How to Write a First Class Law Essay: What Markers Reward

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Learning how to write a first class law essay starts with understanding what UK markers actually reward. It's not perfect grammar or the longest bibliography. It's a clear argument, built from the law, that answers the exact question asked. Most students who miss a first lose marks on the same few things, and all of them are fixable.

This guide walks you through the habits that separate a first from an upper second. You'll see how to read the question, plan your argument, use cases properly and write in a way a tired marker can follow. A checklist at the end helps you spot the slips before you submit.

1. What a First Class Law Essay Actually Looks Like

A first class essay has a position. It opens with a direct answer to the question, then defends that answer with reasons drawn from cases, statutes and commentary. The marker can state your argument back to you after one read. If they can't, it's a tour of the topic instead of an argument, and tours score in the 60s.

The usual UK mark bands make the gap clear. The jump from 65 to 72 is rarely about knowing more law. It's about using the law you know to build a case and facing the strongest objection to it head on.

Originality matters too, but it doesn't mean inventing a new theory. It means forming your own view and owning it. A marker rewards the student who calls the current rule unworkable and explains why, over the student who repeats three textbooks and never picks a side.

The usual UK undergraduate mark bands

First class: 70 and above. A clear argument, an original view, strong use of authority.

Upper second: 60 to 69. Good knowledge, sound argument, little original thought.

Lower second: 50 to 59. Covers the topic, thin analysis, weak structure.

Third class: 40 to 49. Basic knowledge, mostly description, gaps in the law.

Fail: Below 40. Misses the question, serious errors, no real argument.

2. Read the Question Like a Marker Would

Half of first class writing happens before you open a book. Read the question twice and underline the instruction words: discuss, evaluate, critically analyse, advise. Each one asks for something different, and answering the wrong instruction is the fastest way to cap your mark. Take "discuss": it wants both sides weighed, while "advise" wants a practical answer for the person in the facts.

Problem questions and essay questions need different shapes. A problem question gives you facts and asks who wins, so your structure follows the legal issues in the order they arise. An essay question gives you a statement to test, so your structure follows your argument. Spot

which kind you have before you plan a single paragraph.

Watch the small words that change the scope. "To what extent" asks for a measured verdict, not a yes or no. "Should" asks for a view on reform, not a summary of the current law. If a phrase feels odd, it's probably the hinge the whole essay turns on. Build your plan around it.

3. Plan the Argument on One Page Before You Write

A first class essay is planned, not discovered mid paragraph. Start with your thesis in one sentence. Then list the three or four points that prove it, in the order a sceptical reader would need to hear them. If a point doesn't serve the thesis, cut it. Markers notice padding and they don't reward it.

For a problem question, use IRAC as a skeleton: issue, rule, application, conclusion. Name the issue in one line, state the rule with its best authority, then apply it to the facts in front of you. The application is where the marks live, so give it the most space.

For an essay question, build the plan as a debate. Give the strongest version of the view you disagree with first, then answer it. That order shows the marker you understand the other side and still hold your ground. If your plan doesn't fit on one page, the argument is too wide and needs trimming.

4. Argue, Do Not List Cases

The most common reason strong students land at 65 is the case list essay. Paragraph after paragraph describes a case, then the next one, and no argument ever forms. Cases are evidence, not the argument itself. Each one should prove a point you have already stated, and the point should come first.

One point per paragraph keeps the essay honest. Open with the point, support it with the best authority, deal with the objection, then move on. When a paragraph runs past 200 words, check whether it's holding two points. Split it. Short paragraphs force you to say one thing well instead of three things badly.

Take a position and keep it. It's fine to say the law is unsettled or that two courts point in different directions, but the essay still needs a view on which direction is right and why. A marker can't give first class marks to an essay that ends where it started, with no verdict. If the writing itself is what holds you back, our assignment writing service can help you plan, draft and polish your law essay around your brief, with your own ideas at the centre.

5. Use Cases and Statutes the Right Way

Use the ratio of a case, the reason the court had to decide as it did, and leave the rest. Obiter remarks can support a point but they don't carry it, so say what they are when you use them. When you cite a case, explain why it matters to your point. A bare citation with no explanation tells the marker you know the name and nothing else.

Apply the facts. A case helps only when you show how its facts match or differ from the question in front of you. Donoghue v Stevenson is the classic example: the neighbour principle it sets out

is easy to state, but the marks come from showing how it applies to a new set of facts, Don't quote long passages when a short summary in your own words does the job better.

Keep your referencing tidy as you go. Most UK law schools use OSCOLA, with footnotes and a bibliography, so check your own course guide and follow it from the first draft. Fixing fifty footnotes the night before submission is how errors creep in.

6. Write So a Tired Marker Can Follow You

Your marker reads dozens of essays, often late at night. Short sentences, plain words and clear signposts are a gift. Tell the reader where the argument is going at the start of each section, then deliver it. A plain signpost like "This section argues that" saves the marker from guessing.

Cut the filler. Phrases like "it is widely known that" and "in the modern world" say nothing and waste words your argument needs. Legal writing rewards precision: name the rule, name the case, state the consequence. If a sentence can be cut without losing meaning, cut it. You'll be surprised how much stronger the paragraph reads.

Read the draft out loud before you submit. You'll hear the tangled sentences, the repeated words and the places where the argument jumps. If you stumble over a sentence, your marker will too. A quick read through catches more errors than a spellchecker ever will,

7. Mistakes That Keep Good Essays at 65

The first mistake is answering a different question from the one asked. It usually comes from planning around a favourite topic instead of the words on the page. write the question at the top of your plan and check every section against it before you write.

The second is description without analysis. An essay that explains the law for ten pages and evaluates it in one paragraph has the balance backwards. Aim for the opposite: state the law briefly, then spend your words testing it. Markers give marks for judgement, not for memory.

The third is a weak ending. A conclusion that repeats the introduction adds nothing, and a brand new point in the final paragraph confuses the reader. End with your verdict and the one reason it holds. If you'd like a second pair of eyes on the draft, our assignment writing service can review your structure and argument before you submit.

A first class law essay is not a mystery and it isn't luck. It's a clear answer to the exact question, an argument built from the best authorities, and writing a tired marker can follow without effort. Plan it on one page, argue in every paragraph, and check the draft against the question before you submit. Do that and the mark takes care of itself. If you'd like a hand with the writing itself, our assignment writing service is ready to help, and you can reach out through the contact page for a free quote.