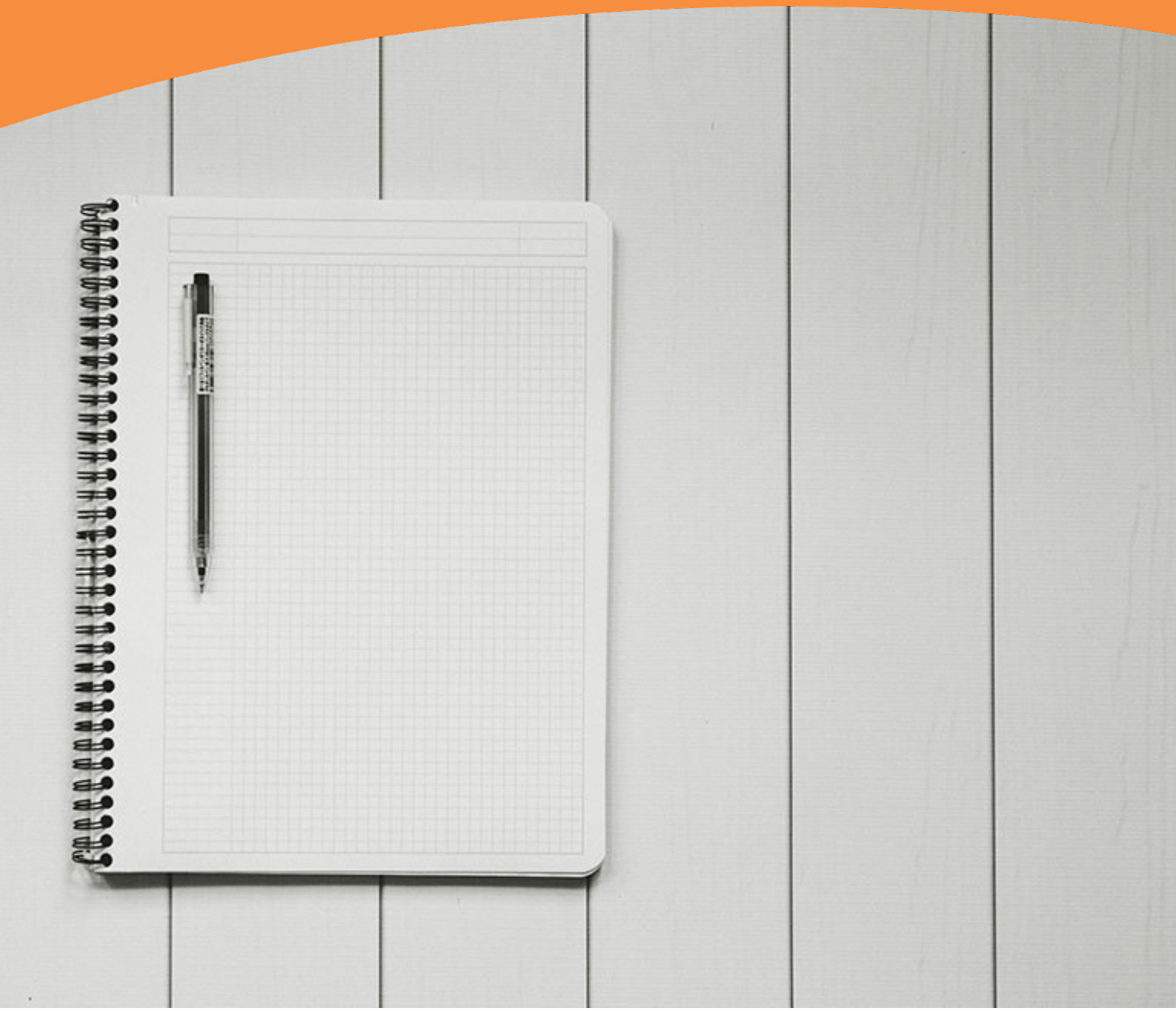
Writing winning essays

Essential tips and techniques to obtain top grades

Patrick Forsyth



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PATRICK FORSYTH

WRITING WINNING ESSAYS

ESSENTIAL TIPS AND TECHNIQUES TO OBTAIN TOP GRADES

Writing winning essays: Essential tips and techniques to obtain top grades
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer ("Professional Marketing") commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of several titles including "Your boss: sorted!" and "How to get a pay rise". His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full)* and light-hearted travel writing: *First class at last!* about a journey through South East Asia, and *Smile because it happened* about Thailand. His novel, *Long Overdue,* was published recently.

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THANKS

The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of two people whose advice and experience were invaluable in the writing of this book. First, **Jacqueline Connelly** who has a wealth of experience of universities. She has a BA (Hons) and an MA from Lancaster University, and has worked both there and at the University of Kent in research management. She is the co-author of *The Study Skills Guide* (Kogan Page). Secondly, **Mark Connelly**, who is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Kent and the author of many academic books and articles. His experience with both the subject and students informed the project and allowed it to reflect the real questions and concerns typically expressed by students getting to grips with the university environment and the challenge of essay writing.

INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS SUCCESSFUL GRADUATION

The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary.

– Vidal Sassoon

This book is designed to provide practical advice that is manageable to implement and which will make it more likely that you will graduate successfully. The focus is narrow and specific. It is on the effective writing of essays that forms such an important task during so many courses and also in the exams that go with them, indeed which can be a major influence on results and grades.

If you are reading this you are likely approaching or have just taken a big step: you have left school behind and moved into higher education. If so then however you got there, and it may not have been straight from school (maybe you are going back to education as a mature student in the middle of your career or after a spell in work), it is doubtless an achievement. You got the necessary results and you were accepted onto a course at a higher education institution with the intention of getting a formal qualification.

If you are at this stage (and the message here could be useful ahead of this for those approaching it), then make no mistake, you may face changes, but you are also presented with a major opportunity. Yes, major: *higher education is the life and career equivalent of an open goal.* But it does not just happen; and here is a key question to ask: will you graduate successfully and with the degree classification that you want?

There is every likelihood that you will; but essay writing may be a key activity influencing what happens. This book aims to streamline the process of essay writing: to kick-start you into a new, effective and appropriate way of preparing and executing written work that will help make it easier and increase your chances of success both day by day and in terms of your ultimate graduation. This applies whatever the nature of what you study.

The approaches reviewed here are all necessary, practical and manageable. What may initially seem in some ways simple can be problematical, so taking your essay writing seriously is important for several reasons:

- Primarily, essay writing and all that it involves is essential for developing a range of academic skills that you will need to succeed in your course;
- Good, well-marked essays provide the stepping stones that take you towards a good result, a degree or qualification;
- Writing your essay in a serious and thus systematic way, one designed to accurately reflect the brief and score good marks, will also allow you to complete the task more quickly than will an ad hoc approach
- Essay writing also has a direct effect on learning. Psychologists tell us that learning is reinforced and made more permanent if things are written down; the act of writing actually prompts the brain to remember and do so more easily. If your studies demand the storing of facts and information then this is a useful side effect of essay writing, and of the research and preparation that proceeds it;
- The skills that make for good essay writing can also form the basis of more broad based writing skills that are useful in a whole variety of ways, both during your course and beyond in the wider world, not least in terms of your career.

Getting on top of the whole study process is vital. Keep up to date, maximise the use of your time, work in an effective and disciplined way and you will work successfully and have time for the other things you want to do. Get behind, or waste time and catching up becomes difficult, achieving the results you want becomes less likely and the problem escalates as time available to catch up is limited; there will also be a real clash between work and your social or home life. Good essay writing technique is an important part of this whole process and getting on top of that can help disproportionately in your search for good grades.

Note: Effective writing is not solely a necessary exercise to be done as part of study, it is a career skill: one worth cultivating because it can help you towards good grades and then form the foundation of a skill much valued in the workplace. I remember seeing a headline, big, bold and top of the front page on the *Daily Telegraph.* It read *PUPILS WILL LOSE MARKS FOR POOR GRAMMAR AND SPELLING.* In the following article the Chairman of Marks & Spencer was quoted as suggesting that too many of those applying for jobs "are not fit for work". Along with adequate numeracy, communications skills, including writing skills, was high in the list of what he meant. If you want a prediction it seems to me that the headline just quoted may well mark a turning point: such things are likely to grow in importance across education as a whole. So be warned, and note too that grammar and spelling is just one small part of what is necessary if you are to write a good essay – as we will see.

This book aims to smooth the path. Whether you are just starting, or indeed are a little way down the track, the lessons here can assist you achieve what you want; and increase the likelihood that you can excel.

How to use this book

To get the best from reading this book it is worth keeping pen and paper close at hand:

- Note when anything mentioned seems to have direct application for you
- Record specific action you will take (even if this is simply to consider something further)
- Watch for "Action boxes" within the text; these are designed to help point the way, creating links to your own situation
- Make notes as you go through the text. There could be a good many points to action: have a notebook to hand.
- Make the book "yours", that is by adding notes, coupled perhaps with highlighting key parts of the text, turn the book into your personal guide to the task ahead, one that will be useful throughout your course.

Act now! Be warned: time starts to go quickly once you are into further education, and there are many distractions, some constructive, others not. There is a line written by John Lennon which says that life is what happens while you are busy making other plans. It's a sobering thought. It is all too easy to find you are a substantial way through your chosen course and lagging behind what you intended, indeed emergency remedial action midway can – even if it is effective - rapidly dilute the satisfaction to be gained from the whole process. A little time spent now will ensure that your first thought on graduation day does not start with the words, *If only…*

So let's see how you can work smarter, not harder, and make your essay writing skills a real asset now and in the future.

1 THE NATURE AND ROLE OF THE ACADEMIC ESSAY

What is an essay?

Most further and higher education courses will require you to write essays. Indeed if you are reading this book then presumably yours does too. Such essays are likely to be the most significant individual piece of work you will have attempted in your education to date. Essays are significant in:

- Their length; an essay is unlikely to be less than 1,500 words and may be as much as 2,500. Some courses allow 'double essays' of up to 5,000 words;
- The time required to complete them;
- The outcome; the grade you receive is likely to contribute to the final outcome of your course, and finally, most importantly;
- *The intellectual application required*.

Essays are not, therefore, something that you will be able to do well without considerable planning and preparation.

As essay is a piece of writing which attempts to explore a particular topic in detail. It is not the only form of writing that does this. You could consider that newspaper and magazine articles, and guidebooks, to name but two, also have the same purpose. However, three things distinguish the essay from other writing forms, and these are:

1. An essay is a formal piece of writing and as such it has certain **conventions**. Many of these will be implicit and not be spelled out in detail by your lecturers; you will be expected to be aware of them. It is critically important that you understand this. You are not being asked to jot down your personal views in any ad hoc way, but to demonstrate your knowledge and skills in a very specific way.
2. Even more importantly, an essay, at least in the context that we are discussing in this book, is a piece of **assessed** coursework. It is a way for your lecturers to judge your progress and understanding – and to give you a grade or mark accordingly. You will be writing it in response to a particular question set for you (or, usually, a list of questions from which you will select one), not randomly, but very carefully to test your knowledge and skills.
3. As well as being used to assess you, your lecturers use writing essays to **develop your academic skills**. Writing an essay will develop your skills by allowing you to:
    - Explore a particular topic in great detail (much greater than lectures or seminars allow);
    - Consider the academic debate on the subject;
    - Reflect on this debate and the facts you uncover to develop your own views;
    - Improve your reading and writing skills.

Below, we shall consider each of these points in a little more detail. However, before we do so it is important that you understand what an essay represents for you. It is an **opportunity**; an opportunity for you to display the extent of your understanding of the subject, the breadth and depth of your background research and your command of the wider subject matter.

On the other hand nothing will expose your lack of knowledge more completely than a poor essay. Nothing in this book is going to help you write a good essay if you haven't done the appropriate background research first (see Chapter 3 for advice on how to approach this). What this book can do is help you understand what is required of you, how to go about this research, and how to put your essay together to meet the expectations.

Essay conventions

Like many forms of specialist writing, essay writing has a set of conventions that you need to follow when completing your coursework. Failing to follow these conventions will have implications not just on the grade you will receive, but on how you and your abilities are perceived, and perhaps most importantly, on the extent to which you develop your own academic skills through the essay writing process. These conventions include:

1. Formal language and presentation

The style of writing you need to use for essays, and other academic writing, is very different from that you use elsewhere. It is much more formal than emails and letters. This means that you must:

- Avoid slang, colloquial terms, clichés and abbreviations (this means not using "they're" and "weren't" or such terms as "e.g." and "i.e.")
- Use full sentences; bullet point lists are not acceptable for essays (as distinct from a book like this where such things are almost mandatory to ensure a quick and easy read for busy people)
- Use correct grammar and spelling. This is important. You will not impress your lecturers if you misspell key technical information in your field. Poor grammar and spelling are inexcusable and give an overall sloppy impression
- Avoid the use of "I". Instead use phrases such as "As has been demonstrated above…", "The next point to consider is…" and so on;
- Avoid subjective language such as "excellent", "awful", "bad", "pretty" and so on. Try to be objective in your writing.

Almost all essays are written using a computer which certainly makes it easier to present it well; so with several years of writing ahead it may be worth working on speeding up your typing skills. Detail is important, you should:

- Avoid using a variety of different fonts, sizes and styles throughout which looks messy and can be hard to read
- Use bold, italics and underlining to highlight headings (if used) or key points only where necessary, and avoid overusing these
- Most importantly, make sure you follow any guidance from your lecturer about how they want the essay presented.

2. A clear line of argument, which develops through the piece

Your essay will address a question or topic, usually set by your lecturers. You need not just do research and summarise the disparate views on the topic, but rather develop and set out your own understanding and opinion. Your essay should then develop your argument progressively, through both its structure and content, with a logical line of reasoning and clear conclusions.

At this point is also worth stressing the importance of relevance. Your essay must:

- Cover what is required
- Be without irrelevant content or digression.

Comprehensiveness is *never* an objective. If an essay touched on absolutely everything then it would certainly be too long. In fact, you always have to be selective, if you do not say everything, then everything you do say is a choice - you need to make good content choices, and this is one of the skills you need to develop.

3. Use of evidence to support your argument

At university level it is insufficient to simply state your opinion, or even that of others. Thus:

- The statements you make in your essays need to be evidenced through referencing other material;
- You will be unable to make a persuasive case or even to answer the question without using material from lectures, books, journal articles, websites and other sources;
- You will need to evaluate and assess this evidence as part of developing your argument;
- You must show that you understand there are other ways to interpret the evidence and try to demonstrate where there are weaknesses in them;
- Be honest: if there are gaps or weaknesses in your own line of reasoning, you must use evidence to show why you still think your conclusions are appropriate.

4. Clear references

In all essays you need to show the precise source of the information, arguments and ideas you use. This is true whether or not you quote directly from the other work. University level study demands that you develop your own ideas and critical thinking. It is fundamental to this that you do not try to pass off other people's ideas and arguments as your own (doing this is called plagiarism, see box). Therefore the convention of referencing is used to show where the ideas come from. References should be used when you quote directly from, paraphrase, or even just rely on the information and ideas within another work.

There are other benefits to referencing too. It allows readers to refer back to the source themselves if they wish. (And it may be that other readers will interpret the same material differently from you). Using references like this is one way that you can make your essay persuasive; it shows that you have evidence to back up what you are saying. Using a wide range of well-chosen references will also demonstrate the thoroughness of your research.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism, or passing off someone else's work as your own, is a major offence (and may also involve breach of copyright and copyright law). It includes:

- Quoting or paraphrasing another person's work without acknowledgement
- Using ideas or arguments developed by another without acknowledgement.

