



NEBOSH

Scenario-based Assessments

Guidance for learners

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1 | Introduction

Working in health and safety means that you can often face a range of opportunities and challenges. You need to be able to evaluate what is really happening in a workplace and formulate and implement ways of making it safer and healthier. This requires a complex range of integrated skills. In our assessments, we are asking you to answer questions in a way that provides evidence of your understanding (theoretical and practical). We link this evidence to what we expect you to understand (the learning outcomes). We do not expect you to be perfect. We do expect you to at least reach the minimum level appropriate to the qualification you are studying.

Many NEBOSH qualifications include a scenario-based assessment (SBA)¹. When we develop these, we want to closely match them to the way you use skills in a health and safety role.

These assessments are designed to be applied to simulate a range of work-based situations. This design also enables deeper learning during the assessment and allows you to show that you understand (and not just that you can read).

This document gives insights into the assessments from the people who actually develop them. But first, we will explain why the assessments are developed in the way they are. This will help you understand what the assessments are trying to achieve and how best to approach them.

¹ SBAs were previously known as OBEs because of the 'open book' delivery method of the examination.

2 | Typical structure of a scenario-based assessment (SBA)

The SBA contains two parts:

- a scenario – a narrative which outlines a workplace environment and situation; and
- a series of tasks or questions which partly or wholly rely on the scenario. However, some papers may also contain 'theory only' questions that do not require you to draw any information from the scenario.

The range of questions reflects the emphasis of learning outcome topics in the syllabus. Some of the questions are focussed on an individual learning outcome, some may include a combination of learning outcomes from the same unit. The reason we do it this way is that, in practice, health and safety often presents complex workplace situations that need to be carefully managed.

TIP

It is important to read the scenario from start to finish at least once as it signposts information that you will need when you answer the questions.

3 | Expertise



Writing assessments is a complex task. It needs expertise. We only use health and safety qualified and experienced subject matter experts (SMEs) and assessment developers to write assessments.

Most of these experts also have years of experience working in health and safety roles, and many had previous careers in other sectors such as engineering, chemical manufacturing, law or construction before that.

So, in short, they have the subject knowledge that is backed up with experience.

4 | Language

Some SBAs are available in a range of languages, though the availability and frequency of these varies depending on the specific qualification. Some SBAs, such as those used in Diploma-level qualifications, are only available in English. Even if a non-English language version is available, it will have been translated from an English original. In cases of doubt, the English version is used as the standard.

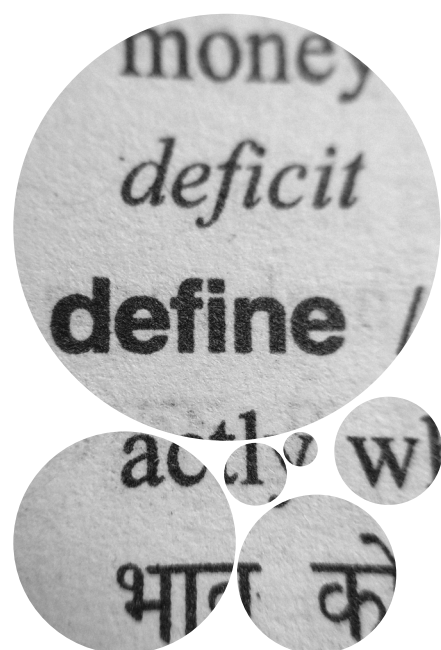
All languages vary quite a lot, and the use of language will depend on the context of its use. For example, you will probably write a formal letter quite differently from how you speak to a friend. You might use different words or change the way you construct the sentences. You will probably also have experienced situations where the same language is used in different ways in different countries or regions.

There is no accepted single global standard for English; there is no governing body dictating rules of English grammar. Instead, English is generally taught in one of several standard ways, each using consistent rules of grammar and meanings for words. The benefit of adopting a standardised form of English is that it can remove ambiguity so that the meaning is clear.

Two of the main forms of English currently being taught are Standard English and Global English. Standard English is taught in schools and colleges in native English-speaking countries like the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The popular International English Language Testing System (IELTS) appears to be based on Standard English because it is designed for people wanting to work in native-English speaking countries.

In contrast, Global English is a simplified form of Standard English; for example, it uses shorter sentences and avoids the passive voice. This can make it easier for people who learn English as a second language.

