Peter Clements explains that addressing the question directly is the key to securing good grades.

To achieve one of the higher grades at A level you need to be precise. That means framing your answer so that it answers the question set, instead of merely writing on the general topic. This is true both in essay and source-based questions, although in this article there is only space to deal with the former.

Often candidates demonstrate that they know a lot of relevant information and even write analytically, giving evidence in support of an argument - but still fail to point what they know to the actual demands of the question. As a result valuable marks are lost in otherwise sound answers. No one expects polished and perfectly reasoned answers to be written in examination conditions, although sometimes they do appear. It is, however, my contention here that it is possible for many candidates to point their answers more closely to the questions set. This would elevate their answers onto higher levels and attract more marks. In this article we will consider examples of how, in different types of essay questions, knowledgeable answers can be pointed more directly to the questions set.

**The way to do it**

Consider the opening extract from an answer to a question on Italian unification ('What factors helped and what factors hindered Italian unification in the period 1815-1848?'):

*'Up until 1848, there was no strong dominant power or person to lead the unification process, but there were three main ideas about how it could be achieved...'*

The candidate has recognised that there were problems before 1848 but that there were also ideas as to how Italian unification could be achieved, which he or she then went on to discuss. Implicit in this discussion were the helps and hindrances demanded by the question, but they were not overtly related to the question. Consider if the candidate had written as follows:

*'The unification process up until 1848 was hindered by the fact that there was no dominant Italian power or personality whose ideas were acceptable to all Italians. Indeed, there were three differing ideas as to how Italian Unification could be achieved ...'*

The same ideas which had hit the question only obliquely before have now been deployed to hit it directly. Higher level marks will be gained if the argument continues in this vein.

It is crucial to read the question carefully before beginning to write. In an exam it is all too easy to look for key phrases and dates - in this case Italian Unification 1815-1848 - and begin writing, without considering the full implications of the question. It is well worth investing a minute or two in thinking about the question - perhaps underlining all the key phrases - before writing a very brief plan listing the points you will deploy to answer it. Having jotted down the plan, try to stick to it. This can be done by referring to it as each new point is developed in your answer. Also, don't be afraid to use the words of the question in your answer. If you are referring to the question relevantly in your answer you are probably addressing its demands well.

**Further examples**

Another example of how answers fail to be pointed adequately to the question is where they begin 'How successful was ...?' Candidates usually recognise this phrase and write about the relevant issue - say Mussolini's domestic policy - but begin to move into description rather than analysis because they have not considered by what criteria success can be measured. As a result, they have nothing concrete to measure the policy against. Within Mussolini's domestic policy, for example, what were Mussolini's aims in negotiating the Lateran Treaty? If you consider these, it is possible to judge how far the Lateran Treaty fulfilled them or operated against them. If you do this for all the aspects of Mussolini's domestic policy discussed in your answer, the question will have been addressed on a higher level. Conversely, if it is not, then all that you can realistically do is to describe Mussolini's domestic policy. This will result at best in a very partial answer. Just as examinations cannot be marked without a mark scheme, policies cannot be judged (or 'marked') unless there is some awareness of what they were trying to achieve and therefore what criteria – or yardstick – they can be measured against.

Comparison-type questions are often answered less well than they could be because candidates do not actually compare the issues they are meant to be comparing. Consider the following:

*'Why was Napoleon successful in the Italian campaign and unsuccessful in the Egyptian campaign?'*

Candidates should avoid simply writing two separate accounts, one of each campaign. This is in fact the simplest way to forget you are meant to be comparing them! Your answer will also be partial if you look at why the Italian campaign was successful separately from why the Egyptian campaign failed. Even if you intend to draw the accounts together at the end with a conclusion which does compare the two, this will not be so successful as an answer which compares the campaigns directly.

Italy, for example, was near to France, while Egypt was far away. Unlike in Italy, French troops in Egypt needed naval support; Nelson's victory at the Battle of the Nile left French troops with little means of supply or indeed escape. Italians often welcomed French troops as liberators from their Austrian overlords, while French troops were seen as western invaders in the middle east. Comparative points like these are quite straightforward but, properly developed, will gain marks at higher levels. Don't forget, also, that the Italian campaign may not have been totally successful, nor the Egyptian one a total failure. Direct comparison will help you to develop the shades of grey in your answer. On the other hand, if you tackle them separately it is easier to see them purely in terms of black and white, i.e. 'the Italian campaign was successful because ...' and 'the Egyptian campaign failed because ...'

**Prepare well, but you still have to think**

One general issue of relevance here is the 'learnt response'. By this I mean, besides a good knowledge of a particular topic, an almost pre-prepared essay on that aspect of the topic which is thought most likely to come up in the exam. For example, 'Why did Napoleon III fail to achieve his objectives in his foreign policy between 1849 and 1870?' or 'Why did the Weimar Republic fail?' Candidates often have stock answers prepared for such popular questions. They comprise such ideas as: Napoleon III sought to emulate his illustrious uncle by an aggressive foreign policy; the Mexican adventure was poorly thought through; Bismarck was able to exploit Napoleon's weaknesses and trick him into war. On the Weimar issue, a fledgling democracy had little chance in the face of Germany's dire problems; and the democratic process itself could be manipulated by those who sought to destroy it. These points, properly developed, may be quite valid if the questions are as expected.

The problem with learnt responses, however, is that they can't always be deployed even if the topic for which they have been learnt turns up. Candidates can panic unnecessarily when they see questions such as 'Why did Napoleon III's foreign policy appear successful in the 1850s but unsuccessful in the 1860s?' or 'Why did the Weimar Republic survive for so long?'

Yet if you read the questions carefully and allow yourselves a few moments' thought, you will see that your knowledge can be deployed equally well. You just have to abandon your learnt response and think about what the actual question requires.

What did Napoleon do in the 1850s? He pleased French Catholics with his aid to the Pope, gained considerable prestige by his involvement in the Crimean War and appeared to have facilitated northern Italian unification. However, if you go on to the problems caused by these policies, you will be addressing the crucial phrase 'appear to'. Similarly, if you discuss the policies of the 1860s in the same context - what problems they led to - you will show why they appeared unsuccessful. You will have both addressed the precise question which came up and been able to deploy all the information you had at the ready for the one which you expected.

The way to answer the Weimar question is slightly different. You need to consider what issues it raises. It is about success not failure. Let us consider two examples. Firstly, the regime lasted fifteen years. It survived major problems at its inception. How? By putting down rebellions with force. Any regime which is prepared to arm its potential enemies (the Freikorps) to destroy a common current enemy must be very determined to survive. Similarly the prosperity of the middle years of Weimar was destroyed by the collapse of the US economy. Many candidates jump in here with the coming to power of Hitler and, in so doing, argue that the Weimar regime collapsed because of the Wall St Crash. However, that was over three years removed from Hitler's accession to power in January 1933, and by 1932 the economy was showing some signs of improvement and the success of the Nazis seemed on the wane. So, what factors enabled the Weimar Republic to succeed for three years after economic catastrophe? The focus is different from that of a discussion of how Hitler was able to overthrow it.

If you address issues such as these, you will be pointing your answer to the question and, thereby, maximising your marks. Again the crucial issue is to read the question carefully, making sure you understand its implications. The essential clues are always contained in the questions once you have interpreted them. Napoleon was successful in the Italian campaign but not in the Egyptian. Why? The Weimar Republic lasted for fifteen years. Why? The golden rule is, quite simply, to use your knowledge to address the question set rather than the topic on which it is set.