

Illustrations of Essay & Report Writing

○ Introduction

Using chapter review questions from *The Companion* and drawing on the *General Guidance*, this component of the web site provides suggestions on how you might respond to [essay](#) and [report](#) assignments in the different fields of the discipline.

○ Illustrative Essay Answers

❖ **Field: Concepts and Approaches**

Question: *What are the advantages and disadvantages of increasing choice in the provision of public services? (Chapter 6)*

Assignments in this field generally seek to gauge your ability to distil and examine differing understandings and views on the principal conceptions that underwrite social policies, welfare arrangements and their implications. Analysing the disputed ways in which these are conceived can at first appear rather daunting, but once taken apart you will find most assignments centre on one or more of the following core issues:

- differing definitions/interpretations of key conceptions;
- the grounds on which they are proposed; and
- their policy implications.

In terms of the question above, an astute answer would recognize the problematic nature of what is meant by 'choice', the differing values supporting it, and the perceived consequences following on from the variant conceptions. Having then restricted the ensuing discussion to a particular view of this key notion (and outlined what is meant by 'public services'), it is possible to proceed with the discussion of benefits and costs of increasing choice. Given that there are several existing and potential (direct and indirect) stakeholders involved in service delivery, for example, the government, taxpayers, the state agency/agencies providing the services, the consumers, and the commercial/ voluntary organizations to which services might be outsourced, an effective essay would address *who* would be advantaged and *who* might suffer as a consequence of the changes. With regard to the sequence of your essay:

- You might ease your way in by signalling the context and importance of the issue posed by the question and the centrality of 'choice' in current and recent UK governments' welfare agendas. A strong account would also clarify what is meant by 'public services' for the purposes of the essay.
- You could then turn to the key concept of 'choice', look at its roots and employment in economics and its somewhat looser usage in many Social Policy discussions before explaining how it is going to be treated in this assignment. The obvious move would be to link it with 'neo-liberal' thinkers who advocate greater efficiency in welfare services through competition in the supply and delivery of provision. By and large, they favour market mechanisms in place of direct state provision and see choice as an expression of individual liberty.
- Having clarified how you are using 'choice', you would then address examples of choice-based measures introduced (or planned) by government for example, 'internal markets'; opening up state service to competition from commercial and voluntary sector providers or promoting user-

based services; vouchers, direct payment or other user-controlled schemes, and assessing who benefits and for whom such changes are/would be detrimental.

- Your discussion of their respective advantages and disadvantages could be addressed either individually or in a synopsis. In either instance, they should be linked to the differing stakeholders in terms of benefits and costs.
- There are several ways in which the essay could be concluded; you might

acknowledge that there are both advantages and disadvantages that you offer in a balanced résumé or, in a more sophisticated way, that the benefits and costs vary by service and the mechanisms involved;

suggest that there is a short-run/long-run distinction to be made; for example, short-run advantages could be replaced by long-run costs (or vice versa);

end by arguing that current evidence does not enable you to make an overall decision on whether benefits outweigh costs; or

take a stance, linking it to the neo-liberal perspective (and/or opposing positions) arguing the evidence suggests that increasing choice is always beneficial (or always generates disproportionate costs in terms of equity and social justice).

Chapter 6 provides the main source for your essay and a wealth of ideas on how to take it forward. A close reading of the other chapters in *Part II* and *chapters 19 and 35* will help you clarify your response and increase your awareness of the key issues. For examples of UK government attempts to increase choice, you should look at *Parts VII and VIII*.

❖ **Field: Key Perspectives**

Question: What are the main criticisms that social democrats have levelled against neo-liberal ideas about welfare? How convincing are they? (*Chapter 8*)

This question is asking you to assess the evaluation that one key Social Policy perspective has made of another. In terms of neo-liberalism, it involves understanding

- the key arguments made by the proponents;
- the tenets on which these arguments are based;
- the illustrations and evidence they utilize in support of their case; and
- their implications for welfare provision.

