

# BioMedical Admissions Test (BMAT)

## Section 3: Writing Task

BMAT Questions with Example Plans

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## YOU MUST ANSWER ONLY ONE OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

Please indicate which question (1, 2 or 3) you have chosen to answer by writing the number at the top of your essay.

Each question contains a statement and three cues; ensure you **address all 3 cues in your essay**.

**1 “A scientist’s aim in a discussion with his colleagues is not to persuade, but to clarify”. (Leo Szilard)**

Explain the reasoning behind this statement. Argue to the contrary, that discussion between scientists requires persuasion. To what extent do you agree with the statement?

**2 “Political correctness kills discussion” (Lars von Trier)**

Explain what you understand from this statement. Argue to the contrary, with relevant examples. To what extent is political correctness necessary?

**3 Self-inflicted illnesses should be given less coverage within the NHS, as these prevent money and resources from reaching those who had no influence on the cause of their illness.**

Explain the reasoning behind this statement. Argue to the contrary. To what extent do you agree that self-inflicted illnesses should not be covered?



## Answers

### Question 1

This essay question encourages the consideration of science as **objective** rather than **subjective**. A scientist should attempt to clarify the **truth**, rather than persuade their colleague of their own opinion. Persuasion usually involves **rhetorical techniques** which, in an objective practice, should not be necessary. However, due to the fact that science is also a profession, it may be difficult to convince a colleague of an objective truth when they have a more emotional connection to their work and results, in which case **persuasive techniques** could be used. The question in general prompts students to consider the role of persuasion within science, and its relevance in discussions.

### Example essay plan

#### Introduction (short)

- Clarify the distinction between explaining (clarifying) and persuading. Relate these to objectivity vs subjectivity.

#### Arguments for

- Scientists should attempt to explain the truth, not their own opinion.
- A clear attempt to explain can often be more effective than making extravagant claims.
- A scientist's moral duty is to present an unclouded version of the truth, which is less likely to be the case when persuasive techniques are involved.

#### Arguments against

- Nothing can realistically be purely objective, scientists will have their own attachments to their work (time and effort).
- The attachments can be religious, familial and in general deeply rooted, making it difficult to change their opinion even with proof.
- Sometimes analogies with personal examples can be used in explanations - could these be considered rhetorical techniques? Lengthy explanations can be more difficult to separate from persuasion when trying to convince.

#### Conclusion

- Ideally, scientists should aim to explain and clarify in discussions with their colleagues - mention objectivity of truth.
- However, to some extent persuasive techniques may be used - mention lack of impartiality of beliefs.
- Can mention this quote: "One of our most powerful resources is the insight of our colleagues" (Peter Agre).



**Exam Tip** - Although Section 3 of the BMAT is referred to as the “essay” section, it is **not a traditional essay**; it does **not** require an introduction and conclusion.

The **conclusion** does not need to summarise all the points that you have written, but instead serves as a good way to **compare and contrast** your arguments directly.

- This is where you can answer the “**to what extent**” part of the question explicitly, and show that your essay is **balanced**. It should only be about **two lines** long.

#### Quotes to use

- Argument against: “Science is not only a disciple of reason, but, also, one of romance and passion” (Stephen Hawking).
- Argument for: “Science is the process that takes us from confusion to understanding in a manner that’s precise, predictive and reliable” (Brian Greene).

**Exam Tip** - It might be a good idea in the exam to note down any **quotes or case studies** that immediately come to mind when you read a question. When you write your plan, you can insert these if/where appropriate to **support** your points.

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#### Question 2

This essay question can inspire a large range of thoughts, but the most successful answers would provide **relevant examples** in the scientific or healthcare field. Answers could include examples where political correctness has made discussion **easier to approach**, as well as situations in which it may **discourage conversation** for fear of offending or upsetting others. Another approach could be in the more scientific field where **ensorship** of “politically incorrect” ideas (such as lack of efficacy of vaccines) limits discussion.

