A-Level Economics

Common Mistakes ·

Almost every mark lost in this subject is lost in the same three places: an answer that is not aimed at the question, an analysis with no evaluation, and a missing or unlabelled diagram. All three come straight from Cambridge's examiner reports. :

Across every paper

✗ Writing everything you know about the topic the question mentions.

✓ **Answer the question that was set, in its own words, from the first sentence.**

The single most repeated weakness in these reports: general answers instead of a response directed at the question.

ER 5 sessions P4

✗ Analysing well and then stopping.

✓ **Add a judgement: which effect is larger, under what conditions, and why.**

Up to six marks per essay are for evaluative development, and examiners describe evaluation as generally weak.

ER 4 sessions P4

✗ Assuming evaluation is only needed when the question says 'evaluate' or 'discuss'.

✓ **Include it in every essay. It is implied even when not asked for.**

Examiners state this explicitly: in Sections B and C the evaluation marks are available whether or not the command word names them.

ER 2 sessions P4

✗ Writing a strong essay with no diagram where one was requested.

✓ **Draw it, label both axes and every curve, and refer to it in the text.**

A well-written response without the requested diagram cannot go beyond Level 2 – a hard ceiling, whatever else is written.

ER 3 sessions P4

✗ Answering a data-response question from memory.

✓ **Quote the figure, the year and the source from the extract.**

Section A requires candidates to refer to the evidence when instructed, and examiners record marks lost for commenting on the wrong country entirely.

ER 2 sessions P4

✗ Making six brief points.

✓ **Make two or three and develop each into a chain: cause, effect, consequence.**

Examiners describe short undeveloped points as the ceiling on analysis marks; the developed chain is what Level 3 means.

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ER 3 sessions P4

✗ Defining aggregate demand as 'total demand in the economy'.

✓ **Give the components: total planned spending on domestic output at each price level, $C + I + G + (X - M)$.**

Examiners state that a simple rewording of a concept is not a definition, and give this exact example.

ER Jun24 P41

✗ Writing half a page for a two-mark question.

✓ **Two marks, two points. A sentence each is enough.**

Examiners remind candidates to read the mark allocation; the extra writing costs time that the essay needs.

ER 2 sessions P2

■ Ending with a paragraph that repeats your arguments is not a conclusion. A conclusion reaches a judgement the arguments support.

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ER 2 sessions P4

1 · Basic economic ideas and resource allocation

✗ Using output and productivity as if they meant the same thing.

✓ **Output is total production; productivity is output per unit of input per period.**

Examiners name this confusion directly as a barrier to explaining the concept at all.

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ER Jun24 P42

✗ Calling anything the government supplies a public good.

✓ **A public good is non-rival AND non-excludable; a government-provided private good is neither.**

Examiners list this exact confusion among the concepts candidates could not then explain.

ER Nov23 P42

2 · The price system and the microeconomy

✗ Defining a concentration ratio as 'how concentrated an industry is'.

✓ **The combined market share of the largest few firms, used as a measure of the degree of competition.**

Examiners record vague answers here with little explanation of what the ratio says about competition – two marks were available.

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ER Jun23 P41

✗ Drawing the kinked demand curve and leaving it there.

✓ **Say what it explains: price rigidity, because rivals match a price cut but not a rise.**

Examiners note the diagram was used but rarely identified as the solution to the pricing problem the question posed.

ER Nov24 P41

✗ Naming barriers to entry and describing each in turn.

✓ **Identify the cost or benefit of each, for the producer AND the consumer.**

Examiners describe the better responses as going beyond description to specific costs and benefits on both sides.

ER Jun24 P41

✗ Treating allocative and productive efficiency as interchangeable.

✓ **Productive efficiency is producing at lowest average cost; allocative efficiency is $P = MC$.**

Examiners state that allocative efficiency was less well known than productive efficiency, and a labelled monopoly diagram was expected alongside.

P = MC

ER Nov24 P42

3 · Government microeconomic intervention

✗ Saying a minimum price raises farmers' incomes and stopping.