With regard to the social democratic perspective, you need to understand

- the central arguments made by the proponents and how these are used to counter the neo-liberal position; and
- the illustrations and evidence they have employed to support their arguments.

Your assessment addresses the convincing nature (or otherwise) of social-democratic criticism.

The essay sequence is largely set by the question. After the Introduction, your first task is to explicate what is meant by the neo-liberal perspective. If you look at *chapter 8* (and *chapter 19*), you will see this would involve a summary of its roots in classical liberalism and the central ideas and principles of its key advocates, their criticisms of state welfare, and their market-based reform

proposals (*see the boxed summaries*). You could then provide illustrations of policies/plans based on neo-liberal prescriptions in the United Kingdom (and possibly further afield).

This would be followed by a very brief overview of the social democratic perspective. But note here, the focus of the question is on social-democratic *criticisms* of neo-liberalism; hence you need to identify the most important lines of attack and show how they link with its principal arguments and/or the policies and evidence it offers in support of them (*chapters 8 and 10*). Is this a clash of ‘first-principles’, of the policies derived from them or the welfare interventions undertaken in the name of the respective perspectives?

In the third part of your essay, which should be at least a third of the total length of your assignment, your focus is on evaluating social-democratic criticisms. Where does the strength of its reproach rest? What are the weaknesses (if any) in its arguments? What is the potency of its evidence base? Have the neo-liberals successfully countered its arguments? You can then move on to your conclusion. This might involve

- taking a stance and arguing that social democratic criticisms of neo-liberalism are/are not convincing;
- adopting a more circumspect approach, rounding off by suggesting that there are strengths and weaknesses in both perspectives, and the debate between them is ongoing, fuelled by the differences between UK political parties; or
- in a more discerning conclusion, suggesting that the debate between the perspectives should be set within a wider context as valuable contributions to the issues they discuss have been made by writers from other viewpoints (e.g., Feminist, Green, Socialist, and within the Conservative tradition).

To tackle this (and similar essays on key perspectives), you will need to look at *chapters 8 and 10*. But you will also find it worthwhile looking at the other chapters in *Part II* and at *chapters 3, 6, 7, 19, and 35*.

❖ Field: Historical Context

Question: Did the post-war Labour Governments create the welfare state? (*Chapter 18*)

Assignments on historical issues usually centre on one or more of four general issues:

- the key features of and developments in social provision in a particular period (focusing either on particular measures, policies/policy sets or the overall welfare mix);
- contemporary controversies over these provisions;
- the ways in which measures are/have been explained; and
- how they have been assessed/viewed in terms of both their contemporary impact and subsequent developments.

Although the emphasis will obviously vary with the topic, a good historical essay will capture aspects of all of the above. This is the case with this illustrative essay. The topic utilizes a ‘cause and effect’ format in which you are asked to assess the extent to which post-war Labour Governments brought about the welfare state. Assuming that you confine ‘post-war Labour Governments’ to the two administrations elected between 1945 and 1951, the question then turns on the characteristics associated with ‘the welfare state’ and the degree to which its principles, policies, and services were formed during this period of government, prior to their coming to power or after their period of office.

Whatever stance you take, the essay sequence would be similar. Your Introduction would

- delineate the administrations covered by the phrase ‘the post-war’;
- outline the debates concerning definitions of the ‘welfare state’ and the significance they hold for your answer, before opting for a ‘working definition’;
- set out your response to the question and the sequence in which you are going to answer it; you might adopt a tack in which you argue any one of the following lines:

that the post-war Labour administrations did indeed create the welfare state;

that the seeds of the welfare state were sown by administrations prior to the Second World War;

that the post-war administrations welfare legislation was far from comprehensive and needed a ‘second wave’ in the 1960s; or

that each of these periods contributed to what we know as the ‘welfare state’.