#### Example essay plan

##### Introduction (short)

- The statement suggests that the practice of using the least offensive language can sometimes ‘kill’ or hinder conversations that may otherwise be had.

##### Arguments for

- People may refrain from discussing sensitive topics due to a lack of knowledge of how to approach the subject, and fear of offending or saying the wrong thing.
- **Example**: discussing obesity with an obese patient at risk of cardiovascular disease may be more difficult due to the general stigma around obesity, or calling/implying that people are “fat”. This may lead to serious health risks being overlooked.



- If time/space : paradoxically, avoiding sensitive topics can contribute to stigma, achieving the opposite effect to the one intended.
- Political correctness in science can discourage research that goes against the norm.
  - **Example:** research into the effectiveness of certain vaccines (e.g. influenza vaccine) may be discouraged as the “politically correct” view is that immunisation should be supported.
  - **Alternative example:** research into the reasons for homelessness can be limited by the politically correct explanation of poverty, when other factors such as substance abuse and mental illnesses can play a part.

#### Arguments against

- Political correctness encourages a sensitivity around certain topics that may enable people to discuss them in more depth - respect.
- **Example:** if an obese person is not outright called “fat” but instead the consequences of obesity are discussed with them, they may feel that they are being encouraged to take up a healthier lifestyle, rather than being attacked for their potentially unhealthy one.
- Even if political correctness limits discussion in some senses, it can also limit discrimination, which in itself can potentially provide a more equal voicing of opinions on a topic

#### Conclusion

- Political correctness is necessary to the extent that it limits the marginalisation of certain groups of people.

*Or*

Political correctness is useful in provoking consideration around serious issues and subsequent well-considered discussion.

- However, political correctness should not be such a limiting factor in science as this can lead to potentially inadvertent censorship where non-politically correct opinions are discussed.

**Exam Tip 1** - When starting to plan an essay, it is a good idea to write down **any ideas** that come to mind even if you will not have time to include them all. When you come to write your answer, pick the ideas that you think are **most appropriate** given what you have already written and the **time** you have available.

Sometimes very pertinent points will require more time than available to be explained fully and therefore may need to be skipped to achieve a complete essay in the time given.

**Exam Tip 2** - The report “Is political correctness damaging science?” by Philip Hunter could be of use. You can read it [here](#).



### Question 3

This essay question is an example of a very **typical** medical debate that is likely to come up in discussions. It could also come up in a medical school **interview**. As a result, candidates should already have a fairly **wide range of examples** when discussing both sides of the argument. Nonetheless, the best answers will not become overwhelmed with the number of arguments for both sides, but instead will focus on the more **relevant** and lay these out in a concise, logical way. For example, a potential answer could focus on the **utilitarianist** benefits of giving self-inflicted illnesses a lower priority versus the **moral duty** of a doctor to treat patients to the best of their ability, and the difficulty of **drawing the line** at which an illness is considered “self-inflicted”. The conclusion can be up to the candidate to decide, but **needs to show consideration of both moral standpoints**.

#### Example essay plan

##### Introduction

- Explain what is meant by self-inflicted, giving examples with their ‘causes’ (obesity and its associated complications, type 2 diabetes, pulmonary cancer associated with smoking, liver cirrhosis associated with heavy drinking).
- Explain that the limited budget of the NHS means that some people may receive limited resources - should these people be those with self-inflicted illnesses, or should they be at random, or using another method such as cutting less essential treatments?

##### Arguments for

- Unconditional treatment of self-inflicted illnesses may encourage people to carry on practising the habits that bring these about.
- **Example:** in 2015, 63% of UK adults were classed as overweight or obese, and this number is rising (1).
- Utilitarian argument: by cutting out costs of self-inflicted diseases, which make up a large proportion of the money spent by the NHS, a larger number of people could benefit.
- **Example:** in 2012, £8.8bn was spent by the NHS on type 2 diabetes (not including social care) (2).

