Examiners’ Bugbears

Exam Preparation Mentoring Workshop
Department of Geography
What should you avoid? Ask the examiners…

We emailed the teaching staff: “We thought it might be useful to let the first years know what YOU find particularly annoying or disappointing in an exam answer.”

We had replies from about a third of them, from Lecturers to Professors, from the newest members of staff to the recently retired…

What do you think they said - and which were the most common answers?
1. Questions: “Answer the question set, not the one you prepared for.”

“I hate it when people discuss the topic rather than dissecting the question.”

“Students think they need to write down EVERYTHING they know about the topic, and are scared to have less content - when in fact, less content but with more analytical response to the question is exactly what we want.”

“Read the question properly. In particular take notice of whether a question is asking you to discuss, evaluate, argue to what extent - and whether it is specifically asking for certain kinds of examples or case studies.”
2. Watch the time: “Not spending an equal amount of time on each question.”

• “Spending too much time on a ‘best’ topic, simply gives you less time to think about delivering a reasonable effort on No 2!”
• “A good answer might give you 70%. A short second answer might get 30%. The end result is a Lower Second.”
3. Referencing and content.

• “Repeating the lecture (anecdotes, examples and structure) back to me without any sign of additional reading or independent thought. I was there, and I wrote the lecture, so I already know all of that!”

• “They shouldn't just drop concepts in the hope that we're just ticking boxes. Instead, they should take their time to unpack them in their own words.”

• “My pet hate is the use of direct quotations - often as plug-in sentences.”

• Dates: “Depends whether the reference is to a theoretical argument from a particular year e.g. Harvey 1989, or general literature where it often really doesn't matter what year it was written in.”
4. Figures and showing your working.

• “For some subjects diagrams, graphs and figures are extremely useful and in many cases required.”
• “…but it’s key to stress that figures and (particularly) graphs must be labelled correctly, especially axes.”
• “For numerical questions, show working where you can so that we can give marks even if you get the wrong answer.”
And finally...

- “I also dislike it when students tell me what they think I want to hear. I want to know what they think.”
- “No jokes! They never work and just annoy the examiner.”