IB Psychology Exam Technique — Papers 1, 2 & 3

IB HL Study Guide

Contents

Introduction: Why Exam Technique Matters

In IB Psychology, **students lose more marks on exam technique than content knowledge**. The most common mistakes are not factual gaps — they are structural:

- Answering the wrong command term (outlining when asked to evaluate)
- Missing the link back to the question
- Wrong word count (200-word answer for a 22-mark question)
- No methodological evaluation of studies
- Forgetting the conclusion in an ERQ

This guide provides **answer templates** for every paper type, **command term definitions with examples**, and a list of the most common mark-loss traps. Master these patterns and you will score higher — even if your content knowledge is unchanged.

IB TIP

The IB Psychology markscheme rewards **structure and argumentation**, not just recall. A well-structured answer with two studies will score higher than a poorly structured answer with four studies.

Paper 1: Core (SL + HL, 2 hours)

Paper 1 tests the three core approaches (Biological, Cognitive, Sociocultural). All candidates answer **Section A** and **Section B**.

Section A: Short Answer Questions (SAQs)

Format:

- Answer **3 SAQs** from a choice of 9 (3 per approach)
- **9 marks each** (27 marks total)
- Target length: **~220 words per SAQ** (not a strict limit, but a practical guideline)
- Time allocation: **15-20 minutes per SAQ**

Common command terms: Outline, Describe, Explain, State

SAQ Structure Template

Use this three-part structure for every SAQ:

WORKED EXAMPLE

Template:

1. **Define the term** (1-2 sentences)
   "X refers to…"

2. **Describe one study** (supporting evidence)

   - Researcher(s) and year
   - Aim of the study
   - Procedure (brief — 2-3 sentences)
   - Findings
   - Conclusion

3. **Link to the question**
   "This study demonstrates [concept from question] because…"

EXAM ALERT

Critical: Do not write more than **one study** in a 9-mark SAQ. Students who write two studies often run out of time and lose marks on evaluation in Section B. One well-explained study with a clear link scores full marks.

Example SAQ Skeleton

Question: Outline one effect of neurotransmission on behaviour. (9 marks)

WORKED EXAMPLE

Sample Answer Structure:

Define:
"Neurotransmission refers to the chemical communication between neurons via neurotransmitters, which influence behaviour, mood, and cognition."

Study:
"Antonova et al. (2011) investigated the role of acetylcholine (ACh) in spatial memory. Participants were injected with either scopolamine (an ACh antagonist that blocks ACh receptors) or a placebo, then completed a virtual maze task (the Arena task). Those who received scopolamine performed significantly worse on spatial memory tasks than the control group, demonstrating reduced hippocampal activity via fMRI scans."

Link:
"This study shows that blocking acetylcholine neurotransmission impairs spatial memory, demonstrating a direct causal effect of neurotransmission on behaviour."

Word count: ~105 words (can expand procedure/findings to reach ~220)

IB TIP

Notice the structure: Define → Study → Link. This SAQ structure is **universal** — it works for every 9-mark SAQ in Paper 1.

HL **HL Extension — Research Methods/Ethics SAQs:**

HL students may also encounter SAQs on research methods or ethical considerations. The same SAQ template applies, but the "study" section becomes a **methodological analysis** or **ethical evaluation** of a named study.

Example HL SAQ: Outline one ethical consideration relevant to the study of behaviour. (9 marks)

WORKED EXAMPLE

Sample Answer Structure:

Define:
"Informed consent is the ethical requirement that participants must understand the nature, risks, and purpose of a study before agreeing to participate."

Study:
"Milgram's (1963) obedience study involved deception — participants believed they were administering real electric shocks to a 'learner,' when in fact the shocks were fake. Participants were not fully informed of the true nature of the study (investigating obedience to authority, not memory and learning as they were told). This violated the principle of informed consent."

Link:
"Milgram's study demonstrates the ethical tension between informed consent and the need for deception in certain psychological research. While the study produced important findings about obedience, it raised serious ethical concerns about participants' right to know what they were participating in."