##### Arguments against

- By limiting the resources available to self-inflicted illnesses, autonomy could be limited - people are effectively penalised for their actions that do not harm anyone else.
- Principles of justice and beneficence - doctors should provide equally good medical care to anyone who needs it. Not a doctor’s duty to judge their patients.
- Difficult to draw the line at what constitutes a self-inflicted illness. The reason behind a person’s habits may be something out of their control.
  - **Example:** a person with lung cancer who was previously a smoker but who also had a genetic predisposition to this cancer.
  - **Alternative example:** two people have the same unhealthy lifestyle choices, but one person is more predisposed to the associated illnesses - is it immoral for the



less predisposed person to receive more healthcare even though both made the same choices?

- **Alternative example:** a chronic alcoholic is exposed to alcohol at a young age - is it their fault or their parents'?

#### Conclusion

- With the strain on the NHS budget, there are some moral arguments that would support the limited coverage of self-inflicted illnesses.
- However, this limitation goes against a number of the 'four pillars of ethics' and the classification of "self-inflicted" is more difficult than it first appears.

- (1) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-obesity-and-the-food-environment/health-matters-obesity-and-the-food-environment--2>
- (2) <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/resources-s3/2017-11/diabetes%20uk%20cost%20of%20diabetes%20report.pdf>



## General Marking Criteria for All Questions

(Taken from Admissions Testing, you can find the original [here](#).)

### Quality of Content

In arriving at the score, you should consider:

- Has the candidate addressed the question in the way demanded?
- Have they organised their thoughts clearly?
- Have they used their general knowledge and opinions appropriately?

Scores are awarded on a scale from 1 to 5.

#### Score 1

An answer that has some bearing on the question but which does not address the question in the way demanded, is incoherent or unfocussed.

#### Score 2

An answer that addresses most of the components of the question and is arranged in a reasonably logical way. There may be significant elements of confusion in the argument. The candidate may misconstrue certain important aspects of the main proposition or its implication or may provide an unconvincing or weak counter proposition.

#### Score 3

A reasonably well-argued answer that addresses ALL aspects of the question, making reasonable use of the material provided and generating a reasonable counter proposition or argument. The argument is relatively rational. There may be some weakness in the force of the argument or the coherence of the ideas, or some aspect of the argument may have been overlooked.

#### Score 4

A good answer with few weaknesses. ALL aspects of the question are addressed, making good use of the material and generating a good counter proposition or argument. The argument is rational. Ideas are expressed and arranged in a coherent way, with a balanced consideration of the proposition and counter proposition.

#### Score 5

An excellent answer with no significant weaknesses. ALL aspects of the question are addressed, making excellent use of the material and generating an excellent counter proposition or argument. The argument is cogent. Ideas are expressed in a clear and logical way, considering a breadth of relevant points and leading to a compelling synthesis or conclusion.

An answer judged to be irrelevant, trivial, unintelligible or missing should be given a score of **0**.





## Quality of English

In arriving at your score, you should consider:

- Have they expressed themselves clearly using concise, compelling and correct English?

Scores are awarded on a scale from A to E.

### **Band A - Good use of English.**

- Fluent
- Good sentence structure
- Good use of vocabulary
- Sound use of grammar
- Good spelling and punctuation
- Few slips or errors

### **Band C - Reasonably clear use of English.**

**There may be some weakness in the effectiveness of the English.**

- Reasonably fluent/not difficult to read
- Simple/unambiguous sentence structure
- Fair range and appropriate use of vocabulary
- Acceptable grammar
- Reasonable spelling and punctuation
- Some slips/errors

### **Band E - Rather weak use of English.**

- Hesitant fluency/not easy to follow at times
- Some flawed sentence structure/paragraphing
- Limited range of vocabulary
- Faulty grammar
- Regular spelling/punctuation errors
- Regular and frequent slips or errors

Where candidates have crossed out sections or added information, the essay should be judged on the quality of the resulting use of English (i.e. crossed out text ignored, and inserted text read as if it were originally in place).

An essay that is judged to be below the level of an E will receive an X.