Plagiarism is likely to lead to you receiving a zero for the particular essay involved and, if you persist, it could even mean that you are not allowed to continue your course. Lecturers are used to identifying plagiarism in student coursework, however cleverly it is disguised. Many universities require electronic copies of essays to be submitted so that they can be subjected to plagiarism detection software.

You *will* be caught. Don't even think about it!

ACTION: to make sure you can reference other works accurately, and avoid plagiarism, it is important that you keep good notes as you research. As you will need to study a wide range of material you will quickly lose track of which ideas came from where if you are not careful.

5. Structure

Within these broadly applicable conventions different subjects have different models for essay writing, especially in the sciences. Here is an example essay structure which would be appropriate for most other subjects.

Example essay structure

1. *Title:* The essay title is a key part of the essay itself. Make sure you understand and stick to the question asked.
2. *Introduction:* Explore the essay question or title, make your line of argument clear, summarise your conclusion and state briefly the evidence you are going to examine to demonstrate this.
3. *Main part of essay:* Here you develop your argument. Break different ideas down into paragraphs, making sure there is a logical sequence from each one to the next, and that overall a persuasive line of reasoning is developed.
4. *Conclusion:* summarise the main ideas in your essay (don't introduce any new ideas at this stage), clearly stating your own conclusions, and showing why these are important.
5. *References:* References may be in the form of footnotes throughout the essay, or endnotes as suggested by this example structure.
6. *Bibliography:* don't make the mistake of thinking this is an extra or add-on section. The bibliography is a core part of the essay. Here you should list:

    - all the books, journal articles and other evidence you have consulted in answering the question, even those that you have not taken references from;
    - the full bibliographic details of each piece in the same format as you have done for references. Order the bibliography alphabetically, using the surname of the author.

And beware: do not be tempted to include items that you have not referred to – their content, when compared to your essay, may make it clear that you are bluffing.

6. Word Limit

Whatever type of coursework you are doing there will be a word limit. If a lecturer asks for 2,000 words it is because they believe that will allow you to do justice to the subject. Delivering 1,000 or 5,000 is not likely to be well regarded. Keeping to the word limit is one of the skills that essay writing is designed to test you on. You are not, of course, expected to hit the word limit exactly and you can work on the basis of about 10 per cent or so leeway either way, though this can vary somewhat and it is useful to check. Again, this will become easier with practice and may well be largely instinctive after a number of essays.

The essay as assessed coursework

The final grade you will receive for your course is likely to be determined by both examination and coursework. This means that each essay you write will have an impact on this outcome; so it is worth taking the time and trouble to get it as good as you can. You need to plan carefully in advance of each essay to ensure that:

- You make available the required time (taking lectures, seminars and other classes, as well as other coursework that you may have into account)
- You have all the materials you need to hand when you need them (for example, this means that you need to check whether you will have to recall any essential books that may be out of the library a week or so before you plan to use them).

Who are you writing for?

As a student the essay you write is unlikely to have a wide audience. Its primary purpose is to meet the requirements of your course, and it will be read and assessed by your lecturer. Some essays will be looked at by a second marker, or the external examiner, but all do so with the same purpose in mind: to assess your progress and see how well you have interpreted and answered the question. This will allow them to give you a mark that will feed into your final grade. You may share draft or completed essays with friends (and some universities have essay banks), but you are not writing *for* them. Keep your audience and purpose in mind as you write.

Your lecturers will be looking for you to display particular academic skills through your essay, and the grade you receive will depend upon how well you do this. It is crucial that you understand what they are looking for at the start of your course and before you begin any essays. It is likely that there will be a handbook or something similar for your course or department which lays this out in detail; make sure that you familiarise yourself with it. As an example we include below the Essay Classification Descriptors from the Undergraduate Handbook of the School of History at the University of Kent.

Example Essay Classification Descriptors

90-100

Outstanding work, brilliantly demonstrating

- A superlative command of the secondary and, where appropriate, primary sources, showing outstanding breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding
- A deep understanding of key concepts
- An exceptional ability to organise, develop and express ideas and arguments in an eloquent and sophisticated manner
- An outstanding capacity for critical analysis and insights
- Striking and sustained originality in argument

- Outstanding ability to engage with, and where appropriate contest, the terms of a question
- Excellent punctuation and spelling
- Immaculate citations and bibliography.

80-89

Exceptional work, impressively demonstrating

- A comprehensive command of secondary and, where appropriate, primary sources, showing exceptional breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding
- An impressive mastery of key concepts
- Impressive ability to organise, develop and express ideas and arguments in a lucid and sophisticated manner
- Highly developed capacity for critical analysis and insights
- Sustained originality in argument
- Impressive ability to see where a question may be problematical
- Excellent punctuation and spelling
- Immaculate citations and bibliography.

70-79

Excellent work, consistently demonstrating

- A thorough command of secondary and, where appropriate, primary sources, showing breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding
- An mastery of key concepts
- An excellent ability to organise, develop and express ideas and arguments in a lucid and sophisticated manner
- Strong capacity for critical analysis and insights
- Some originality in argument
- Ability to see where a question may be problematical
- Excellent punctuation and spelling
- Exactitude citations and bibliography.

60-69

Sound work, demonstrating

- A command of the major secondary and, where appropriate, primary sources, showing some breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding
- An awareness of some key concepts
- An reasonable ability to organise, develop and express relevant ideas and arguments
- Well-structured argument in response to the question
- Clear and grammatically accurate writing
- Reasonably correct citations and bibliography.

50-59

Satisfactory work, demonstrating

- Some partial engagement with the major secondary and, where appropriate, primary sources, indicating adequate knowledge and understanding
- A limited awareness of some key concepts
- A partial ability to organise, develop and express relevant ideas and arguments
- An argument (often descriptive and sometimes lacking focus) in response to the question
- Writing clear and correct enough for comprehension despite some errors in punctuation, spelling or syntax
- Fairly regularly incorrect citations and bibliography.

40-49
Weak essays, demonstrating

- Limited engagement with the major secondary and, where appropriate, primary sources, with poor knowledge and understanding
- A very limited awareness of some key concepts
- Sketchiness in response to the question or topic
- Lack of clear focus or direction
- Poor grammar, mispunctuation and/or misuse of words
- Weak use of citations and bibliography.

30-39
Unsatisfactory essays, demonstrating

- Only superficial acquaintance with secondary and, where appropriate, primary sources
- Far less than the expected length
- Lack of coherence in the argument
- Writing rendered nonsensical by errors.

I am grateful to the School of History at the University of Kent for permission to use this text.

We shall consider *how* you display these skills in subsequent chapters of this book. However, at this point, it is important to remember that, unless you are studying in this particular department, these are only an example. They are included here to show the kinds of skills that your lecturers will be looking for and to underline the existence of such a document. You need to find the relevant guidelines for your own course and make yourself familiar with them.

Developing your academic skills through essay writing

At the start of this chapter we consider how significant a piece of work each essay is. This might mean that the process of writing one is daunting for you. However, even if this is so essay writing is a crucial part of your university learning. You are not required to write essays only to allow your lecturers to assess you, but because it is through the process of researching, drafting and finalising an essay that you will develop the academic skills that you need to complete your programme successfully. Before we consider the skills that essay writing will help develop, let's think about the support that you can get.

Getting support from lecturers

Your lecturers do not set essays to enjoy watching you suffer. They will be only too pleased to help you if you ask. Don't approach them simply to moan about the volume of work, or the imminence of an impending deadline, especially if the problem is down to your poor planning and time management. However, you will find excellent support from them with things like:

- Identifying the best way to tackle a problem or piece of coursework from a range of options you present;
- Reviewing an early draft
- Checking your writing style is appropriate
- Discussing ideas and questions for essays
- Giving added guidance about suitable reading material.

But you should keep in mind that university is not about spoon-feeding you answers. If that happened, you would not improve your own, independent thinking and analytical skills. What lecturers want to see is that you have been grappling with the issues and now need a bit of advice on the next step.

When you receive your essay back you are likely to have not just a mark, but a cover sheet with a few comments on, detailing the strengths and weaknesses of your essay (more of this anon). In addition to this feedback many lecturers will have specific times when they are available to meet and discuss essays. Don't miss this excellent opportunity for input directly tailored to your work. At such a session:

- Make sure that you understand each comment being made;
- Seek clarification where necessary;
- Ask which were the strong and weak parts of the essay;
- Use their feedback to make sure that you write a better essay next time.

As was stated above there are four particular skills that essay writing will help you develop and we shall now look at each in turn:

1. *Exploring a particular topic in great detail*
   One of the characteristic things about university level study is the breath and volume of material that you will cover. For example, if you are studying English Literature you may be undertaking four different modules at any one time, each of which requires a novel (sometimes a very substantial one) or equivalent to be read each week. You might have one lecture and one seminar on any particular topic. You get a flavour for it, and begin to understand how each topic fits together, but not the opportunity to dig deeper into something that may interest you. The essay gives you just this opportunity. Usually you will be given a list of essay questions to choose from, however it is worth noting here that wherever possible you should choose a question in which you are interested. Writing an essay is a significant piece of work, and if you can do it on a topic that interests you so much the better.

   The original material, texts or artefacts about the topic are known as the "primary sources". To continue the English Literature example this would be the novels, plays or other literature; for History of Arts it would be paintings, sculptures and so on as well as the personal papers of artists.

   You may find that you do not deal directly with primary sources, but this will be largely dependent on your subject. If you are studying Archaeology then the primary sources may be artefacts from a Roman villa now on display at a museum in Florence! However, if you are studying for a degree in some form of Literature then the primary sources are readily available and you will study them directly. Students in History of Arts may not be able to gain direct access to all of the relevant artistic works, but they will be able to view very high quality reproductions. In many subjects you will

be required to engage more directly with primary sources in your final year of study and where necessary the relevant materials will be provided.

Whether you engage with the primary sources directly or not, you will need to show a good awareness of the variety of primary sources and their content. However, looking at this material alone is not sufficient; which leads on to the next point.

2. *Consider the academic debate on the subject*
   The academic debate on a topic is known as the "secondary sources" (see box below). These are the subsequent studies of the primary sources carried out by academics, and will help you understand the primary sources themselves. These academics won't always agree on their interpretation of the primary sources. For example, one academic may think that one primary source is much older and more significant than another. Or there may be a fundamental disagreement about how to interpret a primary source. Writing an essay will require you to become familiar with this debate. Often the debate will have taken place over many years, sometimes hundreds, and you will need to understand how the debate has developed and the its current status. You will need to identify whether or not there is any sort of consensus on an issue. You may find that particular academic scholars typify a strand of thinking within such a debate. Often these secondary sources will be listed on your bibliography (of which more later), and summarising their views and possibly quoting key passages will be important in your essay.

   As you consider the academic debate you may find scholars whose position you agree with, or others with whom you strongly disagree. And this leads us into the next skill being developed by essays, because in addition to an analysis of the primary and secondary sources your own opinion and line of argument needs to come through in your essays.

DEFINITION: Primary and secondary sources

Primary sources are the original materials upon which all interpretations and subsequent studies are based.

Secondary sources are the subsequent studies and interpretations by academics and other over the following years (sometimes many hundreds of years; it is not a primary source just because it is old).

Sources are many and varied and link appropriately to your chosen subject. For example for an English Literature student primary sources will include novels, poetry and other literature. For a History student they will include diaries, letters and government papers.

3. *Reflect on this debate and the facts you uncover to develop your own views*
   At University level your essays are expected not just to survey academic opinion but to begin to evaluate it and make judgements on it. Try to ensure that your essay:

   - Shows awareness of a range of opinions and arguments
   - Deals with these opinions and arguments in a balanced way
   - Details where there is room for debate or alternative explanations
   - Uses secondary sources and, where appropriate, primary sources
   - Has a firm conclusion: make clear which line of argument that you favour and give sound and convincing justification for this.

Note: remember that an essay is not a statement of your opinion; it is not a tweet, a blog or a fanzine. Whilst carefully researched and informed opinion should form part of your work, this must be within the formal constraints of the essay.

4. *Improve your reading and writing skills*
   Writing skills are considered in greater detail later, however reading skills are worth a mention here. You will need to read a large volume of material for any individual essay – the works on the lecturer's bibliography as a minimum. A student with poor reading skills will spend a great deal more time on this than a student with effective reading skills. These come only with practice, but you should be looking to:

   - Select which primary and secondary sources are relevant to your essay
   - Quickly identify which parts of the book or article are relevant to your topic (use your bibliography, index, chapter headings (if available) to help)
   - Do not be distracted by interesting material which is not relevant, instead make a note and come back to it later when time allows
   - Make photocopies of key sections or articles which you can annotate to highlight key parts and summarise themes
   - Make notes of the important points and key quotations and also the ideas that they prompt
   - Give yourself regular short breaks from reading to maintain concentration and focus and do not read when tired
   - Ensure that you understand what you read. If you do not and it is critical to your essay then make sure you clarify things with a lecturer or fellow student as soon as possible.

Some people can scan read – that is they can quickly look over a text and get a sense of the argument. This is not a requirement for essay preparation, but you should find that

with practice and increasing confidence in your subject matter that you are able to read and make notes on large volumes of written material with greater speed.

During your programme you will be expected to develop each of these academic skills noted above. Try to keep in mind that the essays and other tasks that form part of your course and assessments will have been designed to help you do just this.

2 A FIRM BASIS FOR SUCCESS

Next, an overall comment in a way that illustrates an important lesson.

USING CLEAR LANGUAGE

If you undertake to engender a totality of meaning which corresponds with the cognition of others seeking to intake a communication from the content you display in an essay there is a greater likelihood of results being less than you hope.

You are correct. That is not a good start. If I want to say: *if you write well, people will understand and be more likely to mark you accordingly* - then I should say just that. But it makes a good point with which to start this section. Language and how you use it matter. Exactly how you express things has a direct bearing on how they are received; and that in turn has a direct bearing on how well your essays will read and how they will be marked.

Make no mistake habit, and the ongoing pressure of work, can combine to push people into writing on "automatic pilot". Sometimes, if you critique something that you wrote you can clearly see something that is wrong. A sentence does not make sense, a point fails to get across or a description confuses rather than clarifies. Usually the reason that this has occurred is not that you really thought this was the best sentence or phrase and got it wrong. Rather it was because there was inadequate thought of any sort - or none at all as you rushed.

It is clear language that makes a difference. But this is a serious understatement; language can make a very considerable difference. And it can make a difference in many different ways, as we intend to show. Think of text you must read. What makes something good or bad, easy to read or hard work? It might help consider the next section here to look at an example and make a list. Certainly matters like using the right words, arrangement of words, grammar and punctuation and a straightforward approach all help.

The dangers

While the cause may lie in a hundred and one details the dangers of poor writing fall into four categories. What you write may be:

- Ambiguous, unclear and thus misunderstood; you may make a good point but it is unclear and unappreciated
- Difficult to read; something that makes concentration difficult and thus risks the message being diluted as the reader struggles to take it in

- Wrong; if grammar and syntax is incorrect this may lose you marks (in some subjects more than others) and if it is sufficiently bad it may lead to a lack of clarity
- Wrong and annoying; there are some linguistic inaccuracies that are not only noted as incorrect, but which produce a "Surely they know that" response that does extra harm (examples of such are flagged as we move on).