We write assessments (the scenario and questions) in simplified Standard English. As an organisation, we are also committed to the Campaign for Plain English. This means we will try to make the English as simple but as unambiguous as we can. English that is too simple can be ambiguous. We use shorter sentences instead of very long ones. We try to use the active voice, though we do not avoid using the passive voice entirely. We also avoid colloquialisms and use gender neutral pronouns and terminology, unless this would confuse or conflict with a widely used technical term, for example, banksman. Ordinary, everyday words will have their standard dictionary meaning rather than any local variation or double meaning. This standardisation helps remove ambiguity.



Health and Safety is a technical subject. For example, you will need to understand the language used in legal texts and official guidance (UK or ILO equivalents), risk assessment and safety technology. There will therefore be many technical words and concepts which you will learn as part of your course of study. As a result, the language will sometimes be more complex. The complexity of the language we need to use in SBAs will depend on the qualification and its level. The standard of English required depends on the qualification.

Every qualification syllabus guide recommends a particular IELTS level, for example, IELTS 6 for Certificate and IELTS 7 for Diploma qualifications.

In summary, while we will make the language as simple as we can, health and safety is a technical subject. Your language skills need to be of a good enough standard that you can both understand and respond to the assessment.

5 | The scenario

To get started, several scenario ideas are proposed and one of these is selected. Scenarios need to be reasonably credible, so the ideas are very often based on personal experience of the writer. Or, they might be adapted from a publicly-accessible record of a serious accident. However they are developed, scenarios need to incorporate a range of health and safety topics from across the syllabus, so will not wholly reflect reality in any single workplace.

Health and safety people don't just work in offices. Workplace settings already considered in previous SBAs have included a:

- do-it-yourself (DIY)/hardware store;
- chemical plant;
- call centre;
- food factory;
- supermarket;
- removals company;
- car tyre fitting garage; and
- warehouse.

You may not be familiar with some of these workplace settings, but that will not stop you from being able to answer the questions fully. The tasks/questions will be based on subject matter that you studied during your course. We will only assume that you know things that are within the scope of the syllabus. Sometimes, we will give you additional information that you might need for a particular question in a 'stem' (an introduction to the question – also, see section 6.1). This additional information will supplement the information in the scenario.

As they are writing the scenario, the writer will have in mind the task that will be set and the questions that will be asked. This means that relevant clues and information will be incorporated into the scenario. This creative writing process usually needs several iterations, and a team of people are involved in various review stages.

As well as using standard English, we also generally use the present tense, even when referring to past events. The use of the present tense in this way is typically referred to as the 'dramatic present'. You may be asked to assume a role within the scenario, for example, the scenario may say 'you are a recently appointed health and safety adviser for a large supermarket'. These devices are used to make the scenario feel more real and immediate.

Here is an example that is taken from a past scenario which shows how clues are seeded into the scenario:

“

You ask the store manager why the investigation has been left until now and they reply that you are responsible for such health and safety matters, so it is your job and not theirs. You inform the store manager that, due to the injuries sustained, the accident needs to be reported to the enforcement authorities as soon as possible.

”

When we develop these assessments, we subtly place 'signposts' or clues in the text so that you can use your understanding of health and safety to interpret the clues and give correct technical answers to the question.

One of the main principles that we apply when writing scenarios is 'show, not tell'. This means that the answer will not usually be directly in the scenario. You will need to make a logical inference from the information given.

For example, rather than stating in the scenario that the health and safety culture was poor or negative, there will be indicators in the scenario, such as statements about attitudes or the way things are routinely done. You must then use what you know about health and safety culture to interpret the clues and logically conclude what the culture is like. In most cases, you will also need to support your conclusions using evidence from the scenario.

Here is another example from a past scenario:

“*This supermarket was listed in the top 10 for sales last year and the store manager wants to do even better this year. They have told shift managers that they do not care how it is done, but the supermarket must be in the top 5 this year for everyone to receive their bonus.*”

Collectively, these sentences indicate negative aspects of culture; there is an emphasis on financial incentives at the expense of health and safety. It does not literally say this in the scenario extract, but it is a logical inference from what is written.

Another aspect of the 'show, not tell' principle is that we would not explicitly describe the things that are not being done. We describe the workplace as is, meaning that you can infer what has been missed - within the context of the scenario.

For example, if the scenario describes that a site visitor had not been added to an emergency roll-call, you could infer that the organisation does not have an effective visitor procedure in place.

This type of inference will help you respond to tasks that require you to evaluate how well something is already being done, or to recommend improvements.