Section B: Essay Question (ERQ)

Format:

- Answer **1 ERQ** from a choice of 3 (1 per approach)
- **22 marks**
- Target length: **~800 words** (not a strict limit, but a practical guideline)
- Time allocation: **60 minutes**

Common command terms: Discuss, Evaluate, "To what extent…", Contrast

ERQ Structure Template

Use this five-part structure for every ERQ:

WORKED EXAMPLE

Template:

1. **Introduction** (50-80 words)
    - Define key terms
    - State your thesis/argument (what position will you take?)
    - Outline the structure of your essay
2. **Body Paragraph 1** (250-300 words)
    - **Study 1:** Name, aim, procedure, findings, conclusion
    - **Evaluation:** Strengths and limitations (methodological or ethical)
    - **Link:** How does this support or challenge the question?
3. **Body Paragraph 2** (250-300 words)
    - **Study 2:** Name, aim, procedure, findings, conclusion
    - **Evaluation:** Strengths and limitations
    - **Link:** How does this support or challenge the question?
    - **Counterpoint** (optional but recommended): Acknowledge alternative explanations or conflicting evidence
4. **Body Paragraph 3** (optional, 200-250 words)
    - **Study 3 or counterargument:** Either a third study OR a critique of the first two studies (e.g., cultural bias, ethical concerns, reductionism)
5. **Conclusion** (50-80 words)
    - Restate your thesis
    - Summarize the balance of evidence
    - Answer the question directly (especially important for "To what extent…" questions)

⚠ EXAM ALERT

Critical: The **conclusion** is mandatory. An ERQ without a conclusion cannot score above a **5/22** (roughly 23%) no matter how good the body paragraphs are. The IB markscheme explicitly states: "Does not answer the question = maximum Level 2."

Example ERQ Skeleton

Question: Discuss the use of one research method in the study of the brain and behaviour. (22 marks)

WORKED EXAMPLE

Sample Answer Structure:

Introduction:
"Research methods such as experiments, case studies, and brain imaging techniques are used to investigate the relationship between the brain and behaviour. This essay will evaluate the use of **fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging)** as a research method, focusing on its strengths and limitations. fMRI measures blood oxygen levels (BOLD signal) as a proxy for neural activity. While fMRI provides valuable insights into brain localization and function, it has methodological limitations including poor temporal resolution and lack of ecological validity."

Body Paragraph 1: Study Supporting fMRI
"Maguire et al. (2000) used structural MRI to investigate whether experience shapes the brain. Researchers scanned the brains of London taxi drivers (who must memorize 25,000 streets for 'The Knowledge' exam) and compared them to age-matched controls. They found that taxi drivers had a significantly larger posterior hippocampus (involved in spatial memory) than controls, and this volume correlated with years of taxi driving. The study demonstrates **neuroplasticity** — the brain's ability to change structure in response to experience."

Evaluation:
"Strengths: High spatial resolution (can pinpoint the posterior hippocampus); non-invasive; objective measure. Limitations: Correlational design (cannot prove causation — perhaps people with larger hippocampi become taxi drivers); MRI is expensive; ecological validity concerns (brain activity in a scanner may not reflect real-world navigation)."

Link:
"This study shows that fMRI/MRI is valuable for identifying **brain localization** (which brain regions are involved in spatial memory), but it cannot establish causation."

Body Paragraph 2: Study Demonstrating Limitations
"Antonova et al. (2011) used fMRI to measure hippocampal activity during a spatial memory task (the Arena task). Participants injected with scopolamine (an acetylcholine antagonist) showed reduced hippocampal activity and poorer spatial memory performance than controls. This study uses fMRI to demonstrate a **causal link** between neurotransmitter activity (acetylcholine) and behaviour (spatial memory)."

Evaluation:
"Strengths: Experimental design (scopolamine vs. placebo) allows causal conclusions; fMRI provides objective measure of brain activity. Limitations: Poor temporal resolution (fMRI measures blood flow, which peaks 4-6 seconds after neural activity, so it cannot capture fast cognitive processes); artificial lab setting reduces ecological validity; small sample size limits generalizability."

Counterpoint:
"Critics argue that fMRI measures blood flow, not neural activity directly, so it is an indirect proxy. Additionally, the artificial lab environment (lying still in a loud scanner) does not reflect how the brain functions in real-world contexts."

Conclusion:
"In conclusion, fMRI is a valuable research method for studying brain-behaviour relationships, particularly for identifying brain regions involved in specific cognitive functions (localization). However, it has limitations including poor temporal resolution, high cost, and questionable ecological validity. The method is most useful when combined with other approaches (e.g., behavioral experiments, case studies) to triangulate findings."

Word count: ~450 words (expand procedure/findings to reach ~800)

> **IB TIP**
>
> Notice the structure: Introduction with thesis → Study + Evaluation + Link → Study + Evaluation + Counterpoint → Conclusion. This ERQ structure is **universal** — it works for every 22-mark ERQ in Papers 1 and 2.

Paper 2: Options HL

Format (HL only):

- Choose **1 option** from: Abnormal Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Health Psychology, Psychology of Human Relationships
- Answer **2 ERQs** from your chosen option (22 marks each, 44 marks total)
- Time allocation: **60 minutes per ERQ** (2 hours total)

Command terms: Same as Paper 1 Section B (Discuss, Evaluate, "To what extent…", Contrast)

Structure: Use the **same ERQ template as Paper 1 Section B** (Introduction → Body Paragraphs with Studies + Evaluation + Link → Conclusion).