Note: an important point to note is that the danger here is cumulative. By that I mean that while one error may do no great damage (unless it prohibits understanding) the effect of several – or many – mount up, quickly creating a picture of ineffectiveness than can lose you marks.

So what must you bear in mind? First, remember that the kind of essay you are writing must always be born in mind; each type demands a particular linguistic style, but the following are general points that apply across the board.

Before we get to some examples of fine detail, we consider matters overall in terms of three broad intentions. You need to get it write (sic). Essay readers want documents to be understandable, readable and straightforward:

Understandable:

Once something is in writing any error that causes misunderstanding is made permanent, at least for a while. The necessity for clarity may seem to go without saying, though some, at least, of what one sees of prevailing standards suggests the opposite. It is all too easy to find everyday examples of wording that is less than clear. For example:

- A favourite is a sign seen in a hotel. On the inside of bedroom doors it reads, "In the interests of security bedroom doors must be locked before entering or leaving the room". A good trick if you can do it
- For a while there was a notice on London's Paddington station that read "Passengers must not leave their baggage unattended at any time or they will be taken away and destroyed". And, no, this does not mean gas chambers are hidden below Platform 7
- Or consider this example quoted in the national press recently. The item commented not on the facts that the company was attempting to put over, but quoted one sentence: saying that the company envisioned: "A world where economic activity is ubiquitous, unbounded by the traditional definitions of commerce and universal". Err, yes – or rather, no. The newspaper referred not to the content of the release, only to the fact that it contained a statement so wholly gobbledegook as to have no meaning at all. It is sad when the writing is so bad that it achieves less than nothing, and if a presumably carefully crafted document like a press release can be this inadequate then so can your essays.

All these are but a single sentence, yet they apparently cause problems. In the first example the sentence was written, printed and fixed to 256 doors and *still* no one noticed it was nonsense. If one sentence can be problematical then a full essay certainly can. You could doubtless extend such a list of examples extensively. The point here is clear: it is all too easy for the written word to fail. Such examples were probably the subject of some thought and checking; but not enough. Furthermore these are only a single sentence long; if that presents problems how much more so a complete essay. Put pen to paper and you step onto dangerous ground.

So, beyond the link to academic study the first requirement of good writing is clarity. A good essay needs thinking about (which is what a systematic approach to writing, which we describe later, allows, indeed prompts) if it is to be clear, and it should never be taken for granted that understanding will be automatically generated by what we write. Some of the factors that help clarity immensely include:

- Using the right words and arranging them in an order that makes your meaning clear
- Correct arrangement: such factors as the use of paragraphs, headings and sequence.

Readable:

Readability is difficult to define, but we all know it when we experience it. For instance:

- Your writing must flow
- One point must lead naturally to another
- The writing must strike the right tone
- You must inject a little variety
- Above all, there must be a logical, and visible, structure to carry the message along.

As well as a clear beginning, middle and end the technique of "signposting" - briefly flagging what is to come - helps in a practical sense to get the reader understanding where something is going. So you might use a phrase like: *In the next section I will deal with X, Y and Z;* then taking each in turn. It allows your lecturer to read on, content that the direction is sensible. It is difficult to overuse signposting and it can be utilised at several levels within the text, for instance to flag the nature of what is coming, say an example, as well as content.

Two factors that have considerable influence here are:

- Good punctuation
- Correct grammar.

We consider examples of both as we continue.

Straightforward:

In a word (or two) straightforward means simply put - follow the well-known acronym KISS - Keep It Simple, Stupid. The "KISS" principle means using short words where they are clearer than long, short phrases, sentences and paragraphs albeit amongst longer elements but enough to keep the reader proceeding easily. In the same way that saying "now" rather than "at this moment in time" is usually best, everything about your writing must be designed to make your essays straightforward.

Key to keeping writing simple is using:

- *Short words*: why *elucidate* something when you can *explain*? Why *reimbursements* rather than *expenses?* Similarly, although *experiment* and *test* do have slightly different meanings, in a general sense *test* may be better; or you could use *try*

- *Short phrases*: do not say *at this moment in time* when you mean *now*, or *respectfully acknowledge* something, a suggestion perhaps, when you can simply say *thank you for*
- *Short sentences*: having too many overlong sentences is a frequent characteristic of much poor writing from essays to business reports. Short ones are good. However, they should be mixed in with longer ones, or reading becomes rather like the action of a machine gun. Many student essays contain sentences that are overlong, often because they mix two rather different points. Break these into two and the overall readability improves
- *Short paragraphs*: Regular and appropriate breaks as your argument builds up do make for easy reading.

Note: Examples in the next section can also be related back to these three overall principles. Success here, let us be clear, comes from a number of details, and, while this is not intended as a comprehensive guide to writing and grammar, here we highlight a good number of points. Nothing here is intellectually taxing, but you need to note areas and approaches that you want to avoid or deploy and develop the good writing habits that make better writing a reflex.

DETAIL THAT MAKES FOR GOOD WRITING

Some of the detail now highlighted makes an individual point, other guidelines affect your whole text; all are important and all can make a difference. This list may well lead you to further investigation and certainly suggests that some checking as you go may be advisable.

ACTION: Any student needing to write essays should have a guide to grammar and writing style to hand (something like Bloomsbury's "Good Word Guide") and make a point of consulting it when necessary. Doing so only takes a few seconds and the lessons will gradually stick reducing the number of times you need to check.

Spelling

Make no mistake, accurate spelling matters and we are not all perfect at it. It is worth the time and trouble of checking to get it right. Be careful with the spell checker facility on your computer; it will not highlight mistakes that involve one word being written instead of another (check/cheque or write/right and similar) and care is also necessary over matters such as proper names. A dictionary is clearly useful as perhaps is a reference that will enable

you to take in common errors and is not too much of a chore to read. A good example of such a book is Bill Bryson's *Troublesome Words* (Penguin).

Never forget that as examinations are normally handwritten, there is no computer spell checker to hand, and any necessary improvement to your spelling ahead of exams will clearly make you better able to submit the quality of work you want.

ACTION: resolve to develop the habit of spell checking everything you type, even draft documents you may think do not need it. Not only will this make sure that you do not neglect it when it does matter, but also if you have blind spots then repeatedly seeing a word corrected will help you remember its right form. This is important because hand writing an exam essay allows no such check to be made.

Punctuation

This matters too, not just because it should be correct, but because a well punctuated piece of text is inherently more readable, and less subject to ambiguity, than one that is not: too little is exhausting to read, especially coupled with long sentences. Too much punctuation can seem affected and awkward. Certain rules do matter here, but the simplest guide is

probably breathing. We learn to punctuate speech long before we write anything, so in writing all that is really necessary is a conscious inclusion of the pauses. If you are not sure about this just read what you write out loud – if you find it uncomfortable or run out of breath then you need more punctuation. The length of pause and the nature of what is being said indicate the likely solution. In some ways too much is better than not enough. Particular points to note are:

- *The full stop:* this ends a sentence. So if you write sentences that goes on for too long (and breathing will tell you) then you need more of them
- *The comma:* this helps define clauses (simply that's part of a sentence) and separate out elements that need to stand out on their own. In such a case, to explain further, a comma is necessary before and after the separated text (as in this sentence)
- *The semicolon:* this introduces a longer break than a comma and is particularly used to highlight a change of nuance or contrast between clauses; just like this
- *The colon:* provides a fraction longer pause than a semicolon and is used to introduce a list or a quotation. It also makes clear when something is the result of something else or explains it. Thus – punctuation is important: it influence the quality of your writing
- *Brackets or dashes:* most often these are used to separate something that adds a note of explanation or gives an example (thus keeping it separate from the main text of a sentence)
- *One dash:* this is a longer pause then any so far and is most often used to lead to something that must be given a separate emphasis, rather in the way of a punch line for a joke – boom, boom
- *The question mark:* is perhaps an obvious one; it replaces a full stop when the sentence poses a question, which may be actual or rhetorical. See?
- *The explanation mark:* an easy one to overuse or use inappropriately. An explanation mark adds emphasis, for instance producing a shout. It can be regarded as a weakness in that it may be used as a substitute for the more powerful, descriptive language that should feature in your essays. Take note!
- *The apostrophe:* this is renowned for its misuse (the phrase the "greengrocer's apostrophe" has entered the language. It is not "Orange's fifty pence"). The apostrophe indicates procession as in "Patrick's computer" or "students' computers"; the latter positioning of the apostrophe after the letter s being when the plural is involved – more than one student, in this case. Another use is the intentional omission of a letter as in "let's" meaning "let us". Because this is so often misused and its misuse so often commented on, it is very much one to get right
- *Headings:* a comment about this fits in here because a heading also prompts a pause and indicates a significant change of topic. Headings also affect the look of a page and some documents need to look easy to read and accessible.

Making up the page

Even the densest text is normally broken up into paragraphs, what the dictionary calls a section of the text. The practice in recent years has become to use shorter paragraphs than in the past, certainly very long ones can seem daunting. There is no definitive rule for the structure of paragraphs, but they need to focus on a discreet issue; when the topic moves on you need to start a new paragraph. If complexity is involved within a single paragraph then they need a beginning, middle and end to keep them well ordered and clear. Then the first sentence should make it clear that something new is being said, the middle sentences explain it and the last links on to the next paragraph and the next part of the essay. Short paragraphs being recommended it should perhaps be noted that there is virtually no minimum length for a paragraph, indeed an ultra-brief one adds emphasis.

Brevity in this context really does make something stand out.

See?

The overall rule, one avoiding a style that can cause problems, is that if you are in doubt about when to move to a new paragraph then err on the side of more paragraphs rather than fewer. The units within the paragraph are the sentence and the clause. In more complex sentences there may be several clauses and these may be different in form:

> It is clear *that a sentence must read well.* (This sentence has a noun clause providing a subject for the sentence)
> The sentence *that John wrote* did read well. (Here an adjective clause describes who wrote the sentence)
> John wrote the sentence *as he sat at his desk.* (An adverbial clause complements the verb, telling about the circumstances of his writing).

Grammar

Certain things can jar; and you should be particularly careful to avoid things that examiners and lecturers will notice and dislike. To give an immediate example, *less* and *fewer* are often confused: one refers to quantity the other (fewer) to numbers. In addition, in correct usage less tends to go with singular nouns (less money), and fewer with plural ones (fewer students). Some mistakes are very obvious; other things you may need to check and get into the habit of either using or not using as appropriate.

Grammar is a huge topic, one that you may feel stands some more elaborate study, and we can only give examples of the kind of thing needed here. We approach this primarily by listing examples in terms of what to avoid. First let us note that some rules are meant to be broken, or more accurately some "rules" are now archaic. Certainly the main thing is that what you write reads well. As the writer Keith Waterhouse said in a book on language: *If, after all this advice, a sentence still reads awkwardly, then what you have there is an awkward sentence. Demolish it and start again.* For example, one example of archaic rules are those that forbid starting a sentence with the words *and* or *but*. Maybe years ago this rule was the norm. But it is not so today. And besides it can, provided it is not overused, create writing that does read well. But be careful; some such practice is adopted more slowly in academic circles and more than one lecturer still regards this as a rule not to break. Perhaps the moral is if in doubt check, or adopt the more formal alternative.

That said, here are some examples of things to take care over:

- *Split infinitives:* the most famous of these comes from the title sequence of "Star Trek" – *to boldly go* rather than to *go boldly*
- These days split infinitives seem more tolerated, but it is not something to overuse

- *Adverbs:* Some incorrect use here can throw pedantic tutors into fury. For example "hopefully" is often used ungrammatically. *Hopefully we will write well.* Here it is a self-functioning statement and should be written as *It is to be hoped that …* or *I hope*
- *Word order:* sometimes an ill chosen order gives the wrong impression. *Having worked through the night, the essay was finished on time.* It is not the essay that worked late, but rather the writer
- *It:* the word it can be loosely used in a way that causes problems. A famous example is - *If the baby does not thrive on raw milk, boil it.* Clearly the word it here refers to the milk not the baby, but this could be better expressed. Another danger is that of distance. Something is referred too, discussed at length perhaps, and then some sentences later a new sentence starts *It is …* but so long after the original thought that it is then not clear what is referred to by the word it
- *Double negatives:* sentence like – *I cannot believe that there may not be a problem here* – simply begs the question – is there a problem or not? An area for some care
- *Incorrect and annoying:* some things, for whatever reason, are both wrong and annoying. A good example of this is the use of the word unique. Unique means unlike anything else and so you must not write "very unique" or "rather unique"
- T*autology:* (this means unnecessary repetition) of which the classic example is people who say "I, myself personally" and is to be avoided. Do not *export overseas,* simply export, do not indulge in *forward planning,* simply plan
- *Oxymoron:* (word combinations that are contradictory) may sound silly - *distinctly foggy* - or may have become current good ways of expressing something - *deafening silence.* Some sentences can cause similar problems of contradiction - *"I never make predictions; and I never will".*

This is necessarily a disparate group of points chosen intentionally to span the range of things that are important and can assist you make your writing score points. The action box below sets out a sensible approach to making regular improvements.

ACTION: it is useful to actively develop habits about such things as grammar and punctuation. Try to take note of things you discover you do and do out of habit and should not do, so that when you see yourself doing that it triggers a response, and a change, if you even start to write a particular thing. Similar if you make a note of things you do want to adopt you will begin to deploy them as a reflex.

Word use

Choice of words should be made with care, both to achieve simple accuracy and make the precise point you want; inappropriate choice can change both meaning and tone. Two aspects are important and go beyond a single word:

1. *Using the right words*: for example
    - Is your work on an essay *continuous* (unbroken or uninterrupted) or *continual* (repeated or recurring) – unless you never sleep it is likely to be the latter
    - *Scarce* and *rare* do not mean the same thing: scarce is applied to something for the moment difficult to obtain, rare implies that there never were very many of something
    - Are you *uninterested* in a proposal or *disinterested* in it? The first implies you are apathetic and care not either way, the latter means you have nothing to gain from it
    - Similarly *dissatisfied* and *unsatisfied* should not be confused. The first means disappointed and the second needing more of something
    - *Fortuitous* implies something happening accidentally; it does not mean fortunate
    - If something is *practical* then it is effective, if something is *practicable* it is merely possible to do, and *pragmatic* is something meant to be effective (rather than proven to be so).

2. *Selecting and arranging words to ensure your meaning is clear:* for example
    - Saying - *At this stage, the case is* ...- implies that later it will be something else when this might not be intended
    - Saying: *After working late into the night, the essay will be with you this afternoon,* seems to imply (because of the sequence and arrangement of words) that it is the essay that was working late.

Note: take care with words relating to such areas as ethnicity and religion, those that cause offense seem to change very regularly.

Linked to words is the need not to have too many; to be succinct. You want your argument or information to be described clearly. Of course the content of your essays may be anything but simple, but it needs describing without undue wandering before you find the right words. This thought should be linked to the overall length of an essay. Most often you will receive clear guidance, or clear instruction. If you are asked to write 2000 words you want those words to express the content well; poor word choice can have you wandering so much that the total essay fails to contain sufficient substance.

ACTION: always respect the word count (extent) that is given to you. It is courteous and efficient to do so and writing 3000 words rather than 2000 is more likely to annoy a tutor rather than score you extra marks.

The important thing here is to have the appropriate level of detail; avoiding unnecessary complexity and jargon while dealing fully with the intricacies of the subject in simple language is a skill to work on.

