

WRITING ESSAYS

- Make the most of class essay assignments. They:
- Make you use your notes and review your work;
 - Test your understanding of the material studied;
 - Allow you to develop your essay-writing skills;
 - Allow you to assess your progress;
 - Count towards term/quarter grades;
 - Give you practice for the examination.

How to make a Mess of an Essay

It is sometimes easier to approach a problem by considering how NOT to do things. Avoid the following:

- Anonymity. Somebody has to take the blame for writing it.
- No title or question. So which essay is this supposed to be?
- Illegible writing. Somebody actually has to read it.
- Failure to read the question properly and understand it before beginning to answer. (Not a good start. Everything you write may be irrelevant.
- Lack of any obvious plan. Giving a plan as an introduction is a good idea. If you haven't got one you can't give one.
- Ignorance of the basic facts. You *are* supposed to know some.
- Confusion about the facts. You *are* supposed to show that you understand them.
- Introduction of irrelevant material by "dumping" your notes on the general topic. Despite the belief of students everywhere, this is not going to get you any credit. You will be penalised for not being able to distinguish what is relevant from what is not.
- Vague, unsubstantiated generalisations lacking in detailed support. Anybody can make them, so why should anyone give you any marks for them?

- Unnecessary repetition. There are no extra marks for saying the same thing several times; there may even be a penalty for boring the teacher/examiner.
- Failure to control your use of language, so that at times your meaning is unclear. If the teacher/examiner cannot tell what you are trying to say, he cannot give you any credit for it.
- Irrational bias: e.g. "As a communist, Lenin was bound to turn out a murderer. . ." There is no place for this in serious writing.
- Dogmatism: e.g. "Anyone with an ounce of intelligence knows that . . ." This is insulting to the teacher/examiner.
- Moralising: e.g. "If only Hitler had not been so greedy . . ." This is usually irrelevant.

What to Provide in Essays

This varies somewhat from subject to subject, and from level to level, but generally the teacher or examiner will be looking for you to do the following:

- Show that you understand the question and its implications: For this reason it is often a good idea to restate the question in your own words in the introduction.
- Plan your response. Make a plan or outline, either on paper or in your head.
- A complete and well-rounded answer to the question, in which everything you write is relevant as an answer to the question asked. Make no major omissions, and include no irrelevant material.
- Be economical and efficient in your response, so that every word counts, and there is no padding or "waffle".

**ANSWER
THE QUESTION,
THE WHOLE QUESTION,
AND
NOTHING BUT THE QUESTION**

- Display of a detailed knowledge of the subject, which is entirely relevant to answering the question. Do not show off your knowledge of the subject which is irrelevant to answering

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the question. Don't "dump" material on the same subject, simply because it is on the same subject, if it does not contribute to answering the question.

DON'T "DUMP" YOUR NOTES

- Provide evidence for all claims that you make.
- Distinguish between facts and theories. This is not always easy; if this is the case, not, say so.
- Display evidence of wide reading, and an ability to employ the results of this work effectively in the essay. Refer, quote, show off a bit!
- Provide a balanced discussion of the issues. Consider all significant points of view.
- Make evident your awareness of the limitations of your claims. Use words like "probably" and "arguably" where appropriate.
- Present your essay legibly and clearly.
- Ensure that it is free from significant numbers of errors of spelling, grammar, syntax and punctuation.
- Adopt an appropriate style.
- Adopt a lively and confident style.
- Elegance of expression. Polish it as you do it.
- Try to be original. Every teacher dreams of one day coming across a student who really thinks for himself.
- Show some sign that you enjoy studying the subject. Don't do anything special about this. If you have enjoyed the subject, it will show up by itself. If you try to tell the teacher/examiner that you have enjoyed the subject, you will come across as dishonest.

**ESSAYS ARE NOT PRIMARILY DESIGNED
TO TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE
THEY ARE DESIGNED TO TEST WHETHER YOU CAN
ANSWER THE QUESTION ASKED**

All the points made above refer to essays in general. But in each of the subjects you study, the examiners will be seeking for what are

good essays in their subject. Special considerations will apply in each subject. The History examiner will be looking for sound analysis of the basic facts, citation of primary sources where appropriate, etc. The Psychology examiner will be looking for a grounding in observational or experimental evidence, provided by citation of empirical research, etc.

The special requirements of the examiners for good grades in each subject are listed in the criteria for evaluation of essays, provided for the use of examiners and available to schools. You should be aware of the special requirements of the examiners in each of your subjects.

**ENSURE THAT YOU ARE AWARE OF THE
SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS
FOR GOOD ESSAYS
IN EACH OF YOUR CHOSEN SUBJECTS AND ToK**

Interpreting the Question

Read the question very carefully. make sure you understand it before you begin to plan your answer. In the Chapter on Studying in a Foreign Language there is a list of the key words used in examinations in English, together with what they require. If in doubt, refer to it.

The Essay Plan

There are two forms of useful essay plan:

- the detailed plan made for an essay done at home;
- the simple plan for an essay during an examination. (You will not have time for more.)

In general, your plan should be simple:

- introduction,
- main body,
- conclusion.

There is an old saying, that you should:

- write about what you are going to write,
- write it,
- write about what you have written.

Correctly understood, this is a wise policy to follow if you cannot think of anything more appropriate to the particular question you are answering, for the chief concern of the teacher or examiner will not

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be how much you know, but whether you know how to answer the particular question asked. You can tell him this in the introduction by repeating the question in your own words and by giving a brief plan. In the conclusion, you can show exactly how you have answered the question. This need involve no unnecessary repetition.

Introduction

An introduction may include:

- a reformulation of the question in different words, (but make sure it *is* the same question);
- a brief outline of the essay plan;
- a quotation which illustrates the nature of the problem;
- definitions of the key terms;
- challenging the terms of the question. Do not be afraid. When done convincingly, it earns respect. e.g. If the question says: "Was Hitler an ideological fanatic or a self-interested opportunist?" you can argue that these two categories are not mutually exclusive, and that he could have been both, perhaps at different times.

Main Body

In the main body of the essay:

- Develop a line of argument as fully as you can (with one main topic or idea per paragraph).
- Do not repeat yourself in the main body of the essay
- Flesh out the skeleton of your argument. Cite evidence and arguments to explain and justify the points you have made. It is not enough merely to assert them.
- Confirm your ideas wherever possible by referring to published materials, properly cited (see below).
- Clarify what you say with examples, graphs or diagrams where appropriate.
- At all times keep in focus the precise question you have been asked to answer, and the main themes of your argument.
- Only write what is directly relevant to answering question.

Conclusion

Ideas for conclusions include:

- your conclusions about the arguments you have deployed (which side you come down on, and why);

- an account of exactly how you have answered the question set;
- a quotation which succinctly sums up your conclusion.

Constructing Arguments

Most essays should take the form of considering various ways to analyse an issue. Mere description or narration will almost certainly be insufficient for a high grade.

Many issues may be analysed in one of two ways. These are best answered by:

- stating the issue;
- presenting the arguments or evidence for one point of view;
- presenting the arguments or evidence for the other;
- weighing up the arguments or evidence and coming to a conclusion.

Make sure that when you are stating an opinion, you make it clear that you recognise it *is* opinion, and not fact.

Psychologically it is more satisfactory if the arguments (or evidence) for the point of view that you decide is the best one are presented last. Being the most recently read, they will tend to appear more convincing, and therefore leave the impression that your conclusion is soundly based.

Where an issue may be analysed in many ways, or when there are many competing explanations, the following plan is advisable:

- state the issue;
- present the arguments for the various viewpoints;
- weigh them against each other;
- come to a conclusion.

Each individual point may be developed by:

- stating it;
- explaining it;
- giving examples;
- justifying it by citing evidence.

Again, the best explanations should generally be placed last, before the conclusion.

Style

The style appropriate for essays in each of your subjects will vary somewhat, but some general advice can be given:

- Write as clearly as possible. Confusion of expression is usually an indication of, and a consequence of, confusion of thought. Try to think clearly exactly what it is that you want to say, and then say it as precisely as possible.
- Avoid rhetorical flourishes or "purple passages" which might be appropriate in a political speech or religious sermon, but which are out of place in an academic essay.
- Do not use note form in essays; i.e. sub-headings or numbered paragraphs, unless these are generally acceptable in the subject you are studying.
- Do not use "I." Write impersonally. e.g. Do not write: "I think that the foundations of Stalin's totalitarian state were laid by Lenin." Write: "It can be maintained that the foundations of Stalin's totalitarian state were laid by Lenin." Alternatively: "There is persuasive evidence that the foundations of Stalin's totalitarian state were laid by Lenin." The essay for Theory of Knowledge and some essays for Language B will be exceptions to this rule.
- Use guarded language. Avoid "it is certain that . . ." "it is obvious that . . ." unless it really is. And it rarely is. Do not normally claim that you have "proved" something in an essay. Restrict use of the term "proof" to mathematics or philosophy (and in Philosophy, use it very carefully). Instead, use such phrases as "it is probable that . . ." "it is likely that . . ." "it is reasonable to suppose that . . ." For a very strong position say something like: "The weight of the evidence points overwhelmingly towards . . ."
- If you are working at home, read your essays aloud to yourself to be sure that the language is not awkward, and that it "flows" properly. If it does not, you will hear it.
- Scholarly writing demands complex sentence structure. Use colons, semicolons and commas to create richer, and more complex sentences.
- Use the technical language of your subject. This will:
 - help demonstrate your grasp of the subject to the teacher/examiner;
 - help you express your ideas succinctly.
- Omit needless words! If a word or phrase can be dropped without a change in meaning, drop it. If a word adds irrelevant

information or no information, omit it. Adverbs such as "rather", "quite", "somewhat", "truly", "honestly", and "very" are usually irrelevant. Students get into the habit of using certain words, e.g. "actually," "however," quite unnecessarily. If a rephrasing will eliminate several words, use the shorter phrasing. Look out for such alternate phrasings.

- Don't attribute human qualities to non-human objects. While this is a useful, and effective technique in fiction writing, it is usually inappropriate in scholarly writing. The effect may be unintendedly amusing. The most common instance of this is attributing intentions or actions to the paper you are writing: "This paper demonstrates" and "This study will attempt to show."
- Keep a scholarly tone. Don't become too passionate, too carried away with your topic. Don't use sarcasm, mockery, satire, snide commentary, quips, asides, or exclamation points. Give both sides of any issue. Remain objective and analytical. Don't get on a soap-box. Scholarly writing is just not the place for preaching or zealotry.
- Never use slang, jargon, clichés, or any other colloquial expressions appropriate only in the spoken language. Use only formal language. Avoid contractions like "don't" except in quotations for direct speech.

Citations

Citation shows where the ideas or quotations you have used come from. This is so that the evidence you have cited in defence of your argument may be checked.

Reference to your sources may be made in the text. Where X is an author cited and Y the work cited, the following phrases are useful:

- As X points out . . .
- As X shows in his . . .
- As X draws our attention to . . .
- In his Y, X states . . .
- X argues . . .
- X suggests . . .
- X makes the point that . . .
- X argues . . .

Formal citation is made either by using footnotes or endnotes, or parentheses. The style conventionally used varies from subject area to

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subject area. Minimal information is given in citations; just enough to identify the book or article in the bibliography, together with the page, or pages, from which the ideas or quotations are taken.

In arts and humanities essays, cite in brackets using the author's surname and the page number of the work cited; e.g. (Petrides, 217). The citation may instead be made in exactly the same way, but inserted as a footnote at the foot of the page, or as an endnote on a separate sheet of paper at the end of the text. If this is done, superscript arabic numerals should be used, and the notes are numbered consecutively throughout the text. In social science and science essays cite in brackets using the author's surname, followed by a comma; the year of publication, followed by a colon, and the page(s) referred to; e.g. (Papadopoulos, 1984:17). This may be used in arts and humanities essays to avoid confusion if more than one work by the same author is cited. In the unlikely, but by no means impossible event that you are citing two works by the same author in the same paper, add an "a" after the year of the one that occurs in the bibliography first, and a "b" after the second; e.g. (Papadimitropoulos, 1997a: 212).

In addition to bibliographic citations, endnotes or footnotes may be used for additional information which may disrupt the flow of the text or the readers' concentration. Thus they may be used for:

- Additional relevant biographical information on an important figure;
- Definitions of key terms used;
- Opposing points of view;
- Minor qualifications of the main argument;
- Cross references to other parts of the text or to appendices;

Endnotes and footnotes should be reasonably short. Large amounts of information should be placed in appendices.

Who Are You Writing For?

It is important not to:

- State what is obvious to anyone over the age of four years, thereby insulting the intelligence of the teacher/examiner, and gaining no credit;
- Omit important material which you take for granted, but which you must demonstrate to the examiner that you know.

For this reason, you should write as though for someone who is:

- As intelligent as you are;

- Has a normal amount of common sense;
- Knows almost nothing about the precise you are writing about;
- Wishes to understand it, but has not had the privilege of attending your I.B. course.