> **EXAM ALERT**
>
> **Critical:** HL students must answer **both ERQs from the same option**. You cannot mix options (e.g., one ERQ from Abnormal and one from Developmental). Doing so results in **zero marks** for the second ERQ.

Paper 3: Research Methods HL

Format (HL only):

- **Qualitative research analysis** based on stimulus material (e.g., interview transcript, field notes, case study)
- **3 structured short-answer questions** (total 24 marks)
- Time allocation: **1 hour**

Paper 3 tests your ability to **analyze qualitative data** (thematic analysis, content analysis) and evaluate qualitative research methods (interviews, observations, case studies).

Common Question Types

Question Type	What to Do	Example
Identify themes	Read the stimulus and identify 2-3 recurring patterns or themes	”Two themes are: (1) stigma and shame (participants describe feeling judged by family), (2) coping strategies (participants describe using exercise and social support to manage stress).”
Analyze data	Use qualitative analysis techniques (thematic analysis, content analysis) to interpret the stimulus	”Using thematic analysis, the data reveals that participants construct their identity around their diagnosis (theme: ‘illness as identity’).”
Evaluate method	Identify strengths and limitations of the research method used in the stimulus	”Strength: Rich qualitative data, ecological validity. Limitation: Small sample size, researcher bias, low generalizability.”

Paper 3 Approach

WORKED EXAMPLE

Step-by-step strategy:

1. **Read the stimulus carefully** (10 minutes)
    - Highlight or underline recurring patterns, emotional language, contradictions
2. **Identify 2-3 themes** (15 minutes)
    - A **theme** is a recurring pattern of meaning (e.g., "loss of control," "social stigma," "coping through routine")
    - Support each theme with **direct quotes** from the stimulus
3. **Evaluate the method** (20 minutes)
    - Identify the research method (interview, observation, case study)
    - Strengths: Rich qualitative data, ecological validity, flexibility, in-depth understanding
    - Limitations: Researcher bias, low generalizability, time-consuming, subjective interpretation
4. **Answer all questions directly** (15 minutes)
    - Do not write general essays — answer the specific question asked
    - Use **evidence from the stimulus** to support every claim

IB TIP

Paper 3 rewards **close reading** of the stimulus. Do not rely on memorized content — every answer must be grounded in the stimulus material provided.

Command Terms Decoded

The IB Psychology markscheme has **strict definitions** for command terms. Answering the wrong command term is the most common mark-loss trap.

Command Term	What to Do	Example Response Structure
Outline	Provide a brief summary with minimal detail.	Define the concept → Name one study → State findings (no evaluation).
Describe	Provide a detailed account (more detail than "outline").	Define → Study (with detailed procedure) → Findings.
Explain	Show the relationship between concepts using evidence.	Define → Study → Link showing how X causes or influences Y.
Discuss	Present multiple perspectives, evaluate strengths/limitations, and reach a balanced conclusion.	Introduction → Study 1 + evaluation → Study 2 + evaluation → Counterpoint → Conclusion.
Evaluate	Assess strengths and limitations, supported by evidence.	Identify strengths (e.g., high validity) → Identify limitations (e.g., cultural bias) → Use studies to support claims.
To what extent…	Evaluate the degree to which a claim is true. Must include a conclusion that directly answers "to what extent."	Introduction with thesis → Evidence supporting the claim → Evidence challenging the claim → Conclusion: "To a large/moderate/limited extent because…"
Contrast	Identify **differences** between two concepts/theories/studies (not similarities).	"Theory A claims X, while Theory B claims Y. The key difference is…"

⚠ EXAM ALERT

Critical: "To what extent…" questions **require a conclusion** that explicitly answers the extent. Do not leave it ambiguous. Example: "To a **large extent**, Schema Theory explains memory errors, but it has limitations including…" or "To a **moderate extent**, cultural dimensions influence behaviour, but individual differences are equally important."

Common Mark-Loss Traps

Here are the most common exam mistakes and how to avoid them:

1. Wrong Command Term Response

Mistake: Outlining when asked to evaluate, or describing when asked to discuss.

Fix: Memorize the command term table above. Before you start writing, underline the command term in the question and mentally confirm what structure you need.

2. No Link Back to the Question

Mistake: Describing a study but never explaining how it answers the question.

Fix: End every study paragraph with a **link sentence**: “This study demonstrates [concept from question] because…“

3. Missing Methodological Evaluation

Mistake: Describing a study without evaluating its strengths and limitations (especially in ERQs and “Evaluate” SAQs).

