

Writing an essay at university

A short article that is intended to help give A Level geography students an idea of what will be expected of them in their first year at university

Sometimes lecturers will relay most of the information to you verbally, in which case you will need to take detailed notes. Other lecturers give out handouts which contain fairly detailed information, quotations and examples. In this case you can spend more time in the lecture digesting the information, and only adding annotations if necessary.

Essay questions will be set based upon the lecture course you have attended. For example:

1. How far do you agree that attempts to explain the growth in social and spatial inequalities in contemporary Britain must look to the economy rather than to policy?

This initially seems to be quite a tricky question to answer. But if you unpick the component parts within it, it becomes a lot easier to make sense of. Firstly, the subject of the question: 'social and spatial inequalities' is probably not a term you will be familiar with. Think about how social inequalities are manifested in British society. Having access to a good education, a choice of commutable jobs and living in a safe environment are some examples of desirable characteristics in a person's situation. If you think about your memories of areas you have visited, or seen in the media there are obvious visual disparities, which relate to inequality.

On a national scale you could think about whether there is a north / south divide - picture a de-industrialised zone of a northern city, and compare it to London's west end. This is a good example, but it should not be treated as representative of the whole country. On a regional scale you could use your knowledge of city models - think about a typical inner city council estate compared to an urban fringe area. You can probably think of examples on a local scale too, although they may be less pronounced - two adjacent streets could have very different housing types, and / or belong to different school catchment areas. The 'spatial' part of the question has become inescapable. Your experience of different places is all the evidence you need to know that some areas have many of these desirable qualities, whilst others are limited.

To begin the explanation about how these inequalities have grown, you will first want to confirm whether they indeed have! You need a way of measuring them. Level of poverty is a good proxy for those experiencing social deprivation, since money provides people with the ability to move to a desirable area and access the services they want. On the lecture PowerPoint there is information about certain measures used, such as the Gini coefficient. In your essay you could acknowledge that this is only one measure, and decide whether this is sufficient evidence or not.

The last part of the question asks you to think about whether you believe the economy or policy is responsible for these inequalities. Economic reasons would relate to the economic structure of Britain, and how this impacts upon the availability of jobs - think about the recession, or outsourcing the

manufacturing industry. Policy would relate to how governments have impacted upon the distribution of wealth and access to services – think about the monetary benefits given to people who cannot find work, and the extent of state funded education (including the student loans company, which allows anyone the chance to go to university irrespective of wealth). The precursor ‘How far do you agree...’ allows you to form a conclusion which could recognise the significance of economy *and* policy, not just one or the other.

Now that you have unpicked what the question is asking you, you will probably want to think about how to structure your answer. To begin, one could write about the meaning and definition of poverty using the lecture notes. This allows you to clarify to your reader what you are basing your answer on. Next it would be helpful to start explaining why poverty is prevalent in Britain, and splitting these into economic reasons, or policy-based ones. To conclude, you need to decide which of these is most significant for explaining inequalities, or if it is a mix of the two.

Often lectures provide the basic ideas about an issue, but do not contain enough information to answer essay questions fully. Further background knowledge and statistics about poverty in the UK would be really useful, to allow you to back up your ideas with evidence. Hence reading lists will be given out by your lecturers, these forming an essential basis for your learning. Sometimes the reading list will be quite sizeable, and you won’t be expected to read everything on it. In these instances you need to pick the ones which are most relevant or interesting for you. A good way to do this is to read the ‘Abstract’ paragraph which gives you a summary of the article. Here are some references which might help you with this essay:

- Dorling, D. *et al* (2007) Poverty, wealth and place in Britain 1968- 2005, available at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2019-poverty-wealth-place.pdf>
- Palmer, G. *et al* (2008) Monitoring poverty and social exclusion, available at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/monitoring-poverty-and-social-exclusion-2008>

If you would like to see an example answer to this question, open the word document entitled ‘Poverty Essay’.

Some questions may require a little less factual knowledge, but have more emphasis on your arguments and thought processes. This question requires a different approach, for example:

2. What does geography as a discipline contribute to our understanding of poverty?

Answering this question will require you to think differently to the first one. The key subject of this essay will be the idea of geography as a discipline. You might begin by talking through the kind of thought processes which you think are unique to geography with fellow students, or your teacher. These links may help to give you some inspiration:

<http://www.geography.org.uk/gtip/thinkpieces/concepts/#2>

www.geography.org.uk

http://www.uwsp.edu/geo/faculty/ritter/geog101/textbook/essentials/essentials_of_geography.html

Now with the idea of geography as a spatial science in mind, you can start applying this knowledge to the second part of the question: its contribution to our understanding of poverty. If you think about how poverty is manifested in our society, the spatial aspect is inescapable (for examples, please read the paragraph beneath question 1 above).

As well as discussing these core ideas of spatiality in your essay, you might find it interesting to think about people's different and changing perceptions of places. If you think about the way an area you know has been portrayed in the media, ask yourself whether you think it paints an honest portrait of the place. Different portrayals and perceptions will have an impact on your idea of how prevalent poverty is in an area. For example, a holiday brochure or a University prospectus for a city portrays its subject in a flattering light by including features such as smiling visitors, clear skies and varied attractions. Photos here will probably be of the most affluent areas, as this encourages you to think about the best characteristics of city living and want to visit it. But a newspaper article about rising crime rates in urban areas might include images of dark streets, claustrophobic alleys and deserted buildings. This portrays the darker side of a city, suggesting that some residents there turn to crime in lieu of any other source of income or role, thereby highlighting the issue of poverty. Your perception of a place might be skewed by the medium you have used to get your information from, so try to think past the stereotypes!

- If you would like to find out more about place perception, this extract from Doreen Massey's book *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) provides a good overview of the subject:
<http://www.unc.edu/courses/2006spring/geog/021/001/massey.pdf>

If you would like to deepen your understanding of the whole issue of poverty, these books contain useful information:

- Fuller, D. and Gough, J. (2001) 'Geographies of Poverty' in R. Pain et al, *Introducing Social Geographies* (London: Arnold)
- Green, A. and Owen, D. (2006) *The Geography of Poor Skills and Access to Work* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation)