

Use of language for Spanish A Level

Five golden rules

1 Interpret the question wisely

Sometimes when you approach a question, whether it's an essay question or a short or extended answer question in your exam, you need to approach it like a detective. Initially, you're on a trail to decipher what is being asked of you; then you have to produce a logical response upon which you'll be judged.

- If it doesn't make sense to you straight away, then revisit the question. It's unlikely not to make sense in practice.
- Identify the main topic under discussion, then any sub-topics that might need referring to.
- Answer the question given, not the question you think is being asked, or the one that you would like to answer! Assignment questions are frequently interpreted by students as a 'tell-all opportunity' when you simply pour onto the page everything you know about that topic.
- Determine what the key words are asking you to do: those words that influence how you answer the question.

- 1 Here are some key words often used in questions for MFL essays or that you might incorporate as part of a research project. Match each key word with its relevant explanation.

State or Define.....

Describe or Explain or Discuss

Outline

Analyse.....

Assess to what extent

Consider

Justify

- A You will need to communicate the main points but not necessarily go into detail. You might just use bullet points for this sort of short answer.
- B You need to give details about the existence of an issue and explain how and why it happens in that way. It's likely you'll need to make reference to some theory.
- C You need to precisely explain something, usually only requiring a short answer.
- D You need to say what you think about something having reflected upon it. You will need to support your thinking with evidence as well as points of view which might run counter to your own.
- E You will need to make a case for an idea or point of view which will involve also exploring opposing points of view.
- F You need to examine the issues methodically and in detail and try to explain a number of points of view with supporting arguments, then go on to interpret how the issues might be interrelated.
- G You need to reflect on an issue or problem and evaluate to what extent it might be said to be true, while also taking any weaknesses or strengths of the argument into account.

2 The quality of your language matters

As a student of Spanish, you will know to what extent you have to be aware of accurate spellings and the correct use of grammar in your writing. Of course, this is equally important, whether you're writing in Spanish or in English. Above all, when writing in Spanish, try not to focus on thinking in English and then translating your thoughts into Spanish.

- A common mistake is the use of Anglicisms or a word-for-word translation when writing in Spanish. As an alternative, try to think and write like a native speaker. You will only achieve this if you spend plenty of time outside of lessons watching Spanish films/television, listening to podcasts or the radio and reading the Spanish press. A recent examiner's report stated that students often understand the word *informe* as 'information' rather than 'study or report', for example.
- While you want to display a sophisticated use of the Spanish language, you should avoid confusing your reader by trying too hard to translate a complex sentence from English to Spanish. It might be better to concentrate on conveying your points clearly rather than overcomplicating your text so that your meaning is unclear.
- Although using abbreviations might save time, you must make sure they are always clear and that you write them in the Spanish way (e.g. *IVA* not *VAT*). Any 'accepted' abbreviations, acronyms or shortened forms should usually be written out in full, at least the first time.
- When handwriting, make sure that the legibility of your work is good enough to get your meaning across and not confuse your reader.

3 Get the structure right

Whether you're writing a brief response, an extended answer, or an essay question, you need to make sure you get the structure of your answer right. As a general rule, organise the information and your findings logically. After all, your structure should reflect the logic of your response – you might need to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of a particular situation and then arrive at a thoughtful conclusion, for example. You also need to use an appropriate style of writing and register for the situation (for example, you might need to express yourself objectively rather than subjectively and use a more formal tone rather than an informal one).

4 Provide variety in your use of language

2 Find the missing words from the box below to complete this text:

fixed	communicate	repetition	imperfect	logical
indiscriminately	remember	tenses	repetition	

Whether you are writing in Spanish or in English, your modern languages essay will usually seek to _____ your opinions, your experiences or perhaps your findings from research. Irrespective of the language of your essay, it will be important that you prove you have a good grasp of vocabulary. You should avoid _____ of key words, for example. You may find this process much easier in English, but for your Spanish writing, you will have to prepare a number of different ways for saying the same thing. For example, the words 'good' and 'bad', or 'problem' or 'advantage', or 'young people' are likely to come up many times.

Similarly, do ensure you adopt a suitable _____ of 'linking' words – those phrases that join up different statements or paragraphs in your extended response. For example, *por un lado ... por otro lado, sin embargo, no obstante ...* To go a step further, you could also learn some _____ phrases that will help you construct a _____ piece of text. They obviously have to be used with judicious caution (sprinkled _____ through your text won't necessarily sound authentic).

For example:

en cuanto a _____ as for, regarding
por lo tanto, parece claro que it appears therefore clear that
entonces hay que recordar it is necessary therefore to _____

You should also include a wide range of _____ when writing in Spanish. Appropriate use of the subjunctive (for example, *Es lógico que el autor exprese sus ideas ...*), and the conditional (*Si hubiera tenido la oportunidad ...*), not forgetting the _____ (*Si tuviera experiencia laboral, podría ...*) will really help prove how well you have mastered Spanish grammar.

5 Work on your accuracy

Whether you're writing in Spanish or in English, you should carefully proofread your work before you give it in. Proofreading amounts to more than simply 'reading your text again'. You need to systematically read through it and focus on one element for checking at a time. Inevitably, you may need to re-read a few times, checking for something different each time.

- 3 Create your own 'tick list' of five items you know you should check before handing in a piece of written work. (Everyone will have a different answer, because we all have our own 'weaknesses' we need to work on.)

For example:

- 1 Agreement of direct object pronouns

Never be afraid to use your dictionary; as well as checking your spelling, it can help you improve your vocabulary range. **Always** confirm you've selected the right word in Spanish (in the English–Spanish section) by cross-referring in the Spanish–English section. For example, if you looked up the meaning of 'actual', you would find *real* or *exacto* – both giving you a different nuance of meaning. Checking in the other half of the dictionary helps ensure that you arrive at the intended translation. Of course, if you use a monolingual dictionary, you will have to decipher the correct meaning using the target language which encourages you to broaden your use of the Spanish language.