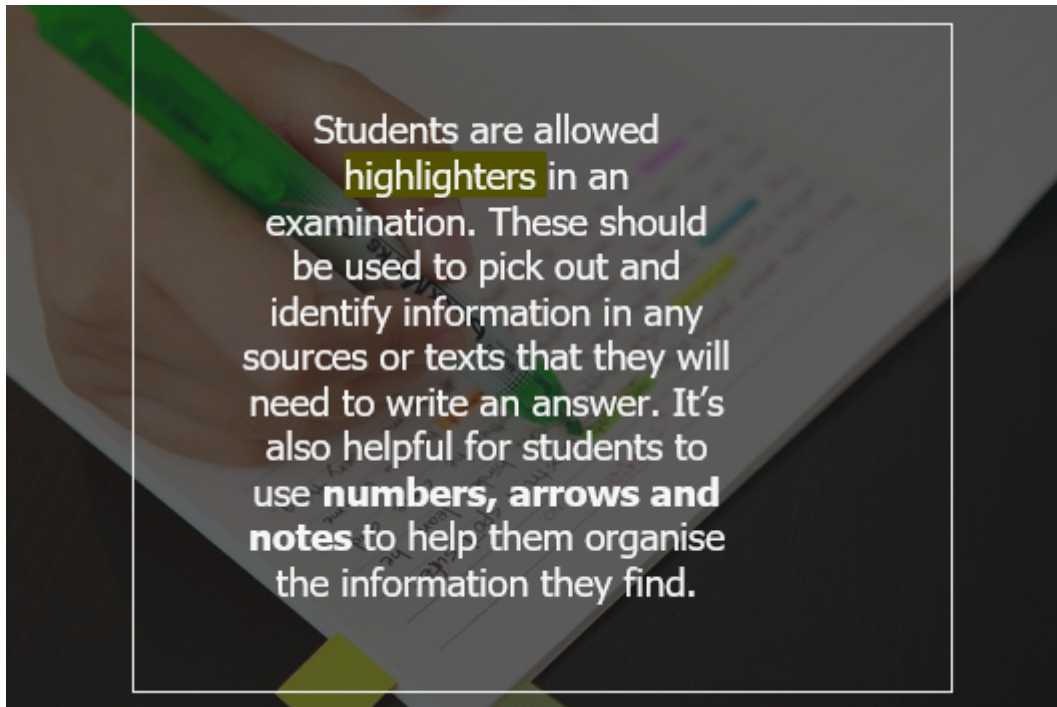
Box or circle the
command word

Underline or highlight
the key topic words

Glance back at the
question / plan as you write
your answer

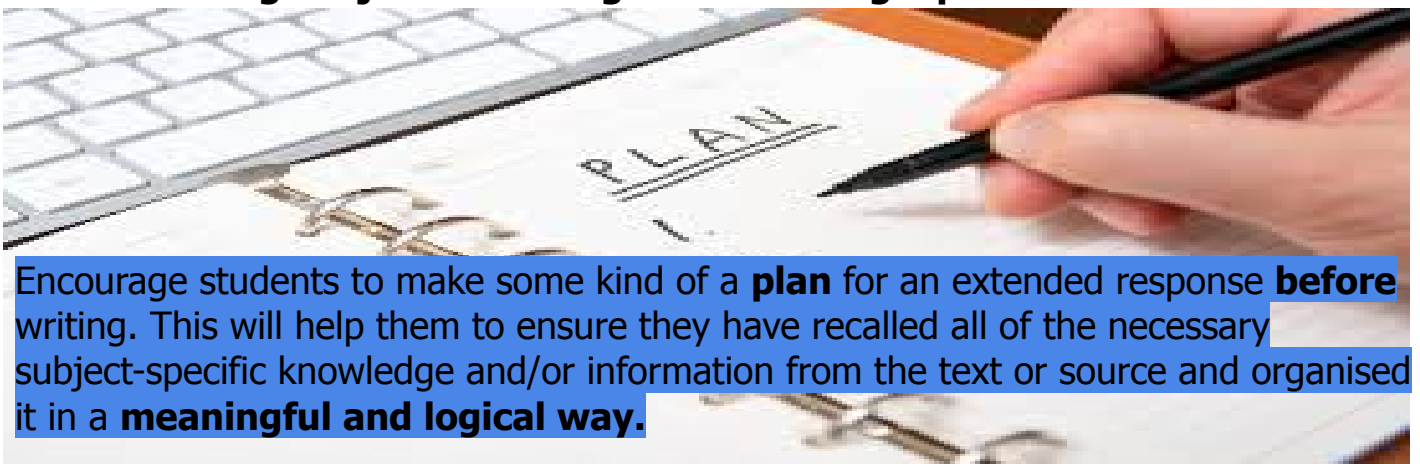
2.Dealing with the content, text or source.

Finding key information in a source or text



For higher-mark questions that require students to write extended responses, students should be encouraged to use strategies to **find key information, recall subject knowledge** and **create a plan** before writing out their response.

- **Recalling subject knowledge and creating a plan**



Planning will also allow students to 'glance' back to ensure their answer stays on track and doesn't go off on a tangent.

3. Writing an Answer

Writing an answer is the final and last step in responding to an exam question. Students should be aware of and able to use a range of strategies to help them fully link their response to the question, express their ideas clearly and demonstrate subject-specific content knowledge.

- **Linking the written response to the question**

In order to focus their answer clearly on the topic expressed in the exam question, students should try to **use the words from the question** to formulate **the first sentence** of their response.

Example :

Describe the **reasons why** a child may **refuse food**.

First sentence of answer:

Firstly, **one reason that a child may refuse food is because** they may be teething and experiencing pain or discomfort in their mouth.

- **Expressing ideas clearly**

Students should be taught and encouraged to use **connectives** in longer written responses to exam questions in order to show a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the information, content knowledge or ideas they are expressing.

Order/Sequencing of information/ideas:

Firstly Secondly Thirdly In addition Next Additionally
Subsequently Finally Lastly To begin In conclusion

Links/Relationships between information/ideas:

As a result Furthermore Nevertheless Moreover Consequently
So For example Overall Therefore

Comparisons between information:

Similarly Likewise However In contrast Whereas Alternatively
In the same way On the other hand

- **Demonstrating subject-specific content knowledge**

Finally, students should learn and memorise **subject-specific vocabulary** to use in their written answers on a range of possible topics, as it encourages pupils to give more in-depth and specific responses – leading to higher marks.

The 95% Vocabulary Rule

Research indicates that if a student does not understand at least 95% of the vocabulary in a text or exam question, their comprehension significantly declines. Modern GCSE papers are often dense with subject-specific terminology (Tier 3 vocabulary), meaning even a strong student in science or geography may fail if they cannot decode the question.

Ask your teacher for key vocabulary lists in each subject. Most subjects also have a list of key words available on the exam website. See below for an example link to Biology key vocabulary

https://www.aqa.org.uk/files/resources.science.AQA-SCIENCE-GCSE-SUBJECT-VOCAB_PDF