Do not underestimate the contribution to a successful piece of writing that careful, correct language can make. I will resist digressing at further length about grammar and correctness, as has been said other references may be useful here; but I do intend these examples should make a valuable and easily overlooked point about the appropriate use of language: think on and write right. Before moving on to the next topic it is worth adding a word about style.

Personal style

Two points are worth making here. First do not show off and write in a way that seeks to add substance in a way that actually does the reverse. Avoid, for example:

- Unexplained jargon, it can just confuse
- Making things unnecessarily complex; even a word chosen ignoring a simpler and more appropriate one may dilute your style and give the wrong impression; for instance – eat/consume, say/communicate, show/demonstrate. An essay may be complex, of course, necessarily so; the point here is not to make any particular pieces of text *unnecessarily* complicated
- Unnecessary foreign words and phrases
- Abbreviations, especially those that are or verge on slang (so an invitation not an "invite")
- Idiom that make sense only to a specific small group (especially one a tutor is unlikely to be in); this applies to age groups and nationalities for instance
- Words or expressions out of time; by this we need that words and phrases have a life cycle and something new, just coming into use, may be misunderstood and something old fashioned may be misunderstood or be so overused as to have become weak and meaningless
- "Tabloid" language in which everything is dramatised and exaggerated: prices *soar* and shares *crash,* minor mishaps become *nightmares* or *disasters* and so on.

Note: the inherent formality of an essay (as described previously) will provide a barrier that helps avoid errors such as those above.

And … a word about humour; perhaps this should simply be a note to avoid it too, but as there could be some exceptions let's say it is something to be approached with great care. Nothing creates a wrong note more quickly than ineffective or inappropriate humour.

Secondly, most people have, or develop, a way of writing that includes stylistic things they simply like. Why not indeed? For example, although the rule books now say they are simply alternatives, some people think that to say: *First,... secondly... and thirdly...*, has much more elegance than beginning: *Firstly...* The reason why matters less than achieving a consistent effect you feel is right.

It would be a duller world if we all did everything the same way and writing is no exception. There is no harm in using some things for no better reason than that you like them. It is likely to add variety to your writing, and make it seem distinctively different from that of other people, which may itself be useful.

Certainly, and perhaps above all, you should always be happy that what you write *sounds* right (the point made earlier about reading out loud is germane here). One more thing may cause problems for some – hence the next section.

If your first language is not English …

If you are reading this book then probably you speak and read English, indeed you are no doubt studying in English and will have to submit your work in it too. But if this is not your first language then it may make for difficulties.

First, do be aware that whilst a tutor who knows you may make some allowances for course work that is not as well written as it might be, an examiner is highly unlikely to do so for an examination paper.

I consulted a number of lecturers about this. Whatever might be done during course work, when understanding, help and advice is commonly available, the situation with examinations was clear. As one of our informants said "in exams the appropriate standard must be hit and there are no concessions made".

No one is saying that speaking two, or more, languages is a bad thing; quite the reverse. But if your first language is not English it would be surprising if it was as good as your first. Furthermore while many people manage to communicate well verbally in a second language, most would agree that writing in it is that much more difficult. What is more, unlike speech where no one is remembering every word you say, written material lasts; it is a lasting record of your competence.

Extra learning

For some people this is simply so important that they must sensibly seek out some extra tuition and learn more about the English language and how to write it. Indeed some universities provide just that sort of assistance and if so such help should certainly be taken. That is perhaps an extreme position, but certainly for many people in this position some private study (and perhaps more practice too) is worthwhile. The very nature of English makes for some common mistakes. For example, sentences are constructed backwards compared with many European languages (derived from Latin); so we don't say "sentences backwards are constructed …" Beyond practice and study, what can you do?

Giving special attention

Though everything in this chapter is important and useful, there are a number of areas to which it is worth paying special attention if you are in this position. Actively doing so will improve the standard of your written English and may help to develop good habits that

mean that you have the reflex to take care or check in a way that improves matters still further. Such factors demanding care, and where not doing so can noticeably highlight any writing inadequacies, include:

- *Spelling:* English spelling can be quirky and seemingly illogical. Work during your course is most often typed and a spell check can be done automatically, but examination essays must be written and no such assistance is then available. So make sure you learn from the spell checking you do and take care, especially over words that are inherent to your course. If you are studying English Literature you do not want the examiner to find you spell Shakespeare in three different ways in the course of one essay
- *Missing words:* it is easy to miss out a word and then not notice as you read your work over
- *Wrong words:* it is a characteristic of English that there are many words that sound alike yet that are spelt differently from each other: 'there' and 'their' is a common example and such are worth effort to get right. There are also words that seem similar yet are not, for example 'uninterested' means that someone does not care about something, whereas 'disinterested' means their feeling is neutral, they do not care one way or another
- *Slang:* academic writing needs a degree of formality. Be careful not to let words that are descriptive in conversation get into an essay if they are inappropriate. In a history essay, for instance, don't describe an eighteenth century figure as being "right cool" about something
- *Double negative:* this means phrases like "I don't have no time" and (with rare exceptions) they should be avoided – they are, to quote one wag, a no-no
- *And:* the avoidance of over complex writing and thus overlong sentences has been mentioned and is a sign of poor writing. So checking how many times you use the word "and" – which allows long sentences to run away from you – is a useful technique
- *Fragment:* this is what a grammar check on a computer says when your sentence is ungrammatical and, well, not a sentence; always worth considering altering anything that flags this warning
- *Abbreviations:* course work and essays are not text messages. Avoid abbreviations and explain those you do use thus: "something that was in evidence in the organisation was the use of information technology (IT)" – such an arrangement allows you to use the abbreviation (IT) further on in the text
- *Apostrophes:* this has been flagged already and incorrect usage is regarded as a sure sign of poor writing, so make sure you learn the rules
- *Overusing words:* if your vocabulary is in any way limited you may need to expand it. Reusing one "favourite" word shows your limitations and is to be avoided.

Overall take care, try not to rush and, above all, check, check and check your work again. If you can, try to get a first language English speaker to proof read it for you. If you can arrange this make sure you take careful note of their amendments so you can learn from them. After all this is not just a matter of refining your skills to help you write good essays, it is developing skills that are great for your career too.

ACTION: Good habits are as powerful as are bad. Almost certainly you are going to have to change your writing habits. Making a shift to new ways is possible and the rewards make the game very much worth the candle: you'll write quicker and more easily and it will ensure your coursework is immediately understood by lecturers. Make your next essay a starting point.

The net effect of all this is positive. To recap: if whatever you write is clear, answers the question well and meets both the academic standards and conventions of essay writing described in the previous chapter then it will be well marked, and will ensure you are considered to be a good and diligent student. It is well worth a little effort to get this right.

3 RESEARCH COMES FIRST

Deciding which topic to write on

Before you can begin work on your essay you need to decide what you are writing about. In some cases the essay title (or "question") will be fixed, and you just have to get on with it, but in many circumstances you will be given a choice of titles from a list. Where you have a choice think carefully before you rush to begin, and in particular try to choose a topic:

- Which interests you - you will be spending a considerable amount of time working on it
- Where the material you need can be relatively easily identified and gathered
- On which you may have done some preliminary research, for a seminar or following a lecture, for example.

Consider too whether there may be occasions when you should select a more difficult option. It may be that choosing a topic you know less well, or a kind of question with which you have had less practice will give you an additional learning experience and better fit you for work to come later in your course and exams. Doing so may not be the quickest way to complete a project, but it could sometimes be a useful thing to do

The questions on the list from which you must select will not just have been quickly cobbled together to get the right number of options. Rather the topics covered and the detailed wording of the questions will have been considered and refined at length by the lecturer or course convenor to ensure they are clear, appropriate to the course, word limit, materials available and so on. Your selection of a question to answer demands a similar level of reflection.

Before you can select a question, you need to understand it, and you may well need to consider several questions in detail before you can select one with which you are happy to proceed. So the next section looks at ways to help you understand the question(s).

Understanding the essay title

Before you begin the actual work, it is essential that you understand the question that you are answering. Think carefully about the question and consider any keywords which will help you plan your response. Most essay titles or questions are relatively formulaic. The main types are:

Evaluate	Consider the value of something (or a range of things) exploring its strengths and weaknesses, and arriving at a firm conclusion in your assessment.
Compare and contrast	Place two or more things in relative perspective. Highlight similarities and differences, showing why these are significant. (This is often a favourite term in examination questions as it forces you to demonstrate a breadth of knowledge.)
Analyse, examine, explain or discuss	Explore something in depth to show your awareness of different interpretations and your ability to identify and assess key issues.
Consider to what extent	Determine the degree of importance or impact of something upon an outcome or argument.
Review	Describe and then assess the correctness of something.

Think about the questions carefully; do not see what you want to see. Many student essays fail to answer the question accurately because the student has looked at one or two key words in a title and then written down everything they know about that topic without recognising the particular angle or argument that is required.

Most students discuss essay questions informally with each other as soon as they are available; make sure that you get involved in this process as hearing what your fellow students are saying about the essays can iron out any misunderstandings at the start of the process.

For each essay title that you are considering think about:

- What is behind the question? That is what does the lecturer want to see in your response?
- Which primary sources (see Chapter 1) will you need to be aware of for each essay?
- Are there any key secondary sources that you are already aware of, perhaps if they have been discussed in a lecture or seminar?

Time taken at this stage is not wasted but will ensure that all your future work is properly focused. It is very difficult to put several days into planning and researching an essay only to realise that you did not fully understand the title and now do not wish to proceed with it. In such a case after a considerable amount of work you will be back at stage one. At the same time you must be careful not to delay getting started on your assignment because you cannot select the question that you are going to answer.

If you are in any doubt about what is required for a particular question that you are considering answering then speak to your lecturers promptly. This may well save you a lot of wasted time and put you in a position to move on and begin work on your essay with confidence.

Once you fully understand what is involved in answering the questions on the list, make your selection and then make sure that you **stick to it**. Make sure that all of your subsequent research and writing is based on that title. Do not be tempted to include irrelevant material. Use parts of the title, keywords in it, and the title in your own words throughout the essay. This will help keep you on track and also highlight to your lecturers that you *are* on track.

Gathering material and using bibliographies

As we noted in Chapter 1 an essay is a significant piece of work. You will not meet the requirements in terms of word length and content without significant background research. If you have already had a lecture or seminar on the topic your notes can provide an excellent overview and way into the subject, but in themselves they will be insufficient to tackle the essay.

Amongst other material you may need to consult:

- Books
- Articles in academic journals (see below for more information)
- DVDs
- Videos and CD-ROMs
- Slide and photograph collections
- Newspapers (both recent and archived)
- Collections of MA, MPhil and PhD theses by the university's postgraduates
- Digital collections, including some websites
- Experimental data and results.

Academic journals

An academic journal is a bit like a magazine. It is published regularly and contains scholarly articles (sometimes around a specific theme), book reviews and sometimes other material. The articles are submitted by academics based on their current research and are all peer-reviewed. This means that before they are accepted for publication they are examined anonymously by other academics in the field for intellectual quality and rigour. All academic disciplines have a range of specialist journals attached to them which are usually a mixture of the general and specific.

For example, *Nature* is a famous journal which carries articles on any aspect of science. At the other end of the scale, but still within the group of academic scientific journals is *Nature Nanotechnology*, which is obviously a highly specialist area. The humanities have their equivalents. For instance, *History* is a general journal publishing articles on a wide range of historical subjects, whereas the *Journal of Military History* is, as its title suggests, much more tightly focused.

Academics find articles particularly useful because they:

- Contain the latest thinking on a subject
- Analyse specific themes or ideas within a wider context
- Provide succinct explorations of much broader topics.

Some material is inappropriate for academic study because it is not sufficiently comprehensive in terms of its depth of analysis and range of conclusions. Although such material may look initially appealing you should not use it in your essay. This includes:

- A level course notes (both your own and published guides);
- Websites not from clearly identifiable academic or academic-related institutions. This means, for example, that Wikipedia is *not* suitable, but the website of The National Gallery website is. Discrimination and discernment is still needed (for example, material from a section for general visitors or school teachers will not have the level of sophistication required for university study).

You will quickly find that your university library has massive volumes of reference material and identifying which of those items that appear to be relevant is critical. Your first port of call is therefore your bibliography.

Bibliography

A bibliography is a list of books, articles and other academic reference material, including both primary and secondary sources, relevant to a particular topic. You will usually be given one per course or module. Lecturers spend a great deal of time preparing bibliographies, revising them regularly and taking care to ensure a spread of material designed to give you an overview of the various opinions and interpretations of each topic you study.

If you are very lucky each essay question will come with an individual bibliography. If there is no bibliography specifically for each question there may be a section on each topic on the particular course you are following. Lecturers structure bibliographies in different ways, but you should assume that you should read *all* the items relevant to your essay *as a minimum*. In all likelihood you will need to consult more widely and the bibliography will be a starting point. As you read each item keep careful notes. One item will lead you to another, and you need to make a note of it when you see it, rather than spend ages hunting for the reference later.

ACTION: the bibliography is the most important piece of information you need for each course. It is a signpost to the different sources you will need to study to do well. Make sure you follow its guidance.

One of the good things about the bibliography prepared by your lecturer is that you can be certain that the items listed will be available in the university library (but not of course that they will be sitting on a shelf waiting for you when you need them, hence the need

to plan essays well in advance). However, you may find that as you explore a particular topic and follow up further references you need to obtain an item that is not in your institution's library.

In such cases your university library can carry out an inter-library loans search. These often require the consent of your lecturer in the form of a signature on a request slip, but this should not cause any difficulty. In this case the book will be sent to your library from the holding library and you will be notified when it arrives. But this will take time, and thus again highlights the importance of planning your essay well in advance to flag such requirements.

Selecting material

Once you have tracked down the book, article, or whatever you need, you need to identify the relevant information. In some cases this may only be a small amount on a few pages, in others a whole section, or possibly the whole text.

The best way to extract information is to determine exactly what it is that you need. The bibliography may again help you here. If not, start this process by looking closely at the content pages, indices or abstracts (depending on the type of material). Use keywords to identify which pages or parts you need to read closely. Don't get drawn into parts of the author's argument or narrative which are not relevant to your purpose.

Even if you keep to the relevant material initial research into a topic often brings in a vast haul of material and information and this can be daunting. The pleasing sensation of having a great stash of material can easily be off-set by the fear of having to sort through it. This is why it is extremely important always to bear in mind the title of your essay and the kind of material, information and facts you need.

Once you've started this process you can contact you lecturer, explain the direction you are taking, and check that this is appropriate.

ACTION: be discerning in your selection and use of materials. Stick to the bibliography and you won't go wrong. Avoid material which has no critical analysis or a narrow range of conclusions. If in any doubt contact your lecturers for advice.

Developing your academic skills

As you select the material, bear in mind the academic skills that you are trying to demonstrate, as was discussed in Chapter 1:

- Awareness of the primary sources
- Reflection on and analysis of the academic debate, or secondary sources
- Evaluation of the primary and secondary sources to develop your own argument and view.

Beyond why these things are important, and what you need to do let's think in a bit more detail about *how* you would go about them:

1. Awareness of the primary sources

At university it is assumed that you will be aware of the primary sources. For instance, you will not be able to write an essay on Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, for example, without reading the novel first. However, your essay needs to be much more than just summarising the plot or even the themes, you need to analyse the text to draw out its wider meaning.

You need to look at *Bleak House* not just as a story, but as a window on 19th century society, its manners, preoccupations and tastes. You need to think of the book, the plot, the themes as basic facts waiting to be analysed and interrogated to reveal their hidden meaning.

Looking at primary sources demands particular care. If you are studying History and look at a letter from Winston Churchill written in 1941 that proclaims everyone in Britain is work shy and we'll never win the war, you cannot base an essay on this opinion because it is not representative of his views. The only way to know this is to put it in the context of all his correspondence and you will certainly not have time or means to study it all! This means that you will be reliant upon historians who have done the job already and are able to give a proper perspective.

Your ability to engage directly with the primary sources depends upon your subject, but regardless of this you will be expected to be familiar with the content.

2. Analysing the academic debate

The academic debate on a topic will help inform your understanding of the primary sources, particularly where you cannot access them directly, but you need to study the academic debate in its own right as well. You may examine the first carefully argued text on your reading list and buy into the interpretation of *Bleak House* that it presents. However if you then come to the next equally convincing argument which presents a fundamentally different interpretation then you are going to have some hard thinking to do. You will begin to realise that all the secondary sources include the inbuilt value judgement of the academic scholar who wrote them. However carefully argued and convincing their arguments are, they are simply their opinion. Part of their skill is putting the information together in such a way as to make their case so persuasive.

This point is made to demonstrate the need for you to think critically about the material that you read for your essays. You need to be able to:

- Identify where fact ends and opinion begins
- Recognise the personal interpretation that each academic is putting on the primary sources
- Consider if there are other ways to look at them.

It also demonstrates the need for you to **read widely** around the topic. You don't want to discover that you have relied on one interpretation if there are others available. Don't be the person who relies upon the one piece arguing that the earth's core is made out of custard,

as this might be a deliberately set academic trap to test whether you are researching widely enough and are assessing and interpreting with due care and discrimination.

Gaining the techniques to be able to determine the value of the custard theorist demands time and care. There are several techniques that may help you to do this:

Assess the methodology

Methodology is a term referring to the processes used by academics to carry out their research and is applicable to all disciplines – sciences, social sciences and arts and humanities. Assessing the value of the methodology of a piece of academic writing is a very good way to begin to assess the value of its interpretation of the primary sources.

For instance, the value of a scientific article might be dependent upon the number and type of experiments carried out in order to gain the data and reach certain conclusions. If this is the case, the authors should be trying to prove their points by clear reference to this method.

To take an example from the humanities, an interpretation of a novel might require constant reference to the novel itself, and other writings and material by the novelist. If such references were missing, you might question whether the examination was rigorous enough.

Assess the references

Academic studies are usually referenced in full, with brief footnotes or endnotes annotating parts of the text, and full bibliographic details for each reference at the end. An important aspect of an academic's work is the open display of sources allowing others to check them if they wish and then, if they believe the interpretation misguided in some way, they can query and challenge it. If you are looking at a work which is missing a reference to a key primary source, or a secondary source that you know is generally accepted, then you may begin to draw some conclusions about the quality of the interpretation and judgement of that scholar.

ACTION: don't ignore footnotes. You can take any book or article and look carefully at the footnotes and sources which reveal much about both the breadth and depth of the original research. In addition, you might well be able to access the sources listed in their footnotes, check them out and consider whether you agree with the analysis or not.

Read reviews and abstracts

With time often of the essence in writing essays, identifying the interpretations put upon facts can be greatly assisted by the careful reading of abstracts and reviews. Most academic journal articles are accompanied by what is called an 'abstract'. This is a précis of its content and of the overall argument presented and often appears on the opening page of an article. Reading the abstract carefully is not a substitute for reading the entire piece, but it highlights immediately and clearly the interpretations of the author(s) and gives you something to anchor your thoughts on as you progress through the piece.

Book reviews also often provide very good summaries of a work's content and add the second interesting element of revealing the opinions of the reviewer. Thus, a book review should not be taken as a definitive interpretation of a piece, but as one which might open up other questions and areas for you to consider. Such techniques are all about reading for, and identifying, an argument and interpretation which have been laid on top of the bare facts. They help you to establish the agenda academics have put on their fact selection.

Identify the academic consensus

An important part of the process of analysis is determining the extent to which there is agreement over the meaning of facts and the degree to which there is dissent. You may find two types of dissent. In the first type, academics may agree generally on the broad outline of something, but disagree on precise details. However, it may be the case that there is little agreement at all between the academic scholars in a particular area with many competing interpretations vying for prominence.

Once again, close reading is a good technique as academics, particularly in the introductory and concluding sections of their pieces, often position their work in relation to others. In this way, you will be able to sketch out whether there are dominant interpretations and how deeply they are divided from minority positions.

3. Developing your own view

As you examine the academic debate on an issue, analyse the interpretations presented and assess their value you will find that you own view begins to develop quite naturally. You will find that there are some scholars whose work is persuasive, generally accepted and convincing. Other pieces may be less so.

The important thing is how to express your views and how to structure your essay to build up a persuasive argument. Remember that your opinion needs to be considered and informed. Your arguments are only credible when they are grounded in fact and show an awareness of competing interpretations. Your argument will only stand up when it arranges the facts logically and convincingly and reveals that it can overcome different assessments and conclusions.

Your essay needs to be balanced, showing if there are different interpretations amongst scholars, but it should not avoid coming to a clear conclusion.

It is important to remember that all arguments and interpretations require refinement and are rarely perfectly formed the first time you either think them through or write them down. This is where formal and informal discussion and interaction with others is essential:

- **Seminars** are ideal forums for discussion and the presentation of arguments. Use them as opportunities to debate interpretations of facts and identify the opinion of your lecturer and fellow students

- **Lectures** give you the opportunity to see how your lecturers interpret primary sources and what value they place on different strands of the academic debate
- **Practical Classes** where a large group of you may be undertaking a similar exercise gives you a perfect opportunity to consider the methodology. Why are you all carrying out the same tasks in the same way? What does this show you about the basic material of your studies and who devised this particular way of approaching it?
- **Talking to other students** about your studies and specific topics within it may sound slightly nerdy, but it really helps. After all, your fellow students on a programme or module should all be enthusiastic about the basic subject material and so comparing thoughts on different topics may well open up other ways of thinking about a subject or refining your own interpretations further.

However you do it, refining your argument before finalising the essay in which you present it for assessment is really important.

Making notes

Making notes as you read is critical. You may wish to record:

- A summary of the argument or approach
- Any key quotations, facts or dates
- Questions and issues that need further study or discussion with lecturers.

Make sure that you always record the precise bibliographic details of your sources; if you don't know where a key quotation that you wish to use has come from, you may spend a considerable amount of time at a later stage tracking this down.

As you read and make your notes, try to think about which category the material will fit into in your essay. For example, you may use a quotation to illustrate one side of the academic debate, or you may use it to support your own line of argument. Make sure that you gather enough evidence to present a balanced argument. You don't want to have one section of your essay with little or no references at all, and another part thick with references and quotations.

Using essay banks

Some student unions now maintain "essay banks" into which students submit their essays for the benefit of future generations. There are also commercial essay banks available online. These can be a useful reference when you want more information on the look and feel of a university essay. However you should be wary of becoming too dependent on any one individual essay. The dangers of plagiarism have been mentioned on several occasions and this applies equally to plagiarism from another student's essay as from an academic scholar. Relying too heavily on an existing essay from an essay bank will mean that you do not develop the necessary academic skills through writing your own essay.

4 FROM PREPARATION TO WRITING

A systematic approach

Even having done thorough research and having assembled the material necessary to inform the content, a good essay is unlikely to spill out of you perfectly formed. It needs some thought and benefits from the adoption of a systematic approach: that is one that proceeds a step at a time, and logically moves through to the desired end result. Such an approach has several benefits, it allows you to:

- Reflect accurately the question to be answered and the material and content you have assembled to assist you do so
- Organise your content to advantage so that the structure is sound and your argument will flow logically and persuasively when read
- Ensure that your content fits the extent; that is the word count required where this is specified
- Balance thoughts about what you will write with the question of language – how you will write it
- Work efficiently so that you complete the task in a reasonable amount of time (this being important as you balance all that needs to be done in your course)
- Hit deadlines; something that is important in its own right.

So, to encompass all possibilities and degrees of complexity, the following seven-stage approach sets out a methodology that will cope with any kind of document (it is the way this book began life too). It is recommended only by its practicality. It works. It will make your writing quicker and easier to do and more impressive. It can install the right habits and rapidly become something you can work with, utilising its methods more or less comprehensively depending on the circumstances.

The seven stages are:

- *Listing* possible content
- *Sorting* to finalise and arrange sequence and relative import of points to be made
- *Arranging* to organise your notes
- *Reviewing:* a chance to make additional changes
- *Drafting:* getting the words down
- *Editing* to fine tune the writing
- *Proof reading* as a final check.

These are now reviewed in turn.

Stage 1: **Listing**

This consists of ignoring all thoughts about sequence or structure, and simply listing every significant point which might be desirable or necessary to include (though perhaps bearing in mind the nature and length of the essay and the level of detail involved).

Note: It should be noted (again) up front that a key part of the preparatory process is developing your own argument. Do not attempt to start planning your essay – or listing content points - until you have thought through your own point of view on the topic and are very clear on this. The structure of the essay will be developed to sell your point of view, or argument, and you cannot do this until you have one! If, at the end of your background research, you are still unclear as to where you stand on all the evidence then you will need to have a further period of deliberation and cogitation before you can start planning.

Once that's done, however, you can list things. This, a process that draws on what is sometimes called "mind mapping", gets all the elements involved down on paper, both the content and a reminder in this case of the style (Action boxes and so on). It may need more than one session to complete it; certainly you will find one thought leading to another as the picture fills out. Rather than set this out as a neat list down the page, it is better to adopt a freestyle approach.

In this way points are noted, almost at random, around a sheet. This allows you to end up able to view the totality of your notes in one glance, so if it is necessary you should use a sheet larger than standard A4 paper. It is also best done on paper not on screen (the next stages make clear why).

Stage 2: **Sorting**

Next, you can proceed to rearrange what you have noted and bring some logic and organisation to bear on it. This process may raise some questions as well as answer others, so it is still not giving you the final shape of the essay. This stage is often best (and most quickly) done by annotating the original list. A second colour pen may help now as you begin to put things in order, make logical groupings and connections, as well as allowing yourself to add and subtract points and refine the total picture as you go.

Stage 3: **Arranging**

This stage arranges your "jottings" into a final order of contents, and here you can decide upon the precise sequence and arrangements you will follow for the text itself. For the sake of neatness, and thus to give yourself a clear guideline to follow as you move on, it is often worth rewriting the sheet you were left with after stage 2 (indeed, this is the point to transfer onto computer screen if you wish).

At this stage you can also form a view and note specifically the emphasis that will be involved. For example: what is most important? Where is most detail necessary? What needs illustrating? (This may involve anything from a graph to an example.) What will take most space?

Not enough material? Usually the reverse is true. And this is the stage at which to prune, if necessary, so that what is included is well chosen, but not inappropriately long. This is true at all levels. Contain the number of points to be made and the amount to be said about each. Of course, you need to write sufficient to match your purpose, but do not risk submerging it in a plethora of irrelevant detail or subsidiary points that are actually unnecessary digressions. As an example, the plan for this chapter might appear thus:

PREPARING AND WRITING
In this chapter …
The need for a systematic approach
What it achieves
How it works
The seven stages involved (listed)
The seven stages, one by one (*note:* these might appear here in full)
Examples – Figures
Getting it down in writing
Drafting tips
Editing tips
The need to proof carefully
Your notes/Read on …
And … ACTION BOXES

Note: the amount of detail here can vary to suit you. Something new or complex may need more detail than something with which you are familiar. As a rule of thumb: better too much than too little (for the record the details here about this book are abbreviated and of course every chapter needed the same approach, plus time spent to ensure an appropriate overall flow and logic across the chapters.).

Stage 4: **Review**

At this point have a final look over what you now plan to do - review your "arranged" guideline. It will be quicker and easier to make final amendments now than when you finally print out pages of draft. It may help to "sleep on it", carrying out a final review having distanced yourself from what you have done so far, at least for a moment. You can easily get so close to something that you are working hard at, that you cannot see the wood for the trees. One of the things you want to be clear about is the broad picture - if this is right, then the details will slot into place much more easily.

Do not worry if you still want to make amendments at this stage. Add things, delete things, move things about (rewrite your guidelines if necessary) - but make sure that when you move on to write something you do so confident that the outline represents your considered view of the content and will act as a really useful guide.

Let us be clear: for many a document this whole process (i.e. stages 1 - 4) will only take a few minutes, and that is time well spent, as it will reduce the time taken once you start to write. As you develop your own style of this sort of preparation, you will find you can

shorthand the process a little, with some documents able to be written from the first freehand style list. If real complexity is involved, of course, it may take longer.

With all that has been done to date it is now time to write; and you are now able to do so having separated deciding *what* to write (at this stage largely done) from *how* to write it. This is significant and makes matters easier and faster. So next:

Stage 5: **Write**

What else is there to say? This stage means writing it. This is the bit with the greatest element of chore in it. But it has to be done and the guidelines you have given yourself by preparing carefully will ease and speed the process. A few practical tips may also help, see box:

Top tips for getting the words down

- **Choose the right moment**. We certainly find there are moments when we cannot seem to ...when we are unable ...when it is difficult ..... to string two coherent sentences together end to end. There are other times when things flow, when you do not dare stop in case the flow does too, and when you cannot get the words down fast enough to keep up with your thoughts
- **Do not struggle.** If possible (although deadlines may have an effect here) do not struggle. If it is really not flowing - leave things. Stop. For a moment, overnight, or while you walk round the block or make a cup of tea. Many people confirm that when the words simply will not flow, a pause helps
- **Allow sufficient time**, once you are under way and words are flowing smoothly it may upset and slow the process to leave it. If you feel you need an uninterrupted day, or more, try to organise things that way. It may both save time in the long run and help you produce better text
- **Do not stop unnecessarily.** For example, when you get stuck over some - maybe important - detail. Say you need to decide on a heading or a phrase, one which must be clear, pithy and fit with the style of the whole thing. You just cannot think of one. Leave it, type some xxxx's and write on. You can always come back to it (and when you do, who knows, you sometimes think of just what you want in a moment). The danger is that you dither, puzzle over it, waste time, get nowhere, but get so bogged down with it that you lose everything you had in your mind about the overall shape of what you are working on. This is true of words, phrases, sentences and even whole sections. Mark clearly what you need to come back to (so that you never forget to check it again!).

That said the job here is to get the whole thing down on paper. It probably will not be perfect, but you should not feel bad about that; a vanishingly small number of people can

create any document word for word exactly as they want it first time. Practice will get you closer and closer, and things you are familiar with will be easier than something that is new to you or pushes your knowledge or expertise to the limits. *Beware:* many essays are handed in without the final read through and editing that is indicated here; resist the temptation to skimp in this way and you will always deliver better work.

***ACTION**: one idea many find useful and which you should consider is to hand write some of your written work. Why? Because you cannot use a computer in an examination and suddenly having to hand write something when you are used to typing may be a shock to the system, one making writing slower and more difficult; content quality can suffer because of this. A few drafts regularly done this way will give you practice.*

But some revision is usually necessary; hence the next stage.

Stage 6: **Edit**

The complexities of the material you are using and the arguments you are developing means that some editing is almost always necessary. There are a number of points here that help make this stage practical but not protracted, again the box expands on this with some practical suggestions.