6 | Questions

Despite many myths, we do not write questions to 'trick' you; we try to write them as plainly and unambiguously as we can. As stated earlier, plain/standard English is used to help make the question clear. We no longer use 'command words' to give instructions to you/learners on how much detail to give in the answer.

The command words used now simply qualify what you are expected to do. The marks available should guide you as to the length of the answer required. There is no mystery about the words used in the question. They are not special words, they are just ordinary English words with ordinary meanings.

For example, the word 'explain' has a dictionary definition of '*to make something clear or easy to understand by describing or giving information about it*'¹. In a question we are simply asking you to tell us clearly what you know about the subject (using the knowledge gained from your studies and/or the information in the scenario).

² Source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/explain>

6.1 Broad types of questions

We use a range of question types in the SBAs. Questions that can be answered without reference to the scenario text are rare. Therefore, you will need to draw conclusions (by logical inference) from the scenario text and, to varying degrees, use evidence from the scenario to support your answers. There may also be a statement in the form of a stem which helps contextualise the question that follows it.

The question wording, together with any guidance notes, will make it clear what is required.

6.2 Questions and available marks

Questions need to clearly direct you to what you need to do. This is especially important when questions are more applied.

Using 'comment on', 'justify', 'evaluate', 'how effective' or 'to what extent' implies weighing up evidence from the scenario. Good responses to these types of questions will include discussion of positives and negatives. Questions with this kind of wording are designed to reward you for showing your understanding. It also means that you will not gain many marks by simply referring to your notes or searching for answers on the internet.

See [examples 6 and 7](#) to show how a learner may respond to this type of question.

6.3 Question guidance marks

Question guidance notes are used to guide you when answering the question. They will help you to decide on how much information from the scenario you will need to include in your answer. It is, therefore, very important that you read all supporting notes so that you understand what is required. The main types of notes that are used are outlined in this section (these are the main guidance notes that will be used but from time-to-time you may see others. When these notes are used they will be clear and provide full instructions).

'Scenario only' note

This note is used when you will be drawing specifically on information from the scenario – there will be no theory, or generic points required for this type of question. The note will take one of the two following formats:

Note: Your answer should be based on the scenario only.

See [example 4](#) to show how this note will be used.

Note: Your answer should only be based on supporting document [number] **AND** the scenario.

The use of this note follows the principle outlined above. It is used if you need to refer to additional reference sources that you will need to be able to fully answer the question (it will give specific instructions of which supporting document(s) to refer to). Supporting documents are considered an extension of the scenario.

'Support your answer' note

The scenario may also reveal examples of theoretical points as well as points that are specific to the scenario. In this case, the question includes a specific note directing you to include evidence from the scenario. The note will normally take one of the two following formats:

Note: You should support your answer using relevant information from the scenario.

See [examples 1 and 2](#) to show how this note will be used.

Note: You should support your answer using relevant information from the scenario AND supporting document [number].

Occasionally this note may change, for example, it may ask for 'supporting examples' from the scenario.

Other notes

Occasionally, you may find that a question will ask you to base your answers on specific criteria. One of the more common of these notes is where you will be required to use calculations (calculations are normally used in Diploma assessments). This note will take the following format:

Note: Use calculations to support your answer.

When this note is used, you will be expected to lay out your answer to show each step of the calculation. This will allow marks to be allocated to all correct steps no matter where they are in the calculation.

See [example 5](#) to show how this note will be used.

The other types of notes that are sometimes used are when the question is asking for you to only refer to and interpret or extract relevant information from a specific reference source. These types of notes are not commonly used and will usually be used in Diploma questions. Some examples of these notes follow.

Note: Your answer should be based on supporting document [number] only.

Note: You should support your answer, where applicable, using relevant information and examples from the scenario and supporting document [number].

Note: Your answer should be based on the information in the [document name eg, HSE's document L108: Controlling noise at work].

This last note may also give instructions to include information from the scenario.

7 | Mark schemes

Mark schemes are what Examiners use to mark your answer. A mark scheme will contain the range of correct answers we expect following a reasonable interpretation of the question and the information in the scenario. We only issue mark schemes to Examiners. The mark scheme is iteratively developed alongside the question. In fact, the mark scheme is usually the starting point of question development. The writer will have a broad idea of the question they want to ask when they begin to develop the mark scheme. Mark schemes must match the question so they will go through many review cycles to ensure we have correctly captured all relevant responses.

Because the mark scheme may contain evidence from the scenario, adjusting the mark scheme might also require adjustments to the scenario and vice versa. The same process applies if we adjust the question. It is crucial that the question does not mislead you or contain distracting information that diverts you away from the points that we have specified in the mark scheme. The mark scheme and question must be a good match.



