



Reflections of a CEQ Examiner

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Abstract

The Critical Essay Question (CEQ) tests some of the key skills necessary for the practice of psychiatry. Many candidates find the CEQ a challenge but there are some basic rules of writing which can help.

Keywords: examination, essay, critical thinking

“Why would you put your hand up to mark a bundle of essay papers?” Well, aside from a sweet payment (a packet of lollies), examining the critical essay question (CEQ) is an opportunity to glimpse into the minds of Australasia’s future psychiatrists, and what a privilege that is!

The CEQ tests a hallmark skill of psychiatrists: the capacity to understand and analyze a complex idea, balance the competing arguments for and against, find the nuance, and express it in a sophisticated, cogent form. It’s not easy. And whilst occasionally I’m floored by a brilliant piece of work (produced under exam conditions!), not infrequently I find myself struggling to read a candidate’s mind.

There are some excellent resources on how to approach the CEQ,^{1,2} and whilst I will try to not overlap too much, what I’ll cover is general in nature. Which brings me to a caveat: mine is not the only approach to writing a CEQ. Certainly I have read many stellar essays that adhere to a very different group of methods to the ones I use. In addition, whilst individual examiners will necessarily bring with them their own personal preferences, the marking calibration process, as well as agreed marking domains and multiple markers per paper all provide a level of objective rigor to CEQ marking. I should also add that this piece is not an official RANZCP perspective; it is mine as someone who has marked CEQ essays and teaches trainees how to write them (lawyers call this is a *disclaimer*).

Some people are naturally talented when it comes to written expression, but most of us need practice and guidance. Thus a fundamental piece of advice for passing the CEQ is this: practice and get feedback from a colleague. Then do some more practice and get some more feedback. It’s like going to the gym: you don’t get muscles by just looking at the barbells, you’ve actually got to do the hard work and lift them; getting feedback from a personal trainer can correct problems and improve your workout.

Below I’ve listed some specifics on how to communicate an idea or series of ideas in essay form, but just in case you

missed the above piece of advice: practice AND reflect on the feedback (in the spirit of learning through repetition, I hope I have repeated this point sufficiently). Also, read widely and not just in preparation for the exam.

Sentences and paragraphs

Good writers use a structure. An absence of structure causes the reader (in this case me) to get confused. So let’s start with a few words about sentence structure and then we’ll move on to consider paragraphs.

I like each sentence to be one thought, and one thought only. If sentences are too long it likely means they contain more than one thought. Having to hold multiple thoughts in the front of my mind before the desperate relief of a full stop is taxing for me as a reader. I don’t know about you, but I can’t concentrate on a sentence more than four lines long (a while back I read one that was 14 lines. After reading it three times, my vision blurred and I needed a lie down). My reflection: keep sentences short. Indeed it may be helpful to *prepare* the thought/sentence in your head before you put it on paper. (For those *really* interested in making sentences punchy you might like to read *Writing Tools* by Roy Peter Clark.³)

Persuasive paragraphs are the ones in the body of your essay that argue for or against the CEQ quote. Each persuasive paragraph, in my view, should focus on one idea (forming the argument), built on the back of a number of thoughts (the sentences). A recognizable, regular structure of sentences aids reader comprehension. The TEEL structure⁴ is a method that is commonly used: Topic sentence/s, Explanation sentence/s, Evidence sentences/s, Linking sentence/s. Example below.

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Quote:

*One consequence of psychiatry's strong identification with science is the implicit assumption that it should actively aspire to a coherent, internally consistent knowledge base, exemplified by the high value placed on evidence-based methodology at the expense of the anecdotal and discursive.*⁵

Example CEQ paragraph:

Anecdotal and discursive phenomena are not diminished by psychiatry's allegiance to science. [← Topic Sentence] In fact medicine, and science more broadly, are moving toward an appreciation of these ideas. They are implicitly difficult to articulate but science is finding new methodologies for understanding them. [← Explanation] Qualitative research methods, for example, have expanded out of the anthropological and social studies to medical science, psychiatry in particular. An ever increasing number of psychiatry research papers employ qualitative methods precisely because the psyche is inherently hard to measure and describe. Utilising such methods, whole paragraphs of verbatim quotes are given in order to capture the subjective experiences of research subjects; their discursive themes are also transcribed, coded and analyzed. [← Evidence] Thus if anything, psychiatry, and science with it, are moving toward a greater appreciation of the anecdotal and discursive. [← Linking Sentence]

Before we leave TEEL, I might offer another piece of advice: put a lot of thought into your topic sentence because this is the one that will direct the rest of your paragraph.