Top editing tips

- If possible, leave a draft a while before re-reading it. You get very close to something and, without a pause, you start to see only what you expect (or hope) is there. It is often much quicker to finish off something in this way than trying to undertake the whole job with one stage back to back with the next
- Print out a draft double spaced and/or in a larger typeface to allow plenty of room annotate it as you review it
- Read things over, out loud is best (though choose where!). You will hear how something sounds and that reflects how it will feel to read. When you do this, you will find that certain things - such as overlong sentences - jump out at you very clearly (you run out of breath).
- Get a fellow student to read it. A fresh look often casts light on areas you have convinced yourself are fine, for no other reason than you cannot think of a better way of expressing something (co-authorship certainly proves the worth of this idea!). Some students habitually do this on a swap basis. Because review can be time consuming, they ask a view of one thing in return for doing the same for someone else. This can work well; better if you do it regularly.
- Worry about the detail. It was Oscar Wilde who said: "I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back". Actually the small details are important. For example, you may create greater impact by breaking a sentence into two, with a short one following a longer one. It makes a more powerful point. See.
- Look at the structure. Now all your points are developed in detail does it work effectively? Would moving one particular point or paragraph elsewhere help your line of reasoning develop more logically?

Editing is an important stage. If you need to read it over three times, so be it. Of course, you could perhaps go on making changes for ever and finally you have to let something go. But more than one look will be essential.

Stage 7: **Proof-read**

Once you have a final draft it is critical that you proof read it. A lecturer faced with something clearly inadequately checked tends to think the sloppiness probably applied to the background research too. Make sure you use a spell-checker, but remember they are not infallible. One history student, writing about the Battle of Gravelotte, allowed it to be replaced throughout an essay with the word Travelodge! So never underestimate the care necessary here. If possible use a grammar checker too.

In terms of time, spending time on preparation will reduce writing time. Similarly it is usually more time efficient to crack through a draft and then make some changes, rather than labour over trying to make every line perfect as you first write. Like much that is involved here, habit plays a part. What matters is to find an approach for working through all of this that suits you; and prompts a thorough job that produces the end result you want.

One final matter is worth a thought here.

When it all goes wrong

Despite all that has been said, and even with care being taken, realistically there will sometimes be occasions when things do not go according to plan. If, despite careful planning and working hard to your timetable, unforeseen circumstances mean that you cannot complete your essay by the deadline do not panic. Most universities have arrangements to deal with such cases. They are reserved for serious illness, family difficulties or other exceptional circumstances and you will not get much sympathy if you attempt to use these procedures because of bad planning or lack of work in time on your part. In such cases:

- Inform your lecturer of the circumstances at the earliest opportunity; letting them know a day before, or even after the deadline, of something that has happened a week earlier will not gain you sympathy
- Continue to work on your essay as your personal circumstances allow so you can complete it as soon as possible and so avoid a knock on effect on other deadlines and commitments that you may have
- Comply with the new timetable or deadline given to you, or, once again, advise your lecturer at the earliest opportunity if you cannot.

You do need to be aware that universities have very rigid timetables for processing the coursework that will contribute to your final degree classification and there will be dates beyond which your lecturers are powerless to go, whatever the circumstances.

Another way in which things might go wrong for you is that you may find yourself receiving a mark for your essay which is much lower than you anticipated, and even possibly in the 'fail' category (although careful planning should avoid this). In such circumstances you may be given another chance. You should not rely on this – not least because it means an additional essay to write when you will be busy with existing commitments.

What "another chance" means will vary by institution. Some universities allow a resubmission on the same essay question, others require a new question to be tackled. Some universities have a strict limit on the number of resubmissions allowed (for example, only one per module). And if you fail an essay it may well be the case that, regardless of the quality of the resubmission, you will receive a maximum mark that equates to the pass mark (which varies by institution but is likely to be around 30-40).

ACTION: using (perhaps having fine-tuned the approach) a systematic approach really does make writing easier and quicker. It may need a small effort to get into this, but the effort is worthwhile and you will quickly feel the benefit. Tackle your next writing assignment this way and see.

5 STRUCTURE AND DETAIL WITHIN THE ESSAY

This chapter will cover each of the following in turn:

- Making a good start: how to get off on the right foot with your opening paragraph
- The central content: how to structure the main body of your essay and how to present a clear argument
- An appropriate conclusion: how to ensure a strong finish with your last paragraph and final words.

The introduction: making a good start

The introduction of your essay is critical. Think about a novel. We have all started books which do not interest us at the start and then failed to complete them. Similarly we know what it is like to be gripped by the first few pages – not only do you want to read on, but

you are confident that the book is going to be a good read. An essay is similar. You want to make a good impression right from the start, to give your lecturer confidence that this will be a good essay.

The introduction should tell the reader what they can expect from the essay and is likely to summarise:

- The main areas that will be explored
- The line of argument that will be followed
- The academic debate on the topic
- What conclusions will be drawn.

Beyond this the introduction needs to demonstrate all those skills that we have already discussed. This will ensure that the lecturer reads it and straight away thinks here is a student who knows what they are talking about. These skills include:

- Familiarity with the primary and secondary sources
- Clear and accurate references
- Accurate grammar and spelling
- Appropriately formal language
- Well organised and structured.

It may well take more than one paragraph: an introduction should not be rigidly identified as the opening paragraph.

Let us consider a hypothetical essay question and compare what would be a good and bad introduction. While there clearly must be a single subject behind the essay question, the lessons drawn from it are wide ranging.

QUESTION: Can any one factor be identified as the cause of the First World War?

Good introduction

Historians have argued over the causes of the First World War since the 1920s. Over the decades many complex arguments have been created to explain why Europe fell into war in 1914. In the immediate aftermath of the war the Germans were held responsible for the disaster. Gradually this gave way to the idea of collective responsibility shared among the great powers of Europe. However, in the 1960s the German historian, Fritz Fischer,

controversially returned the debate to its origins by once again emphasising the primacy of Germany in the outbreak of war. Within the immense spectrum of arguments on the cause of the conflict are historians who have singled out one particular factor while others have argued that a range of factors combined to create disaster. This essay will explore the main schools of thought concerning the causes of the war, placing particular emphasis on those who have blamed Germany and those who see it as a disaster either unwittingly or consciously brought about by the great powers.

Bad introduction

This essay is about the causes of the First World War. There is much debate about the causes of the war with some saying that it was down to the navy rivalry and some saying that it was about empires. Others have said it was about domestic issues. Exploring these ideas is a challenging task. In this essay I will try to identify who caused the disaster.

The first introduction is good because:

- It uses clear and precise language throughout
- It shows an awareness of the fact that the arguments and debates on issues and facts change and develop over time
- It moves logically from one point to another
- It tells the reader clearly what the essay will do and what they can expect.

The second introduction is weak and exposes the writer because:

- It has no structure – ideas and themes are thrown about without context
- It uses the personal pronoun
- It does not provide sufficient detail, and immediately suggests inadequate research.

Having considered the introduction, let's now move on to look at the main bulk of the essay.

The central content

This part is of course the majority of your essay. It is here where you need to detail your response to the question and develop your argument. A clear and well thought out structure is critical and should:

- Ensure clarity; making it clear where one point ends and the next begins. Make sure you have a piece of evidence to back up each assertion that you make
- Make your argument persuasive; you should structure the material in such a way that it reads convincingly, and the argument is built up and strengthened throughout the essay.

Remember that building a persuasive argument is not about only presenting one point of view. Rather you need to show that you are aware of other interpretations, approaches and explanations but point out their weaknesses and shortcomings. In this way you will strengthen your own argument instead of making it look as if you are just brushing 'inconvenient' material under the carpet. Think about the argument as a set of scales, where you put evidence on each side. You just need to make sure that the scales are tipped clearly in favour of your own viewpoint.

Break each idea into a separate paragraph, using the first sentence to introduce the idea, and subsequent ones to develop the idea and provide evidence. This will include reference to other material, as well as direct quotation where appropriate. The last sentence in each paragraph should link to the idea contained in the next paragraph; horses closely followed by carts, as it were.

You may find it useful to use headings as you write your essay, you can use these to group your ideas, material and evidence and so build up your essay as you write sentences to link them. But do remember that, in most cases, these should be removed prior to reviewing your final draft.

We need to look in detail at what will be a crucial part of your essay (including possibly in the introduction and conclusion), and that is referring to other academic texts.

Referencing

As already covered, one of the things you need to do in your essay is engage with the academic debate and begin to analyse and evaluate it. You will also need to show how scholars are interpreting the primary sources that relate to your essay. You will need to do these things in order to answer the essay question. You can do this by:

- Relying on the ideas contained in a text
- Paraphrasing a text
- Quoting from a text (this includes diagrams, tables and illustrations as well as actual words).

Whenever you do one of the above (and you will do them frequently in an essay – or you are doing something wrong) you need to acknowledge (or "cite") the work you are using. (Some students assume that you only need to cite a work if you quote directly from it, in fact you need to refer to it if you use the ideas and arguments contained in a work in any way at all.) This may sound onerous and cumbersome, but it is part of the academic convention followed by all scholars to ensure no one is claiming another's work and ideas as their own. There are certain conventions used to refer to other works without interrupting the flow of your text and argument. In the secondary material you read look at how the author has referenced other material that they depend on for their point of view. The example essays shown later in this book will also show you how some students have dealt with referencing.

What this means is that it is critical to keep excellent notes at the research stage of an essay. You really do not want to find a brilliant quotation which clinches your argument, but find you have no idea where it came from. Without this detail, the quotation is useless to you.

So: how do you actually use the material you wish to cite? Well, in precise detail that is something that you will have to clarify with your department or school because there are many different referencing systems in use, and there may be some considerable differences

between those in use in the sciences, for example, and the humanities. However, the following information is provided to give a broad overview.

When referencing material within the text of your essay it is sufficient to include just the author and year (for example "…the argument developed by Jones (1994)…" or … this theory demonstrates (Jones, 1994) …") so as not to break the flow of your text. A footnote or endnote is then used to give further details. (Footnotes appear at the foot of the page of the relevant reference, and endnotes appear at the end of the entire essay.) It is usual to give the bibliographic details (see below) in full on the first footnote, and then subsequently use an abbreviation. Make sure that you use your word processing packages to insert the footnotes or endnotes for you and do not try to do this manually, or you will need to renumber everything if you move text around, or add more detail to certain sections at a later stage.)

In addition to the footnote or endnote you should have a bibliography at the end of your essay. For each item consulted (even where you have not used it in your essay) you should include:

- The author's name
- The full title (in italics or underlined for a book, in single quotation marks for a journal article)
- Year of publication
- Journal name (in italics or underlined) and issue number (if applicable)
- Name and location of publisher
- Page numbers
- Webpage address (if applicable)
- Any other information that is needed to allow someone else to find the material.

For example: Forsyth, P., *Disaster-proof your career,* Kogan Page, London, 2010, p.123

Make sure that you are consistent in how you present references. The essay classification descriptors quoted here earlier from the School of History at the University of Kent make it clear how important accurate referencing is to getting good marks. Fortunately this is one part of the process where no judgement is required – it is just a case of learning the system and then sticking rigorously to it.

How to present a direct quotation

If you quote directly from the source the relevant part should be put in quotation marks: "passing off someone else's work as your own, is a major offence" (Connelly & Forsyth, 2011, pXXX). If it is a very long piece, put it in a separate, indented, paragraph (without quotation marks), like this:

> Plagiarism, or passing off someone else's work as your own, is a major offence. It includes:
>
> - Quoting or paraphrasing another person's work without acknowledgement
> - Using ideas or arguments developed by another without acknowledgement
>
> Plagiarism is likely to lead to you receiving a zero for the particular essay involved and, if you persist, it could even mean that you are not allowed to continue your course. Lecturers are used to identifying plagiarism in student coursework, however cleverly it is disguised. Many universities require electronic copies of essays to be submitted so that they can be subjected to plagiarism detection software.

You *will* be caught. Don't even think about it!

– (Connelly & Forsyth, 2011, p. XXX)

Having looked at the central part of your essay, let's now move onto consider the conclusion.

An appropriate conclusion

The conclusion is the last opportunity for you to show your lecturer that you are a serious student writing an engaging and thoughtful essay. Of course a good conclusion will never make them think this about you if it is following a load of rubbish, but conversely having expended considerable time, energy and intellect on the essay up to this point do not let yourself down by a weak conclusion. Sadly, this often happens either because students are running out of steam by this point, or just don't know how to write a good conclusion. The conclusion should be planned in detail in the same way as the rest of the essay.

Your conclusion should not introduce any new ideas or arguments that are not already covered in your essay. Rather it should:

- Refer back to the title, and make your own line of argument on the topic completely clear;
- Summarise the evidence for this point of view;
- Make it clear why this is significant or important (that is, you should set the essay within its broader context);
- Show awareness of your position in relation to the academic consensus.

You should also be using the conclusion to demonstrate all those other general academic skills that you will have been using throughout the essay, and that we listed in the section on the introduction.

Your conclusion, as we said above for the introduction, need not be limited to one paragraph, however you must remember that at this point you should be succinctly summarising your argument and not going through it all over again.

Let's turn back to our hypothetical essay question and compare what would be a good and bad conclusion for this. The title was "Can any one factor be identified as the cause of the First World War?"

Good conclusion

This essay has covered all of the main schools of thought concerning the causes of the Great War. It has been shown that historical interpretations have changed considerably over time. Although the primacy of German guilt has been a constant thread in the arguments, it has been demonstrated that most leading historians in the field now see the causes of the war as immensely complex and overlapping, and that Europe slithered into war in 1914 not by design but by accident. Some would argue that this accident came about only because of earlier deliberately calculated aggressive posturing. This piece has argued that the "war by accident" approach is the most convincing by carefully comparing and contrasting the strengths and weaknesses of the varying opinions on an issue which is unlikely ever to reach a final, definitive conclusion.

Bad conclusion

Many things caused the First World War, and although others can be considered guilty Germany was probably mostly to blame. There are different views on the war with some saying that one nation was the cause and others saying that lots of factors were. The war was about many things and the nations fought for different reasons. The war proved tragic and futile. Finding the real cause is hard as there are so many views, but Germany seems responsible.

The first conclusion is good because:

- It reminds the reader clearly and succinctly what has been covered in the essay
- It demonstrates the complexity of analysis and breadth of research carried out
- It shows awareness of alternative views, but comes to a firm conclusion through a rational and rigorous process.

The other conclusion is weak because:

- There is no definite conclusion and no sense of argument developed
- It uses emotive language in an inappropriate judgement for an academic essay (and the statement is not relevant to the question set)
- The references to secondary literature are unclear and vague.

And that's all there is to it!

Of course, an essay is a significant piece of work, as I have said before and as, indeed, I make clear throughout this book. However, it *is* a manageable one, and even a rewarding one. Looking at your essay in these separate parts, taking each idea and paragraph at a time will make it achievable, and something that with time and practice you will get quicker and more confident at.

It is all very well considering these matters as you read this book, and writing assignments gives you time to think about it all (provided you are organised!), but writing essays in examinations is another matter; one worth a few words.

Writing essays in examinations

Although what's been said in this book applies equally to essays written as coursework and in examinations there are clear distinctions between the two. Most obviously the timeframe is different and consequently in an examination you will not be able to do the same detailed and specific background research before answering a question.

Lecturers understand this, indeed the examinations are designed to test a different range of skills, primarily your ability to contextualise information and arguments. It is important to

keep this aim in mind as you revise, as you should not be looking to reproduce coursework material in an exam.