No matter which option you choose, your essay sequence could usefully

- start by charting the chief welfare measures introduced by the 1945-51 administrations;
- then, consider the main arguments concerning their significance; before,
- assessing the degree to which, in terms of ideology, coverage, and outcomes they produced what is termed the welfare state and/or owed much to prior or subsequent developments. Here, you might focus on the comprehensive nature of many of post-war Labour’s welfare measures and ways in which they followed or were different from those of pre-war policy. A discerning answer might also address the continuing selective nature of some aspects of legislation and the way/s in which contributions have been made by subsequent administrations.
- You could then conclude by weighing up your findings and enhancing the stance indicated in your Introduction as to the extent to which the Labour administrations of the 1940s established the welfare state.

Thinking through this question and sequence will enable you to manage other assignments on the ‘genesis’ of state-provided welfare services. You will find the foundations for your answer in *chapter 18*, but you will also need to reflect on the discussions in *chapters 1, 16, 17, and 30*. To get to grips with the main concepts of the ‘welfare state’, scan through the discussions in Part II and for further insights into the arguments over the development of the welfare state look at *chapters 8 and 59*.

❖ **Fields: Welfare Services & Services for Particular Groups**

Question: What were the main aims of the 2010 Child Poverty Act? What are its implications for children? (*Chapter 54*)

This question illustrates the standard essay format of both these substantive fields. Typically, assignments here give you the opportunity to address current developments and debates, asking you in varying ways to outline and evaluate policy-making and provision. Typically, you would be expected to

- describe the origins, aims, and objectives of your topic (whether it is a piece of legislation, particular policy, service, or benefit);

- establish its key components as well as entitlements, provider/s, delivery structure, mode of funding, and, where relevant, regulatory arrangements;
- consider how it has/will be implemented and its impact/potential impact; and, in some instances,
- think about future amendments and their implications.

Some assignments will centre on current provision enabling you, in effect, to use your sources to compile a form of reflective evaluation; others will focus on a predictive assessment of new provisions or proposed reforms. They might also involve a consideration of both current and future arrangements. A word of warning: whatever the topic, it is particularly important in questions in these fields to ascertain whether there are variations in the policy or provision for the different national administrations of the United Kingdom (see *chapter 42*). The illustrative question (above) is a case in point; while the 2010 Child Poverty Act was a UK-wide piece of legislation setting UK targets for relieving child poverty, it made the national administrations responsible for developing the required strategies for their countries. Further, as the Welsh Assembly had already introduced such mechanisms, it was exempt from parts of the legislation.

Turning to the particulars of this sample question, it is making two relatively straightforward requests: what is the legislation seeking to achieve, and what consequences is it likely to have for children? In structuring your response, an initial decision concerns the relative proportion of your answer to be devoted to each aspect of the question which, in turn, depends on whether your reading of the literature suggests that there is controversy regarding the 'main aims'. If there is, and particularly if it then affects your discussion of the Act's implications, you should devote approximately half your essay to responding to the first part of the topic; otherwise limit it to approximately one-third. In considering the implications, you will need to be aware of not only the estimated impact on child poverty (and possible variations within the United Kingdom) but also other possible repercussions for children.

Assuming the main aims of the legislation are deemed relatively clear, following your Introduction you might develop your assignment by

- Outlining the origins of the legislation. One option would be to simply list the main reasons for its development; another more sophisticated possibility would be to identify the differing grounds offered by the literature and order these in terms of what you see as their significance. At a minimum, both accounts should include: trends on the estimated numbers of children living in poverty (and, linked to this, changes in the conception and measurement of poverty – see *chapter 26*); increasing concern about 'social exclusion' particularly over the last three decades and the interest in the 'social investment state' developed under New Labour.
- Following this, you would describe the main aims of the Act; the underlying measures of child poverty; the obligations placed on the UK government and national administrations and the role of the Child Poverty Commission (see *chapter 54*).
- You could then address the 'implications' element of the question. Here, the initial focus should be on whether the measures proposed in the legislation are likely to alleviate child poverty in the proposed time period. Could the targets have been achieved by the previous Labour Government? Can they be achieved in the current economic climate and through the Coalition's 'social mobility' and service-based (rather than Labour's income-based) policies? Are there likely to be national variations given the different politics of the leading parties in the Welsh and Scottish Assemblies? (You should not need reminding that in responding to such questions, a clear evidential base is required to support your arguments).