8 | How much should I write?



When deciding on how long an answer should be, you should look at the number of marks available for the question as well as the command word. If a question is worth 10 marks, then Examiners will be looking for 10 unique (not repeated) things. These might be a mixture of points that you are making and evidence you are citing.

Remember, it is about quality not quantity. Just because you write a lot, this does not mean that you will gain high marks. So, including unnecessary information in your answer will not attract marks, nor will repeating the same answer or providing alternative wording for an answer.

9 | Examples

Here are some examples, with commentary, to illustrate various aspects of what we have discussed.

EXAMPLE 1

What financial arguments could you use to convince the manager that accidents are expensive for the organisation?

Note: You should support your answer, where applicable, using relevant information from the scenario.

The question is looking for brief technical health and safety points such as sick pay, investigation costs and fines. However, the scenario may reveal examples of these theoretical points, such as the employer received an unlimited fine. Identifying this would merit an extra mark. The question includes a specific note directing you to include evidence from the scenario. The note may take various forms (see section 6.3 for further information).

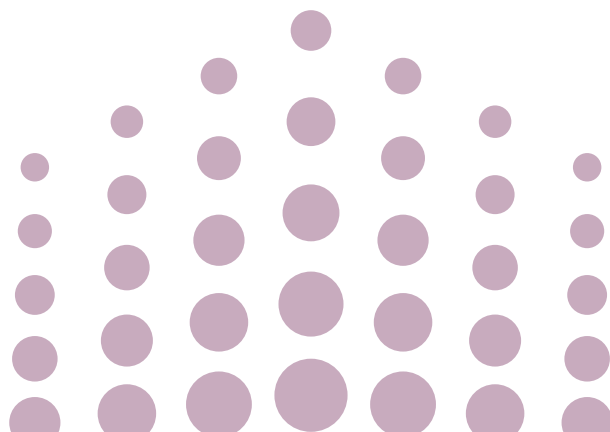
EXAMPLE 2

Comment on the negative indicators of health and safety culture in the workplace.

Note: You should support your answer, where applicable, using relevant information from the scenario.

The use of the word 'comment' invites a more detailed analysis (see section 6.2 on 'command words'). The associated scenario will give you clues that at least some aspects of the culture are negative. You will already have a theoretical framework of culture indicators from your studies, and these will lead you to evidence about the culture through logical inference. Clearly, since the question relates specifically to the workplace in the scenario, any other indicators which are not present in the scenario are irrelevant.

For instance, one of many theoretical points to consider would be management commitment. Citing relevant evidence from the scenario such as 'the manager is hardly seen in the workplace' might lead you to logically infer 'poor management commitment' as an indicator of the negative culture. In this example a mark would be awarded for 'poor management commitment' and another mark awarded for 'the manager is hardly seen in the workplace'.



EXAMPLE 3

The following is an extract from a scenario and a fictitious response to the question. This shows how you could answer a question poorly by incorporating duplication. Remember, this is just an extract from a scenario; in reality, the scenario will be more extensive and provide more evidence that you can draw on. This also means more marks would be available.

This supermarket was listed in the top 10 for sales last year and the store manager wants to do even better this year. They have told shift managers that they do not care how it is done, but the supermarket must be in the top 5 this year for everyone to receive their bonus.

Comment on the negative indicators of health and safety culture at the supermarket. (5)

Points made	Learner's answers to this question	Marks awarded
i	Supermarket appears to prioritise sales over health and safety	1
ii	The supermarket prioritises money over health and safety	0
iii	The supermarket manager thinks that sales are most important.	0
iv	The reason that we know this is that the manager has told the shift supervisors that they don't care how it is done but the supermarket must be in the top 5.	0
v	The supermarket manager appears to be giving their approval to disregard health and safety by saying 'they don't care how it is done'.	1

Only points i and v were awarded marks because:

- Points ii and iii are the same as point i but worded slightly differently.
- Point iv is a repeat of the scenario content so is not worthy of a mark because the question is asking the learner to 'comment on' and the learner has not provided an explanation of the point.

TIP

Simply copying and pasting paragraphs from the scenario and providing them as an answer in their entirety will not attract any marks. The intention is to test the learner's ability to understand the health and safety implications in the scenario.

EXAMPLE 4

While operating the mobile excavator, the recently trained worker notices that the digger bucket is exposing cables. They leave the excavator's cab, taking the keys with them, and immediately go to find a supervisor to inform them of the situation. The supervisor visits the work area.