Certain paragraphs, I find, could be stronger. The introduction is one of them. This first paragraph needs to explain your understanding of the quote and why it is relevant to the practice of psychiatry. Moreover, you might try to give context to the source, the author and/or the time from when it was taken; repeating the quote is of little value. Don't spend the entire introduction telling the reader what you are going to say in the rest of the essay: packing too much detail into this section makes it difficult to change your line of thinking (if you decide to), midway through your essay; keep the foreshadowing broad. Obviously, it helps if you have sketched out a good plan to guide you (recall Benjamin Franklin: *if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail*. Take time to plan). Some writers find it helpful to leave a space and then write the introduction after they finish the rest of their essay.

Not infrequently candidates do not define abstract terms. This does the writer a disservice because such terms can have multiple meanings. For example, my understanding of a phrase may be very different to yours, and yet we may still both be correct (e.g., to me,

"psychotherapy" means talking therapeutically with a patient, but you may define it as psychodynamically informed psychotherapy specifically). There may be times when you are incorrect, or even partially correct, but at least I will be able to follow your line of argument if I know what you mean by a phrase. Thus consider writing a paragraph on definitions. It won't always be necessary, but it very often will.

At the end of the essay there should be a concluding paragraph. This block of text is so significant that it gets its own domain on the CEQ marking sheet¹ (Fellowship Competency 9⁶) so consider carefully what you write here. Rather than a mere recitation of points, a conclusion is at its best when it weaves the preceding paragraphs' arguments into a clear, obvious finale. No new ideas should be introduced, but you may want to hint at what direction the future might take.

Frequent mistakes

Now for some of the common blunders, the first of which is irrelevant material. Too often, candidates make an excellent argument that is irrelevant to the topic at hand. You may, for example, have a solution to global warming, but if you write about it in an essay on the gender differences in DSM diagnoses you will likely garner no marks. Such a waste of talent, time and marks. Once again, a good plan can help.

Poor handwriting—I know, it's a boring topic, but it is critical because if I can't read it then how am I supposed to mark it? Writing illegibly is also disrespectful to your reader. Practice writing fast and legibly. Some candidates leave a spare line between the written ones, making the page look less dense and allowing for easier corrections. When the College institutes computerized exams, illegibility will be a problem of the past (in examinations at least).

You will likely have committed to memory certain journal papers and other sources of evidence, but when you want to include them in your CEQ please ensure that they fit. Too often a good essay is harmed by a clunky, shoehorned reference or piece of evidence. Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) is a viable treatment for Major Depressive Disorder [← see, I just did it there, and it stuck out like a sore thumb]. Make sure the references you want to show off are relevant, or your paragraphs will just end up looking silly.

A set of marking domains is tailored to every CEQ.⁷ An essay can have multiple domain themes running through paragraphs. But if you decide to dedicate a paragraph/s to one domain only then it might be helpful to headline it in the topic sentence. For example, with ethics (Fellowship Competency 6):

This quote brings into consideration certain ethical principles ...

and then you go on to the details. This focuses not only the examiner, but also the writer.

Finally, you should leave time to do a quick review of your material for spelling and grammatical mistakes. Simple errors can confuse your reader, rob your paragraphs of meaning and strip you of marks. Similarly, do not use punctuation you do not understand (e.g., a semicolon); Kim Cooper from the Writing Centre at Harvard University has some useful tips.⁸

Conclusion

The CEQ is a good test of one's analytical and expressive skills. Solid essays will be structured, express thoughts and ideas clearly, and will avoid the common pitfalls that bedevil exam papers. Remember to read over your material. And above all, in your preparation for the exam, practice and reflect as much as you can.

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Note

1. Some other domains *may* be expressed as single paragraph too (e.g., Fellowship Competency 5, covering models of health and illness, history, culture and advocacy) but the conclusion is invariably a single paragraph.

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