- Thereafter, you can extend your consideration to other possible repercussions, as, for instance, in terms of: child-care, early-years education, wider opportunity structures, and the rights and responsibilities of families and the state.
- Your conclusion could provide a brief synopsis of your preceding arguments, or it might pursue a particular stance that you have taken toward the likely success (or otherwise) of the legislation.

In addition to *chapters 54* and *29*, you will find further insights into the issues raised by the question in *chapters 24, 25, 26, 27, and 45*.

❖ **Field: International Issues**

Question: On what grounds do some writers draw parallels between social policy development in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, and the Conservative regimes of continental Europe (based on *chapter 62*)?

International and comparative social policy assignments generally give you a platform to explore and assess policy developments and the welfare mix in other countries. This may involve the evaluation of theoretical frameworks accounting for past, current, and future arrangements, empirical assessments, or a combination of both aspects. Examples of the latter range from country-centred analyses through cross-national comparisons of programmes, funding and/or delivery of services to appraising the role of international governmental agencies (e.g., the International Monetary Fund), and non-governmental agencies (e.g., Oxfam) in the organization, financing, and development of provision.

The illustrative question (above) draws on both ‘regime theory’ (see *chapter 59*) and empirical analyses of the welfare mix in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and continental Europe. In saying this, however, it does not demand either a detailed account of the theory or lengthy descriptions of the welfare mix in the different countries so much as an assessment of the grounds on which some analysts have drawn parallels between these Asian welfare systems and those of continental Europe. Then

- your Introduction could context the topic with a brief overview of ‘regime theory’ and the role of ‘Conservative regimes’ within it;
- it might then briefly outline the grounds that writers have employed to draw parallels between the Asian welfare systems and those of continental Europe; before
- expressing your stance on whether you think these are valid comparisons.

Your essay sequence would then be as follows:

- an account of the features employed by policy analysts to characterize ‘Conservative regimes’;
- an elaboration of the criteria that have been used to characterize the welfare systems of Japan, Korea, and Taiwan as similar to those of continental Europe;
- a consideration of the limitations of this viewpoint drawn from the literature; before
- conveying your stance on the strengths and weaknesses of these comparisons (and, possibly, their repercussions for regime theory).

Chapter 62 offers you the groundings for this essay. You should also consult *chapters 59* and *61*, which will give you a breakdown of the factors you may need to cover in single-case and cross-national assignments.

○ **Illustrative Report Writing**

While essays are the main form of assessment in Social Policy, for reasons outlined in the *General Guidance on Assignments*, you could well be asked to submit a report in any field of the discipline and in one of several varying formats. The initial challenge in report-writing is to recognize the format that is expected of you and to remain close to the anticipated remit.

❖ **Field: Contemporary Context**

Brief: Write a report outlining the implications of an ageing population for social policy in the United Kingdom (based on the materials in *chapter 21*).

As with all reports, the structure and remit of the document play a large part in the distribution and sequencing of its contents (see *Box 2 in the General Guidance on Assignments*). In the case of this briefing report:

- The 'Executive Summary' or 'Abstract' might begin by reaffirming/interpreting your brief. In this instance, you are required to assess the repercussions of an ageing population for UK social policy. You can explain at this point why it is such an important topic and provide brief synopses of your methodology, your findings, and what you consider to be the major consequences (recent and projected) of population ageing in the United Kingdom.
- In the 'Terms of Reference' or 'Introduction', you need to define what is meant by an 'ageing population', outline the scope of your report (e.g., the time period under consideration and the range of benefits and services you are going to include as illustrative of social policy), and, if appropriate, indicate whether there are variations in ageing trends across the United Kingdom.
- The 'Proceedings' or 'Methodology' section should include a short account of how you tackled your brief, your sources and methods, an overview of their merits and drawbacks, and their impact on the inferences you are making.
- In the 'Findings' section, you should summarize the key demographic trends and projected changes and, if they are disputed, the variant views. Then, drawing on *chapter 21* and other relevant literature, you could look at their direct and indirect consequences for the chosen welfare services and benefits, and wider socio-economic issues such as public income and expenditure. One way of addressing the impact of ageing would be to provide a listing of consequences; a stronger option would involve ranking them in terms of their perceived significance.
- The remit of a report generally limits its conclusion to a résumé of the preceding research and analysis. In this instance, however, it would be possible to finish with a consideration of possible strategies to overcome recognized issues and/or drawing the readers' attention to particularly damaging outcomes that need to be alleviated.

In tackling this report, your best starting point would be *chapter 21*, but you will find a discussion of this topical issue in many other parts of *The Companion*, particularly *chapters 6, 24, 35, 47, and 51*, and those in *Part VIII*.

❖ **Fields: Welfare Production & Provision: Welfare Governance**

Brief: As a policy officer employed by a major charity, you have been asked to prepare an evaluative report advising the trustees of the policy implications of the 'Big Society' agenda for the voluntary sector in England (based on *chapter 33*).

Assignments in welfare production, provision, and welfare governance are generally designed to assess your understanding of one or more of a cluster of intertwined developments:

- shifts in the welfare mix;
- changes in the role/s of constituent elements of the mix;
- changes within the institutional framework in the United Kingdom and (where appropriate) internationally;
- the patterning of entitlements, user and public participation, management, and regulation;
- accounting for the patterning or changes to it; and
- the outcomes and implications of these changes.

Ascribing your topic to one or more of these themes would be a useful way of beginning your Executive Summary, as it suggests both an understanding of the discipline and an interpretation of your brief.

- In this instance, the Executive Summary could start by outlining the Government's rationale for proposing its 'Big Society' agenda and illustrating why this is an important policy for the welfare mix in England and, in particular, the voluntary sector potentially involving changes in its organization, staffing, funding, and service delivery. You will then need to interpret your brief and describe your approach, your timetable, research staff, your sources and methods, the limitations of the research, and how (if at all) this has influenced your inferences. Your findings should then be provided in summary form before finishing with a consideration of the likely consequences of implementing the proposals (in terms of standard evaluative criteria: inputs, processes, and outcomes).
- Your 'Terms of Reference' need to clarify the following:

what is meant by the 'voluntary sector';

the service area/client group of the (hypothetical) major charity (as the proposals might, for instance, impact in different ways for housing charities and children's charities); and

what is meant by the 'Big Society' agenda, the Government's rationale and current position.

- The 'Proceedings' or 'Methodology' should add to the information provided in the Executive Summary by detailing the sources and methods of investigation you have employed. Given the type of report, you could helpfully advise the trustees of the methods of evaluation you have used, your assessment of their reliability and validity, and how this has affected your predictive assessments.
- Your 'Findings' need to be phrased very carefully. You are effectively engaged in assessing the *potential* impact of this agenda in terms of what inputs there are likely to be, the possible processes of change to the sector, and future outcomes. So, no matter what your evidence base, there is an element of speculation in your evaluation. Given this, it would be useful to rank-order the likely implications supplying the available evidence for each inference.
- The 'Conclusion' could be divided into two sections: the first reiterating the main implications for the voluntary sector, and the second a considered account of the ramifications for the charity commissioning the Brief.

Chapter 33 gives you the basis for fashioning your report, but you should also look at *chapters 9, 30, and 40* and *Parts VII and VIII*.