Comment on how the excavation work for the new drainage system has been effectively managed.

Note: Your answer should be based on the scenario only.

As with example 2, the answer requires you to provide a more detailed analysis, and this should be reflected in your answer. However, unlike example 2, we would not expect you to include theoretical points in your answer.

Based on the given scenario extract, answers that we would be expecting to see here are that the worker immediately stops work, the worker has received relevant training, the worker knows to stop digging because of the training they have received, the worker reports the situation to a supervisor, a supervisor is available/attends the site, etc.

However, we would not expect to see answers such as the 'the area was not well lit' (as the scenario does not specify when the excavation is taking place) and 'hearing protection used' (again this is not discussed in the scenario, so we do not know whether hearing protection was issued, or if it is required).

However, if this scenario had supporting documents to show a work schedule and/or an extract from an instruction manual that discussed the noise emissions from the equipment, then these answers may be appropriate to include. If this was the case, then the following note would have been used:

Note: Your answer should only be based on Supporting Document [number] **AND** the scenario.

EXAMPLE 5

Evaluate if EACH of the hearing protection products identified in supporting document 3, provide an appropriate level of attenuation for workers using the equipment.

Note: Use calculations to support your answer.

In this example, we have given the source of the information in the question, so the question does not need a supporting note telling you to refer to this additional information. There is, however, a supporting note to show that calculations are required for this question. The calculations will help you to show in both cases how the level of attenuation is, or is not, appropriate.

The following two examples include answers, and show where marks have been awarded for valid points within the response.

EXAMPLE 6

Comment on the organisation's application of the permit-to-work system.

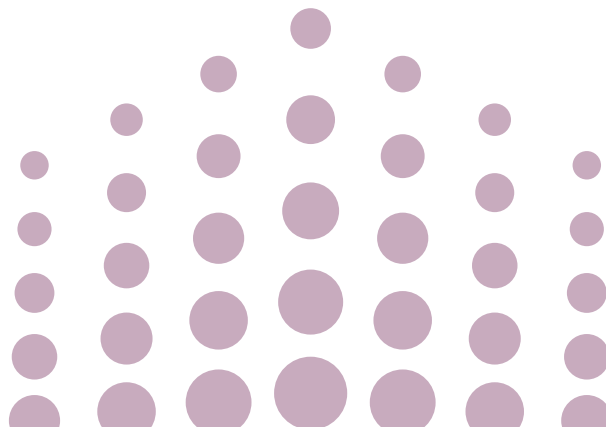
(10)

Note: Your answer should be based on the scenario only.

The permit described in the scenario contains a lot of the correct information: **a description of the job**, and **identification of hazards and risks**. The **time limit was also included of the working hours** (09:00 – 17:00). **The permit was signed**. All of this shows overall good practice of working within the permit-to-work system.

The **control measures were discussed** with the contractor. However, there was **no discussion of a formal handover procedure**. This could potentially lead to oversight or increased risk in the event of any disruption to the work.

When the work was ongoing the **site manager (permit issuer) did not visit the work area**.



EXAMPLE 7

How effective was the organisation's new health and safety policy at reducing workplace accidents?

(10)

Note: Your answer should be based on the scenario only.

The health and safety policy aimed to reduce workplace accidents by introducing mandatory safety training, stricter equipment checks, and a new digital incident reporting system.

The policy had mixed results. According to internal reports, **the number of reported minor injuries fell** by 25% in the first year. **Workers suggested that the training and equipment checks has a positive impact.** **Workers also reported feeling more confident in identifying and avoiding hazards.**

However, the **policy was less successful in addressing more serious incidents.** The **number of major accidents remained largely unchanged** due to **inconsistent enforcement** across the organisations sites and **delays in implementing the digital reporting system.** Furthermore, **some workers expressed concerns** that the training was too generic and **didn't address specific risks** in their roles.

These responses demonstrate good practice of considering both positive and negative aspects of safety management described in the scenario. The learner has considered all of the information in order to answer the question and has included detailed information from the scenario to support their overall evaluation.

10 | Summary

We have given insights into the structure and development of SBAs and we have shown that SBAs:

- have a realistic scenario, followed by a series of tasks; and
- require the learner to apply their understanding of health and safety management in the context of a simulated workplace situation, pulling out clues from the scenario to help support their answer.

We've also given several examples of extracts from scenarios and typical questions to cover the range of questions that the learner will face.



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