✓ **Show the surplus it creates, and say who buys or stores it.**

Examiners list minimum prices for farm incomes among the concepts candidates could not fully explain.

ER Nov23 P42

4 · The macroeconomy

✗ Answering a 'compare between 2022 and 2023' question by describing every fluctuation in between.

✓ **Compare the two dates the question names, and give the overall direction of change.**

Examiners record candidates focusing unnecessarily on short-term variations that were not what the command word asked for.

ER 2 sessions P2

✗ Answering 'define unemployment' with a list of its types.

✓ **Define it: people of working age, willing and able to work, actively seeking work, without a job.**

Examiners note weaker candidates produced a list of types and thereby avoided the definition altogether.

ER Nov24 P42

✗ Describing a low-income country as one with low GDP and leaving it there.

✓ **Use GDP per head, and add the standard-of-living indicators the question implies.**

Examiners describe such comments as little more than descriptions of low GDP, which does not reach the analysis marks.

GDP

ER Jun23 P42

✗ Describing a monetary policy change without the transmission mechanism.

✓ **Trace the links: money supply, interest rates, investment and consumption, aggregate demand, GDP and employment.**

Examiners record the transmission link as often unclear, which limits the analysis mark however sound the conclusion.

ER Jun23 P42

✗ Defining the Gini coefficient as 'a measure of inequality' and stopping.

✓ **Give all three parts: what it measures, that it runs from 0 to 1, and that a higher value means more inequality.**

Examiners state that full marks required all three aspects to be identified.

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ER Nov24 P42

5 · Government macroeconomic intervention

✗ Explaining the quantity theory of money without stating the assumptions.

✓ **Define all four terms of $MV = PT$ and state what is assumed constant, then draw the conclusion about prices.**

Examiners describe the candidates who did this as the ones able to explain it as a theory of inflation at all.

ER Jun24 P43

✗ Naming the Keynesian demands for money without linking them to the interest rate.

✓ **Take each demand in turn and say how it responds to a change in the rate of interest.**

Examiners state that relating the three demands to the rate of interest was the first stage of the answer.

ER Nov23 P43

6 · International economic issues

✗ Treating a free trade area as a general removal of trade barriers.

✓ **In a free trade area members remove tariffs and quotas BETWEEN themselves; each keeps its own external policy.**

Examiners name this confusion directly – it is what separates a free trade area from a customs union.

ER Jun24 P42

✗ Saying tradeable pollution permits raise total emissions when they are resold.

✓ **The total is fixed by the number of permits issued; reselling moves emissions between firms, it does not add any.**

Examiners record a wrong option chosen most often here, showing the mechanism was not understood.

ER Nov24 P12

✗ Using 'terms of trade' and 'balance of trade' as if they were the same.

✓ **Terms of trade is the ratio of export prices to import prices; the balance of trade is a value difference.**

Examiners name terms of trade and exchange rate mechanisms among the concepts candidates confused.

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ER Nov23 P42

✗ Reading a correlation in a table as a cause.

✓ **Say what the data shows, then whether it supports the conclusion – and note what else could explain it.**

Examiners record candidates stating that a table supported a conclusion it did not support; the evaluation mark is for testing it.

ER Jun24 P42

Diagrams – where the easy marks are

✗ Drawing a supply-and-demand diagram with unlabelled axes.

✓ **Label price on the vertical axis, quantity on the horizontal, and name every curve and equilibrium.**

Examiners record errors in labelling and construction as common even where the diagram was drawn.

ER 3 sessions P4

✗ Drawing the diagram and never mentioning it again.

✓ **Refer to it: 'as the diagram shows, the shift from D_1 to D_2 raises price from P_1 to P_2'.**

The diagram earns marks by supporting the explanation; one that stands alone supports nothing.

ER 2 sessions P4

■ Draw a diagram even where the question does not ask for one. Examiners note that candidates in essays without a required diagram were still restricted to Level 2 when the analysis needed one.

ER Jun24 P42