How to write an explanation

At Round 2, you will be asked to "explain your solutions" to some of the later questions on the paper. What exactly does this mean, and how do you do it?

An explanation to a linguistics problem takes the form of a short piece of writing (usually no more than a page) that explains how the language in the problem works, at least to the extent that you can work out. This might include explaining what different suffixes and prefixes mean and how they are used, as well as what order words come in. However, what you actually need to write will depend on the problem – this is where most of the difficulty comes from.

There are some general principles to bear in mind:

- Be complete. Too many people lose marks for not describing things like word order. You should be able to answer the questions at the end of the problem with just the explanation and a dictionary, so you should explain everything that is relevant.
- Be detailed. If you were describing English, you would likely get no marks for simply saying that "plural is usually marked with *(e)s*" without specifying that it's a suffix, and saying when it is *-s* vs. *-es*.
- Generalise. If you ever find yourself writing out a long list of words or affixes that are exceptions to some rule, there will always be a pattern behind them. The marks will almost certainly be for finding that pattern.
- Be clear. Explanations that are filled with long, winding sentences are hard to understand. Subheadings, tables, and lists are invaluable when trying to make explanations clear and concise.
- Think about what you need to write. For instance, if the problem is about how different types of verbs behave, you should probably say which verbs are in which category, either by describing a general pattern (e.g., verbs of motion vs verbs of position), or by explicitly listing them; if all nouns behave the same, you don't need to list them all.

Below, you'll find a pdf of some example student explanations to problems 3, 4 and 5 on the 2021 R2 paper, with short marker's comments. They were all high-scoring solutions, although none of them are perfect; but importantly, they all try to follow the principles above, and are all achievable.

Ainu

Most case is SOV

Verbs:

a + verb root + b + c + d

a) object marker

∅ → object

i(p)- → no object

yay → reflexive

b) away marker -(r)e

r is present if after vowel

shows that the action is done away from the subject ie.

have + away = give

c) quantity marker

~~ta~~ ruy → a lot

teh → a little

d) object plurality marker

∅ → singular

pa → plural

pronouns

	Subj.	obj.
I	an	en
You (sg.)	e	e
He	∅	∅
We	~~as~~ ci	un
You (pl.)	eci	eci
They	∅	∅

however, when no object, I (an) and we (as) go after the verb

pronoun compound = Subj. + obj.

tense

wa (past)

wa + isan → perfect past (have)

wa + an/oka → ~~pref~~ past continuous

an is used without -pa

oka is used with -pa

Marker's Comment

The solution is mostly correct, and very well presented.

The description of the pronouns (although differently presented to the official solution) is complete and clear, as is the description of the aspect markers.

The description of verbs suffers slightly from not recognising the role of transitivity (whether the verb takes an object or not) – this is where most of the marks where lost, as it is a key part of the problem.

Also, there is no clear description of word order. The statement that the word order is mostly SOV doesn't gain any marks, as (i) the subject and object are one word, which may come before or after the verb, and (ii) the aspect markers are not mentioned.

Overall, the answer scores 22/34.

5. Hmong. Hmong forms phrases with the determinant first and modifier second. (e.g. lub nyiaj = 'round thing of money')

The meanings of the roots are given below:

DAIM – sheet
KUA – liquid
LUB – round object
PHAU – sheath
TSAB – writing
TXOJ – winding thing
ZAJ – speech

Determinants

(NPHOOJ – (of a) plant
NTAWV – (of) paper
MUS – (of a) woman [?]
TXIV – (of an) edible plant
SHMAB – (of a) grapevine
NTAWS – (of the) belly
NYIAJ – (of) money
KHAUB – (of) clothes
XOV – carrying information
KEV – ~~to travel on~~ (of) travelling
THAJ YEEB – (of) peace
LEEG – (of the) nervous system

Modifiers

Marker's Comment

An almost perfect solution.

A sufficient description of the syntax is given, with the only marks in the problem being lost for not mentioning the formation of compound nouns.

The list of classifiers (labelled "determinants") is complete and clear, as is the list of root nouns (labelled "modifiers"). This was not necessary, but made the solution stand out.

Overall, the solution scores 18/20.

Explanation

Question 5 Tawala. (2 sides)

- Word order is Subject - Object - Verb
  Possessor - Possessed
  Noun - Adjective.

- Constructions:

English	Tawala
X because Y	X babana Y
X but Y	X ma Y
X and Y	X ma Y
If X, Y	Inapa X Y

Verbs are reduplicated to become adjectives, or a stative form. The initial $\#C_1V_1C_2V_2 \rightarrow \#C_1V_1C_2V_2C_1V_1C_2V_2$, unless C_1 is /h/, in which case $\#C_1V_1C_2V_2 \rightarrow \#C_1V_1C_2C_1V_1C_2V_2$.

"not" is "ega", and it precedes the final phrase in the clause, be it a noun phrase (in 12: lawa memena natuna = settled person's child) or the verb.

	prefix	suffix
2sg	u-	-m
3sg	i-	-na*
2pl	o-	-mi
3pl	hi-	-hi

There are two person affixes:

↳ The prefixes are used to mark the subjects of verbs, and the suffixes the objects *(na → ∅).

↳ Suffixes are used for adjectival agreement, both for predicate adjectives and adjectives modifying nouns.

- possessed nouns bear a suffix corresponding with the possessor.

- Stative verbs can prefix -na- after o- or u-.

Marker's Comment

The solution is incomplete, but what is given is of very high quality.

The initial description of syntax is almost perfect, although the later description of **ega** isn't quite right.

The description of affixes and their uses is also nearly perfect, except that they seem to miss the object suffix **-ya**.

Unfortunately, they do not fully describe the behaviour of verbs and adjectives, where most of the marks for the question were. The description of reduplication is also incorrect.

Thus the explanation scores 10/23.