Your own Opinions

Essays in the arts and social sciences usually require that the student take up a position on the matter under consideration. The student is asked for his own opinion. This is a great problem for some students who cannot see anything in between, one the one hand, merely parroting someone else's opinions, and on the other, expressing one's own unsupported and arbitrary preferences.

Marks are not awarded simply for having an opinion. Anybody can have an opinion on anything at all. It does not follow that such an opinion is worth anything. To be of value, and to be awarded credit, the student must present and support a reasoned position:

- The student's opinion must be clearly and elegantly expressed;
- There must be some justification for the student's preference, and this must be based upon the weighing of the arguments or evidence.
- Alternative positions, together with the arguments and evidence for them, must also be adequately discussed;

It is, of course, quite permissible for you, after carefully weighing up the arguments and evidence for various possible positions, to conclude that the arguments are evenly balanced, or the that the evidence is simply insufficient to draw any definite conclusion.

**THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT SKILL
WHICH WILL DETERMINE YOUR SUCCESS
AT UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE
IS YOUR ESSAY WRITING ABILITY.
IMPROVING YOUR WRITING ABILITY
WILL PAY FOR ITSELF A THOUSAND TIMES OVER.**

Originality and Plagiarism

Your essay must be your own work. That is the justification for you getting the credit for it. For this reason, plagiarism is considered a

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serious offence in schools and colleges. It may be punished by zero marks, a reprimand, or even more serious disciplinary sanctions, depending upon the seriousness of the offence. It is therefore important to know what it is.

Plagiarism is passing off someone else's written work as one's own. This might be by:

- getting someone else to write the essay;
- copying someone else's work, either published or not, without acknowledgement.

Students sometimes think that this means that their writing must be original. This is not a simple issue. There are many different senses of "original." Very little ever written is original in the strongest sense: that no one has ever thought of it or written about it before. All popularising books and journals, all school textbooks, including this one, and all encyclopaedias, are based upon original research previously written in monographs and academic articles. Ideas are continuously recycled.

It is precisely by being able to demonstrate that you can express cogently these ideas already in circulation and part of the scholastic/academic tradition, that you demonstrate to the examiner that you understand them. Therefore expressing facts and theories which have been written about before is NOT plagiarism.

Plagiarism consists in:

- **Allowing someone else to tell you what to write.**

Your teachers or others may in general *advise* you how to approach the task of writing an essay, but they may not tell you what to write, for then it becomes *their* essay and not *yours*.

- **Using someone else's exact words to express ideas, without enclosing them in quotation marks and acknowledging dependence.** When making a quotation from another person's work, you should acknowledge the source of the material by giving the author, the name of the book or article, and the page numbers.

This rule needs to be applied with some common sense. There are not many different ways to say some things. Just because a textbook says "Mars is the fourth planet from the sun," it does not follow that if you choose to make this statement in your research paper, you must either put it in quotation marks or find some other way of saying it, such as "Mars is between the third and the fifth planet from the sun." But if you read some striking and engaging way

of saying something, you should give the author credit for it by acknowledging your source, and putting it in quotation marks.

You should not use too many quotations in an essay, simply because the teacher/examiner wants *your* answer to the question, not a collection of quotations from other people's answers. Don't drop in strings of quotations unless they are evidence for your position or unless they are evidence from a passage you are subjecting to detailed criticism.

Some students include endless quotations from outside sources, and themselves provide enough original text only to tie together the quotations. Sometimes even that is not done well. This seems to be particularly tempting in Theory of Knowledge essays. You have to provide some evidence that you actually have actually thought about and understood the points made in your sources. You should summarise and paraphrase your sources wherever possible. This demonstrates your understanding of the issues.

For the same reason, you should not deliberately "borrow" entire paragraphs. Your quotations should be brief.

- **Failing to indicate the origins of an idea which is not common knowledge and not in general circulation.** A paraphrase of another person's ideas should also be shown by an acknowledgement. If the idea can be found in a score of textbooks, or could be elicited from a significant section of the population if asked the appropriate question, then it needs no citation.

Ideas are not private property, and should not be treated as such. Once they have been publicised, they have become part of the ongoing process of building up a store of human knowledge, to be acquired by each generation of students in their turn. But what is not common knowledge needs to be identified.

This rule also needs to be applied with common sense. What is common knowledge among physics students many not be common knowledge among students (and teachers) who have never been physics students. This issue arises in its most difficult form in connection with the Theory of Knowledge essay, where students, teachers and examiners alike may be dealing with issues outside their areas of expertise.

The best policy is to be overcautious and cite sources whenever you are in doubt as to whether it is necessary or not.