

Paper 6 asks you to describe an experiment you are not doing, read instruments from pictures, and process someone else's results. The marks are for the routine – the instrument, the repeat, the table, the graph – and the routine is short enough to learn. :

Reading instruments

Always read with your eye level with the scale. Looking from an angle gives a parallax error, and saying so is worth a mark when the question asks how to read accurately.

Ruler — read to the nearest millimetre. Start from the 0 mark, or subtract the reading you started at

Measuring cylinder — read the BOTTOM of the meniscus, at eye level, on a flat surface

Thermometer — read to the nearest 1 °C (or 0.5 °C if the scale allows); leave the bulb in the liquid while you read

Stopwatch — reads to 0.01 s, but your reaction time is about 0.2 s – so time ten swings and divide by ten

Ammeter and voltmeter — ammeter in series, voltmeter in parallel; read to the smallest division on the scale shown

When a picture shows a scale, write down every digit the scale gives and no more. Adding a digit the instrument cannot resolve loses the mark.

Tables and graphs

Head every column with the quantity and its unit, written as a ratio: 'l / cm', 't / s'.

Give every reading in a row column the same number of decimal places.

Choose a scale that lets the points fill more than half the grid, and use easy numbers – 1, 2 or 5 units per 2 cm squares. Never use 3 per square.

Label both axes with quantity and unit, plot small neat crosses, and draw ONE thin best-fit line. Do not join point to point.

If a point is clearly off the line, circle it and call it an anomaly. Ignore it when drawing the line, and say that you would repeat that reading.

To find a gradient, draw a large triangle on the line, write the coordinates of its corners, and divide the change in y by the change in x – with the unit.

To read a value from a graph, draw dotted lines from the axis to the line and leave them on the page. They show the examiner where your number came from.

Describing an experiment

Name what you change (the independent variable), what you measure (the dependent variable) and at least two things you keep the same. The controls are the marks candidates most often forget.

Say which instrument you use for each measurement, and how precisely it reads.

Say that you repeat each reading and take an average – and that you look for anomalies.

Describe the steps in order, in short numbered sentences. An examiner should be able to follow them without knowing what you were thinking.

Say what you would do with the results: which quantity you would calculate, or what graph you would plot and what its shape would show.

For a safety question, name a hazard that exists in THIS experiment and a precaution that matches it. ‘Be careful’ and ‘wear goggles’ with no reason score nothing.

Common experiments and what the scheme wants

Pendulum period — time 10 or 20 complete swings from the middle of the swing (not the end), divide by the number, repeat; keep the amplitude small

Density of a solid — mass on a balance, volume by displacement in a measuring cylinder (final – initial), then $\rho = m/V$ with the unit g/cm^3

Resistance of a wire — measure V and I, $R = V/I$; keep the current low so the wire does not heat, and switch off between readings

Specific heat capacity — measure mass, temperature rise and the energy supplied; insulate the block and use a lid, because heat loss is the main error

Refraction through a block — use optical pins at least 5 cm apart, mark the outline of the block before removing it, and draw the normal with a set square

Focal length of a lens — focus a distant object on a screen; the distance from lens to screen is the focal length, and repeating with different distant objects gives a mean

Improving an experiment

An improvement must reduce an error you have identified. Match them: heat loss → insulate and use a lid; reaction time → time more swings; parallax → read at eye level with a mirror scale; small readings → use a larger sample and divide.

‘Repeat and take an average’ improves reliability, not accuracy, and only reduces random error. It cannot fix a zero error on a balance.

‘Use a more accurate instrument’ scores only when you name it: ‘use a micrometer instead of a ruler because it reads to 0.01 mm’.

Never write ‘be more careful’, ‘concentrate harder’ or ‘use a better ruler’. These are the three answers examiners list every year as worth nothing.