Fix: For every study, include at least **one strength** and **one limitation** (e.g., “Strength: Experimental design allows causal conclusions. Limitation: Low ecological validity due to artificial lab setting.”).

4. Wrong Word Count

Mistake: Writing 200 words for a 22-mark ERQ, or writing 600 words for a 9-mark SAQ.

Fix:

- **SAQs (9 marks):** ~220 words, 1 study, 15-20 minutes
- **ERQs (22 marks):** ~800 words, 2-3 studies, 60 minutes

Practice writing to these lengths under timed conditions.

5. No Conclusion in ERQs

Mistake: Ending an ERQ after the body paragraphs without a conclusion.

Fix: Always reserve the last 5 minutes to write a conclusion that restates your thesis and directly answers the question. An ERQ without a conclusion cannot score above Level 2 (~23%).

6. Using Unnamed Studies

Mistake: “A study showed that…” or “Research suggests…” without naming the researcher(s) and year.

Fix: Always name the study (e.g., “Maguire et al. (2000)…”). Unnamed studies receive zero credit in the IB Psychology markscheme.

7. Forgetting the Introduction

Mistake: Starting an ERQ with a study description (no introduction).

Fix: Every ERQ must begin with an introduction that (1) defines key terms, (2) states your thesis, and (3) outlines the structure of your essay. This signals to the examiner

that you understand the question.

8. Misunderstanding "Contrast"

Mistake: Listing similarities when asked to contrast.

Fix: "Contrast" means **identify differences only** (not similarities). Example: "The biological approach focuses on neurotransmitters and brain structures, while the sociocultural approach focuses on social norms and cultural values. The key difference is the level of analysis: biological is reductionist, sociocultural is holistic."

Summary: Exam Technique Checklist

Before the exam, review this checklist:

MEMORISE THIS

Paper 1 SAQs (9 marks each):

- ☐ ~220 words, 1 study, 15-20 minutes
- ☐ Structure: Define → Study → Link
- ☐ Named study (researcher + year)

Paper 1 ERQs (22 marks):

- ☐ ~800 words, 2-3 studies, 60 minutes
- ☐ Structure: Introduction → Body (Study + Evaluation + Link) → Conclusion
- ☐ Conclusion explicitly answers the question
- ☐ Every study includes methodological evaluation (strengths + limitations)

Paper 2 (HL):

- ☐ Same ERQ structure as Paper 1
- ☐ Both ERQs from the same option

Paper 3 (HL):

- ☐ Read stimulus carefully, identify 2-3 themes
- ☐ Support every claim with direct quotes from stimulus
- ☐ Evaluate the research method (strengths + limitations)

Command Terms:

- ☐ Underline command term before writing
- ☐ Outline = brief, Describe = detailed, Explain = causal link, Discuss/Evaluate = balanced argument with conclusion
- ☐ "To what extent" = must explicitly answer the extent in conclusion

Common Traps to Avoid:

- [ ] No unnamed studies ("A study showed…" = zero marks)
- [ ] Always link studies back to the question
- [ ] Include methodological evaluation for every study in ERQs
- [ ] Write a conclusion for every ERQ
- [ ] Stay within word count guidelines

Practice Questions

Use these questions to practice the templates above:

SAQ Practice (9 marks each)

1. Outline one ethical consideration relevant to the study of behaviour.
2. Explain one effect of one hormone on behaviour.
3. Describe one study related to localization of function in the brain.
4. Outline one technique used to study the brain in relation to behaviour.

▶ Sample Answer: Question 1 (Outline one ethical consideration)

ERQ Practice (22 marks each)

1. Discuss the use of one research method in the study of the brain and behaviour.
2. Evaluate Schema Theory with reference to research studies.
3. To what extent do cognitive biases influence decision-making?
4. Contrast two explanations for one disorder from the options you have studied. HL

▶ Sample Answer: Question 3 (To what extent do cognitive biases influence decision-making?)

Final Tips

1. **Practice under timed conditions.** Use past papers and simulate exam conditions (no notes, strict time limits).
2. **Memorize 2-3 studies per topic** (you cannot score full marks without named studies).
3. **Learn the command terms by heart.** Underline the command term in every question before you start writing.
4. **Write conclusions.** An ERQ without a conclusion cannot score above Level 2.
5. **Plan your ERQs.** Spend 5 minutes outlining your essay structure before you start writing (Introduction → Study 1 → Study 2 → Conclusion).

IB TIP

> The IB Psychology examiner is looking for **structure, evidence, and evaluation**. If you master the SAQ and ERQ templates in this guide, you will score significantly higher — even if your content knowledge is unchanged.

Good luck on your IB Psychology exams.