The questions that you face will therefore be adapted accordingly (so you are highly unlikely to get an exact question in an exam that you have already written a coursework essay on):

Coursework	Examinations
Answers a specific question in great detail	Synthesises main themes, with a much wider sweep, in a shorter length piece
Rounded, discursive manuscripts	Cuts to the heart of the question as quickly as possible
Follows all academic conventions	No need for full references or bibliographies
Researched and written over a long period	Instant responses based on sound revision and understanding developed through course
Polished and well-crafted throughout	Minor grammatical and spelling errors likely to be forgiven

Consider these examples of real essay questions from a course on the History of London 1750-1900 which clearly illustrate the differences:

Coursework essay questions	Examination essay questions
Was the fear of crime in London worse than its reality?	What themes dominate the history of London in the period 1750-1900?
Was London culture dominated by middle class taste during this period?	Did London become a safer city during the period 1750-1900?
To what extent did religion permeate every aspect of life in London?	What was the dominant image of London during the period 1750-1900?
What do the primary sources tell us about the lives of Londoners in this period?	To what extent did the Thames dominate the nature of London's economy?
Did mass consumerism alter greatly the nature of London's economy?	How important was London in setting the fashions in terms of domestic architecture and interior design in this period?
What efforts were made to improve the condition of London's poor during this period?	Why was solving the problem of local government for London so difficult?
How did artists and writers interpret London during the nineteenth century?	

The impact of handwriting

Another big difference about writing essays in exams is that you will have to hand write them rather than use a PC. This can make a considerable and surprising difference, even to the way your mind works. Not least, as we hand write at length so little these days, that it will make your hand ache! Although you will want to word process your submitted coursework, you should think about other opportunities for hand writing, such as note taking. You need to be used to writing at length, at speed and maintaining legibility, and note taking provides the perfect opportunity for this.

PCs in examinations?

There were reports recently in the newspapers about this topic. Evidently Edinburgh University is seriously considering allowing certain examination work to be written on computers. This is seen as avoiding the "dual strain" of taking the exam and the psychological brain twisting of writing when you are used to typing. Dia Hounsell, Professor of Higher Education, was reported as saying "ten years from now, I'm not sure there will be any handwritten entries in certain subjects." So, the difficulty is recognised, but who knows when and to what extent any change will come in. The advice here remains firm: be sure you have some practice in handwriting essays and that when you must do so it does not dilute the quality of what you produce.

Other differences in examinations include:

- *No built in spell checker*. Making sure you know how to spell the key terms, and careful proof reading will be critical.
- *Inability to move text around after it is written*. This makes thinking about and writing an essay plan before you attempt to answer the question very important. (If you do need to add a section write "see A below" and then under a heading "A" write the additional text. Don't just use a star or you'll find it hard to add multiple additions if this is necessary.)
- *Working under a short time limit*. Whilst coursework has a deadline it is not like the short duration of an examination. You need to plan how long you can afford to spend on each answer and stick to it.

Top tips for writing essays in examinations

1. If you have a choice of which essay questions to answer, don't rush to select them. A little longer spent at this stage, thinking about the structure and broad content required, will ensure you make the right selection, and don't get half way through an essay, only to discover you don't have quite the right material at your fingertips. In particular be wary of a question which sounds like something you have revised but has a different angle; don't go off down the wrong track.
2. If you feel you could tackle more essays than the number required, then think carefully about which ones will allow you to best show the knowledge and views that you have. If an essay question is in more than one part, make sure that you can answer each part; don't be drawn in by a question of which you can answer only one aspect.
3. Decide how long you will spend on each essay, and stick to it. Don't forget to check the clock every now and again. Remember to spend time according to the allocation of marks. If you run out of time on one of the essays, take two or three minutes only to jot down the rest of what you would have written in bullet points. Leave a suitable space before moving onto the next one. If you have time at the end you can return to the space you have left and complete your essay in more detail. Always remember to do your bullet point list before you move onto the next question, while the first topic is still foremost in your mind.
4. Make sure that you tackle each essay individually. You may wish to note down initial ideas for each one, but once you have started writing focus on that particular essay, and do so without distraction.
5. Plan and structure your essay before you start to write. It is not like using a computer where you can write the text in any order and go back to add large sections of text at a later stage. Time taken planning is time well spent. Consider the number of scripts your examiner will have to mark. Make it easy for them to give you high marks by structuring your essay well, so the key points stand out. Don't forget that even in an examination you still need a clear introduction, conclusion and so on.
6. Once you have finished, take time to re-read your essays (you will need to allow for this in allocating time). You will be writing under pressure and at speed, and may need to tweak a few sentences to ensure their clarity. However brilliant the concept you are trying to express might be, it will not gain you any marks if your lecturer cannot understand what you mean. You must ensure also your responses are legible, and appropriately laid out for formulae, mathematical symbols and the like.
7. It is unlikely that you will be able to leave the examination hall before the end of the exam. If you finish significantly early check if you have completed the paper correctly and written the right number of essays. If you do have some time then don't waste it, use it to check your work again. Correcting spelling and grammar will improve clarity; any aspect of your work you find to positively amend may usefully improve it further.

6 LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

The following example speaks for itself. You can see and read what was written. You can see how it was commented on and you can see how it was marked. You can see how things help make something good and how other things make something poor, or at least dilute its effectiveness – often unnecessarily. By observing good examples and the comments that they prompt you can learn something about what to do and also what not to do; as you can, of course, from the marking and critique of your own work.

A caution: the intention here is to lead you into a useful habit of observation and analysis. It is *not* suggested that you do best by copying the work of others slavishly in every detail. Your own style, as has been pointed out, can and should help you. And the very real dangers of plagiarism have already been spelt out firmly.

The range of essays students must write and also the wide range of courses taking place is huge. Space prohibits having an example of everything and I have therefore selected a topic that is not technical and can, I believe, be read and understood by anyone and will thus make this chapter useful. The essay was written not too long before this book was published. The example is:

- *Real*: (an actual essay and the real comments and marks it prompted seem to be likely to be of most use – indeed swapping essays with fellow students is a well proven and useful tactic of many people and one that can certainly be recommend)
- *Complete*: many books contain extracts from essays (real or contrived) but what is most useful is seeing the whole shape of something in order to critique how well it works)
- *Understandable*: and thus not relating to too specialised a subject; there is nothing here about quantum physics for instance
- *Manageable*: the brief for written work varies. Some pieces would be too short to be useful here, others too long to accommodate, however useful they might be, so that selected and reproduced is in the mid-range, typically about 2000 words

Having read through this section I hope you will be encouraged to seek out more examples, either from fellow students or others, and to get into the habit if comparing what you do on your own topic with other work. The overall idea is to identify and avoid weaknesses and build in and build on those elements that make work stand out and do the job you need to be done to prompt good marks.

Note: I am grateful to the people who allowed us to discuss this work and reproduce it here; they are mentioned specifically later. First, some thoughts about the brief for essay assignments.

An example of guidelines

The educational establishment that the chosen student was attending was not a major factor in selecting an example. This essay was written for an Open University (OU) course. Some may feel that is not typical so let us explain why it is included. First, it should be said at once that the standards there, of teaching, students and results is high, but it is another characteristic of the OU that makes it appropriate in this list.

It is simply in the name. Although students do have some interactive sessions, it is in the nature of an open course that matters, including essay setting and writing, are conducted at a distance. In a university a lecturer must set an essay question and make sure that students understand the brief. Although there may be notes to guide people and some aspects of the brief may be written, usually there is an opportunity to tell students about it too and to answer questions.

At OU this is not possible. Everything happens at a distance and essay setting must be made clear in writing and must have sufficient precision to act as a total brief. The guidelines that are therefore issued are clear and comprehensive; indeed they represent an object lesson of such guidance. Before getting to the example, which is from an OU student, we thus start by quoting some of the guidance material OU issue. This makes a dramatically good example of what must be thought about and born in mind prior to writing an essay and we are grateful to The Open University for permission to reproduce it here.

These guidelines are, of course, one particular way of approaching this (and we are not suggesting that it take precedence over what guidance your own educational establishment provides), but all the points made here are eminently sensible and provide food for thought for any student faced with an important essay to write.

THE O.U. GUIDANCE

Let's go through this extract sequentially. *Note:* this links to the essay example which is on an arts history course. Some of what follows is a verbatim quotation and some is just described (the full details being less important). The section that this creates provides a clear

overview of the need to carefully follow a brief and of the kind of detail that is important if you are to deliver something that matches the brief and is rated highly. It implies also how easy it is to overlook some seemingly small detail and then find that doing so dilutes your overall standard and gets you marked down in some way.

The headings that follow reflect the order of the OU instructions. Text quoted verbatim appears in italics.

Marking criteria used on the course

This part of OU lists seven grades in the way they mark from what is called Pass 1 (A): 85 – 100% to Bad fail: 0 -14%. The way two grades are described is shown here: you can usefully have this much detail in mind before you put pen to paper as it were on an assignment of yours.

It is difficult to break down precisely the basis of the allocation of marks to an assignment. Each assignment is unique in the combination of qualities, strengths and weaknesses it demonstrates.

Nevertheless, you might find the table of marking criteria given below a useful guide to the general characteristics you should seek to develop in your own assignments.

University scale score	Performance standard	General criteria applied
85-100	*Pass 1 (A)*	*Special signs of excellence, e.g. unusual clarity, originality or coherence of argument; excellent understanding and application of course material; a deft and thoughtful use of evidence; lucid expression of ideas.*
70-84	*Pass 2 (B)*	*Approaching but not quite achieving the standards required of Pass 1. A Pass 2 answer will typically demonstrate a richer and more developed argument or analysis than Pass 3, with a clearly stated, coherent introduction and conclusion. An intelligent application (as well as choice) of evidence will also be characteristic. Relevant issues will have been identified and debated effectively. The greater the number of such features in the assignment, the higher the level in this gradation of marks.*
30-39	*Bare fail*	*More relevant content than a clear fail, but seriously marred by vagueness, error or a general apparent lack of understanding of the course or of the question set, perhaps exacerbated by weak expression.*

Next the OU document sets out some overall guidelines, stressing that it is important to follow all the instructions and the importance of deadlines (and what to do if one proves impossible to hit for some tangible reason – no doubt OU is as unlikely to give you extra time for a hangover as any other establishment). Then, after a few words about the role of assignments (what OU refer to as TMAs – Tutor-marked assignments) in an overall course, it sets out some detailed instructions all as you will see from what is shown here (again in italics) very sensible and of general application.

Planning your TMAs

… The following points are good practice in all TMAs which require an answer in the form of a continuous essay:

- *Always begin by scrutinizing the question you are asked: what jobs does it ask you to do and which issues does it raise? What are the key words you must bear in mind if*

you want to construct a relevant answer? One of the key causes of poor performance in essay writing is inadequate scrutiny of a question and the demands it makes.

- *Tease out the meanings of any key words. Use the question's key issues, tasks and terms as a basis for defining and refining the structure of your essay. You need to organise your material in a way that makes the key issues and your approach to handling them highly prominent.*
- *Scan the section(s) of course material to which the TMA relates (bearing in mind any guidance notes provided with the TMA) to see which parts will be most relevant to the TMA you are tackling. The inclusion of irrelevant material/point in your assignment will undermine its quality.*
- *Make notes on these relevant sections of course material, and take care to consider how this material fits into the logic of your answer: for example, into the point – counterpoint – conclusion structure of a well-rounded argument.*
- *Organise your essay by making a plan and sorting your notes under headings. You can do this either way before you start writing or after you have prepared a first draft: choose whichever way suits your method of working.*
- *Review your notes and plan, and place your points in the most effective order possible, so that you construct a coherent argument or progression of ideas in your assignment.*
- *In general, you should open a new paragraph for each new substantial point you make. Announce that point clearly at the beginning of the paragraph, make clear its relationship to your proceeding point and/or to the question in general (in order to ensure a coherent flow of argument throughout your essay) and devote the rest of the paragraph to amplifying and illustrating the point you make. Paragraphs which are too short (three lines or so) will not allow you to develop or illustrate sufficient any points you make. Those which are too long (a page or so) are probably insufficiently focused.*
- *Make sure that the evidence you cite to support your points is appropriate and that you give a source for any quotation (see 'Presenting your TMAs' below). Remember that in many art history questions the most effective evidence will include detailed reference to a specific text or work of art.*
- *Begin your essay with an introduction which sets out briefly the way you have interpreted the task(s) set by an assignment and the way in which you intend to tackle the task. If the question asks you to take sides in an argument, you may wish to outline your own perspective – in support of a given proposition, against it or seeing points on both sides. Your method here will be determined by the way in which the question is worded. For example, in a 'To what extent do you agree with the following view …' question, you will have to state clearly, at some point, the extent of your agreement or disagreement with a given point of view. Your introduction may be the best place to do this. You may wish to say, for example, that you entirely agree (or disagree) with the set proposition or that you agree in some cases but not in others. Alternatively, you could work cumulatively throughout your essay to an overall judgement stated clearly in your conclusion, but this overall judgement must be delivered at some point.*

- *Round off your essay with a conclusion in which you summarize your main points and restate (or state for the first time) your general response to the question posed.*
- *In art-historical essays in particular, it is important to be careful about how you discuss your own emotional responses to works of art. Describe the qualities you observe in the things you look at and remember that feelings and emotions, while they may be experienced in front of works of art, are not properties which the works themselves have (i.e. paintings are things and don't have emotions). If you ascribe an emotional quality to a painting, you must say how and why you are making the ascription. The feeling you experience may be strong, but it will not tell us anything about your understanding of the work of art unless you can account for it in terms of qualities observable in the work. Video 2, Understanding Painting and Sculpture, explores this process.*

If you are asked to discuss the relationship between form and meaning, it is not enough to describe formal elements without discussing the effects and ideas they generate. For example, 'the painting has a low viewpoint' is less effective than 'the painting's low viewpoint allows the viewer to see a greater expanse of sky and emphasizes the cloud formations and the effects of light on them, which in this case are mellow. This evokes ideas of natural harmony. By 'meaning' we mean the ideas, feelings and associations evoked by a work of art. But these aspects must be linked tightly, in any pictorial analysis, with the specific formal aspects which generate them.

What we're looking for is a close link between cause (formal aspect or feature of a work of art) and effect (meanings generated).

If you have not recently completed any essays, you may find the following a useful additional source of advice on planning essays and on study skills in general: E. Chambers and A. Northedge, The Arts Good Study Guide, The Open University, 1997. It is not required reading on this course, but should be easily available from bookshops. Alternatively, Writing at University: A Guide for Students by Phyllis crème and Mary R. Lea, Open University Press, 1997, is a useful practical guide to the complete process of writing.

It should be clear that these points are relevant, helpful and that, topic apart, the points made are very much of general relevance for many students doing different courses. The next section of OU guidance focuses on presentation of work.

