

EXAMINERS TIPS

Approaching a problem-based examination question

Essay/problem type questions are faced by students in the examinations for almost all papers comprising the STEP Diploma programmes. Tutors are often asked for their advice on how best to approach these. Here are some tips from an experienced STEP examiner:

1. What is the question about?

The first thing to emphasise is that you will only be examined on material covered in the course manual and at the tuition sessions that you have attended. Remember that the main purpose of the examination is to test your knowledge. Ask yourself 'what does the examiner want me to prove that I know? What area of knowledge am I meant to display here?' The wording of the question will contain vital clues to the answer. Do you simply need to reproduce information or do you need to criticise or evaluate in some way?

2. Expressing yourself

As soon as you have decided on your question, reflect on what is at the core of the question and draw up a quick and rough plan. This will be important to keep you on track as you progress through your answer and it will help to give it a logical structure. But make this quick and dirty, limit your time and get into writing the answer as soon as possible. And remember, whilst the answer should be coherent, this is not an exam on the excellence of your stylistic abilities. It is essential that you make your meaning clear.

It may help to begin your answer by reflecting the question as you understand it, and how you intend to answer, back to the examiner.

Explain the points to the examiner in the same way that you might explain something to any interested person. In other words, don't assume prior knowledge – you need to demonstrate you know the fundamentals.

For example, if you are studying the Foundation Certificate for England & Wales and are explaining the requirements of a valid will, there is nothing wrong in saying something like: 'The requirements are capacity, knowledge/approval and formalities.' But give sufficient detail to be precise. What does capacity entail? What formalities? You may need to add that 'capacity refers to both age – the testator must be of majority – and mental capacity. The will must comply with the Wills Act 1837, s. 9'.

3. Sorting the relevant from the irrelevant

Don't be afraid to state the obvious – there is usually a mark for it! If you are unsure whether or not to include a point and it is a small point that can be dealt with in a couple of sentences, then there is no problem in including it.

Finally, always ask yourself if you are answering the question set, or is it the one you would have liked to have seen!