Presenting your TMAs

Your TMAs should be legible. It will be difficult for a tutor to judge the force of your points or the effectiveness of your writing if he or she cannot read your writing. It will also be essential in the examination that your writing is legible. If you have a special difficulty with your handwriting which cannot be overcome by extra attention to its neatness, please contact your Regional Office to ask about the different forms of support which may be available to you in presenting both your TMAs and you exam answers. Word-processed assignments will be welcome, but this mode of presentation will not, in itself, attract extra marks. When presenting your assignment please bear in mind the following points:

a) *Word length*

A word length is indicated for each assignment. It is important to work within the limit given (i) in order to ensure that you and your fellow students are working within fair and equal constraints and (ii) in order to acquire the skill in concise expression which will be essential in the exam. While tutors may show some slight leniency over observations of the word limits set for early assignments, penalties in the form of deducted marks may be applied to essays which show a significant disregard for the limits set in later assignments. It is therefore a good idea to establish as early as possible the habit of estimating how many words of your own writing typically fit on to a page. As a general rule, if your answer is severely over length you will need to edit for relevance or reduce the detail or range of evidence and/or background description you have provided. If your answer is severely under length you may not have understood the full implications of the question and should check its wording. It is, however, possible for a shorter essay of appropriate quality to score a high grade. Please note that the word length includes quotations and references, but not your bibliography (see p.9).

b) Size of paper

Please use A4 paper wherever possible, as this will be compatible with the Open University stationery supplied to students and tutors.

c) Margins

Please leave a wide margin (approximately 4 cm) in which your tutor can write comments on the script of your assignment. Some tutors prefer their students to write on alternate lines or just on one side of the paper rather than leave a wide margin. This is the kind of advice you should receive from your tutor in his or her introductory letter.

d) Numbering pages

Please number the pages of your assignment for ease of reference for both you and your tutor.

e) Information on each page

Make sure your name and personal identifier are shown at the top of each page of your assignment.

f) Writing out the question

The TMA question should always be written out in full at the head of your assignments. There is no need, however, to reproduce passages of text or guidance notes supplied with TMAs.

g) How to set out illustrations

If you wish to include photocopied or printed illustrations of visual images to which your assignment refers, please add these as an appendix. Number them clearly and add captions. Make sure there are clear references to any illustrations in the body of your essay.

h) Underlining conventions

If you are submitting a handwritten assignment, underlining should be used as a substitute for the italics which would be used in printed text, i.e. to indicate the title of a book or painting or to emphasize a particular word.

i) Quotations, references and bibliography

Lengthy quotations (which will be calculated as part of your total word length) should be avoided if possible. There will be times, however, when a verbatim quotation of a few words or sentences will complete or illustrate nicely a point you are making. If your quotation is very short, you might incorporate it into one of your own sentences, thus:

> *The evidence does seem to support Crow's view that Watteau's art conveys an '…ambiguity of costume and status'*
>
> – (Crow, Painters and Public Life, p.55).

Here, the ellipsis (represented by three dots) indicates the parts of the quoted sentence you are omitting in order to make the quotation fit grammatically, and in a way that makes sense, with your own sentence. Longer quotations should be introduced by a colon, as follows:

The status of photography in the Victorian age influenced the public reaction to images of the nude:

> *'From its inception photography was discussed as a process that encompassed both technical and artistic concerns. Contemporary definitions of photography as "truth" contradicted the concept of the nude as art. The female nude was hailed as an object of aesthetic delectations when it came to painting or sculpture, but not so with photography – a medium considered incapable of transcending of its subject.'*
>
> – (Smith, "The Victorian Nude", p.55)

I will end the full reproduction of this text there. For the record what is shown here is followed by a paragraph about how, precisely, to set out references so that it is clear where material or ideas quoted in an essay originates. This kind of form is important too and every student should carefully follow the particular guidelines that they are given. While such details may not lead to lost marks if they are ignored, doing so is hardly likely to put a tutor in the right frame of mind to give you the best mark.

The briefing ends with a paragraph headed simply "Plagiarism". This starts: *Every word of your essays, apart from quotations, must be your own.* Confirmation, if such were necessary that this is something taken very seriously by every academic establishment of any sort. Let's now examine an essay written with these guidelines in mind.

AN EXAMPLE

This was written by someone studying for a degree in Art History. It is about 1700 words in length.

Nicolas Poussin's *Eliezer and Rebecca,* and Claude Lorrain's *Landscape with Aeneas at Delos.* a) How do the form and content of each work contribute to its overall meaning. b) Provide some reasons why these works have acquired canonical status in western art.

a) On one level, the subject of Poussin's painting reflects its biblical title. On the other, some elements of its construction might suggest it as an allegory for the Annunciation. It is also a demonstration by the artist of his classical learning and intellectual aspiration to history painting.
The most striking aspect of the picture is the arrangement of 14 brightly lit, highly coloured and delineated figures across the central part of the canvas. Like a frieze on a temple entablature, it has a kind narrative sequence and the most important characters are emphasised by having more space around them. Poussin wants to focus our attention on Eliezer and Rebecca. They are placed nearly central and close to the picture plane so that the viewer feels he is a close witness to the action. The horizontal shape of the picture, to accommodate all the figures, is given some vertical symmetry by the right pillar and the distant building rear left that also serve to frame and emphasise the main figures.

A diagonal on the right foreground from the feet of the last figure on the right passing Rebecca's toes intersects at the front of the picture with another diagonal from the feet of the two brightly lit women on the left. The effect is a foreshortening to recess the figures at the edges and to push Eliezer and Rebecca forwards. The effect

of the brightly coloured clothes make the whole figure group stick out against the darker background.

The limit of the rear of the foreground plane is marked by the well delineated and subtly lighted jar on the head of women centre left set against the hazier building behind. A similar effect is performed by the pillar on the right. The background is not relevant to the story detail, buts its depiction in a grand Italianate manor and the omission of Eliezer's camels might suggest an altogether more high-minded vision by Poussin than the Genesis story.

All the women are portrayed as idealised beauties. Their style of dress, hair, and enigmatic facial features are copies from classic statuary. The hand-on-hip pose of the woman third right, and Rebecca's foot, are nearly identical to those of the *Cesi Juno* in Rome. Poussin uses subtle tones of light and shade to model the folds of the material and the anatomy beneath. We see this also on Eliezer's tunic to suggest its movement, echoing that of his left foot. Eliezer is not static but clearly approaching Rebecca.

The poses of the figures are significant. Rebecca stands out from the rather louche attitude of those on the right and the bustle and chat of those on the left. She is the most delicately drawn, the most poised, the most elegant and with embroidery on her dress; these mark her out as the 'chosen one'. The colouring also gives the same message by the strong contrast of her cool blue dress to the warm oranges and the reds to her left and right. The scene is brightly lit from the upper left. The positions of the pink and yellow women on the left and the bright illumination on their shoulders form a strong diagonal as if they are pulling the light towards the central figures. Eliezer's back is the light and his positioned to throw a shadow across Rebecca – the only strong shadow in the painting, perhaps an allegory for the presence of God. To reinforce this, Poussin has obscured the features of Eliezer's face (by convention the face of god is unknown and never shown). Finally, the interaction of the advancing Eliezer and the slightly defensive pose of Rebecca is mirrored by the words of the annunciation story "…she was troubled at his saying and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be." (1).

Like Poussin, Claude has used an ancient text – Virgil's *Aeneid,* but the emphasis of the picture is less upon the characters than on the landscape. Rather than pulling things forward, the composition is designed to push our eye away from the front plane and into the landscape. The scale of the main figures near the columns indicates the viewpoint is distant and high up, giving a panoramic view. The heads of the two figures on the parapet upper right (who are drawing attention to the bas relief and

the metopes) are the same size as the main group, indicating our eye level is midway between them and the main group. In the lower half of the picture the base of the trees is the focal point: a diagonal from the strong line of the bridge on the left, and another from the right connecting the hand of the soldier beneath the portico and the outstretched arm of Anius, intersect there. Further back, the line of the distant port buildings on the left, and the line of the shore opposite connect to a vanishing point in the far distance behind the trees. Finally, the line of the cornice upper right extends our eye out into the distant pale sky.

There is about the picture an atmospheric sense of tranquillity and peace. The poses of the figures betray no sense of urgency; nor can we interpret their facial expressions, they suggest instead a sense of quietly civilised behaviour on a warm and peaceful afternoon. Goats graze drowsily in the middle distance while their keeper rests beneath the trees. Our eye wants to amble around the picture as if Claude invites us to stroll through his landscape like the woman with her child and dog on the bridge crossing a gently flowing stream. What Claude seems to want us to appreciate is the feeling of timeless harmony between man, nature and the geometry of classical architecture – an Arcadian landscape.

The effect of the muted colours is very significant to the sense of calm. The pale greys, greens, blues and sand colours help the landscape recede away. There are no loud primary colours to disturb the eye or the senses. The only red is on the Aeneas's tunic, possibly to identify him, but even this is very pale and only catches the eye in passing, as do the blues on the other figures. The light is from the middle left, but not so brilliant as to cast deep shadows or cause any glitter or dazzle. While the architecture on the left front, the foreground stonework and the figures shows careful linear brushwork, the landscape, sea, sky and distant buildings are more painterly and less defined giving the effect of a warm haze. It has a textural feel more akin to the atmosphere of a watercolour painting.

b) Those behind the foundation of the Academie royale Paris in 1648, notably Charles Le Brun, sought to elevate painting and sculpture from the craft roots of the Maitrise guild to that of a an intellectual and liberal art to rank alongside ancient epic poetry. This elevation led to the promotion of a hierarchy of genres at the head of which was history painting.
Writing in 1669, Andre Felibien, a consultant to the Academie and therefore influential in furthering its ambitions for high art, suggested the artist could show "…the force, nobility and greatness of his art" through the depiction of the human figure ("Gods most perfect work on earth") in "legendary tales and allegorical compositions" (2). This included biblical subjects. He saw such art as a teaching tool – "we must… educate pupils accordingly" (2) – which could help institutionalise and perpetuate such values. Underlying these values was the cultural reverence for the art, architecture and literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans. This was the classical tradition stretching back through the Renaissance and with roots from Plato in 400 BC. Classical statuary was held to represent the very zenith of form and beauty in nature and was, consequently, the very best model for artists to study. The history painter, therefore, was not merely a technician but a master of grand intellectual design and concept.

The role of the Academie must also be seen within the context of the cultural, political and economic situation of the mid 17th century. The patrons of art where largely those with wealth, learning and power – the king, his court and the Roman Catholic church. Poussin counted amongst his patrons both Louis XIV and Cardinal Rospigliosi. France at that time was becoming a significant military and political force and in this climate high art was symbolic of civilisation, power and glory, not only to the state and its aspirations, but also to those associated with it. Through its emphasis on history painting the Acadamie was an intellectual elite in tune with the system upon whose patronage it relied.

> In the context of the aspirations of the Academie in 1648 we can see how and why a history painting like *Eliezer and Rebecca* quickly acquired canonical status. Poussin's position was reinforced by 17th century theorists such as Bellori and Felibien
>
> The position of Claude's picture in 1672 appears different. In spite of its classical references it is, in essence, merely a landscape, next to bottom in the hierarchy of genres of the time. However, canons and hierarchies are always subject to debate, evolution and change due to shifting political and social ideas. Eventually each genre contained its own canon and the old hierarchy withered. A good example of this is the popularity 100 years later of Chardin's genre and still life work. The portability of smaller work (and Claude's painting is relatively small) became attractive to private collectors who replaced state and church patronage. By the start of the 19th century, Claude's work was clearly canonical and much revered by J.M.W. Turner.

Note: this was followed, as is usual, by a list of sources. The details of these may not be relevant to the reader here (and in this case refer mainly to OU material), but the fact of them and how they relate to the essay is, so the list is shown here.

Notes and sources

1. Gospel of St Luke. Chap. 1 vv 29
2. Andre Felibien, from the preface to *Conference de L'Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture,* as printed in *Art and its Histories,* ed. Steve Edwards pp 34 – 36

Bibliography

1. OU Book 1. *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art.* pp 1 – 187
2. OU *Study Handbook* 1
3. Video 1 and 2
4. TV1 and audio 1 – part 1 and 2.

MARKING: this received a mark of 83% and was described as being based on sound analysis and making detailed and relevant points. There were no adverse comments on the quality of the writing, indeed this was regarded as being well up to the job. Similarly the sequence and structure worked well and the essay was regarded as accurately addressing the question. Other comments on what was the first essay by the student at the start of his course related to details of the two paintings discussed and to points that could have been added or expanded (the details do not matter here). The correct emphasis perhaps comes

over time and from the way earlier work is commented on, indeed a learning process in this respect seems to have been in evidence here as the next essay by this student received a higher mark (85%)!

Note: at this point let me issue a formal thank you to both the Open University and Charles Proudfoot who wrote the essay used as an example; your assistance is appreciated, and has added an additional practical element to this text.

Dealing with criticism

Having considered an actual essay and seen something of the kind of comments that can accompany their return to you, we review more about criticism, touched on briefly earlier) and put this in specific context.

Some comments made will be positive and that is rewarding, but also dictates action.

ACTION: when you receive positive comments do not just heave a sigh of relief. Note them and resolve to deploy again any approaches that are praised. This may apply to all aspects of an essay: the research that preceded it, the way the argument is presented and the quality of the writing.

Conversely comments made about your essays may sometimes seem to focus almost exclusively on the things that are less than perfect.

Note: remember that this is less a question of things that are right or wrong in a black and white sense (though sometimes this may be the case), rather a case of opinion with your lecturer's experience being considerably more at this stage than your own. It is a natural human reaction to become defensive and "fight back" in the face of criticism. So any conversation about an essay or resulting from comments made in writing can then deteriorate into an argument and as things are banged to and fro nothing very much is achieved. Left alone resentment can overtake a constructive approach and lead to a missed opportunity in terms of learning lessons that will help rack up the success of future writing.

But any commentary *is* going to spend time on difficulties – it goes with the territory so to speak – and you must be ready to deal with this. Three intentions should be uppermost in your mind in this respect, over and above a general desire to put the best complexion on everything.

- **Achieving accuracy:** here your intention is to ensure that the right facts are considered. Before you allow yourself a response you must be clear what is being said: is a comment about content, argument or the manner in which matters are put over. It is easier to discuss specifics and questions may well be the route to identify them. Never argue with anything but the true facts, checking what is really meant is the first step to responding to what is said in the right way.
- **Giving an impression of objectivity:** if every criticism is seen simply to put you into automatic defensive mode, then consideration or discussion will be unlikely to be constructive. Using an acknowledgement to position what follows is always useful. It:
  - indicates you feel there is a point to discuss (if you do not, then we are back to achieving accuracy – see above)
  - shows that you are not going to argue unconstructively
  - makes it clear that you intend to respond in a serious and considered fashion
  - gives you a moment to think (which may be very useful!) and sets up the subsequent discussion so that you can handle it better.

Just a few words may be all that is necessary here. Starting with a "yes" gives it power – *Yes, I can see there was a problem with that* – and sounds right as you move towards learning from what is being said.

- **Dealing with the points raised:** now the job is to deal with the matter. Mechanistically the options are few and therefore manageable. You may need to explain why a difficulty occurred, then there are three routes to handling things:

1. *Clarify the problem:* you need to understand the nature of every comment, as was said above is it about content or your ability to explain clearly, for instance
2. *Agree the difficulty:* after all, there is no point in trying to argue that black is white. Most ordinary mortals have some problems during the amount of written work that many courses involve. If it is clear you are open to revision and change any discussion will be easier and more constructive
3. *Resolve to let comments change your future approach:* you need to make mental and actual notes of what you intend should happen next, so that constructive comments are kept in mind and act as signposts in the writing of subsequent essays.

Remember that the prime purpose of any critique is to set the scene for success in your *next* essay, not argue – with yourself or your tutor - about what cannot be changed. None of us can turn the clock back, but all of us can learn from experience. So the key thing to include when the discussion touches on difficulties, is the lessons that have been learned for the future.

The list of implications and actions here is considerable. Weaknesses may have crept in because of unforeseen circumstances, lack of care, a misunderstanding, an inappropriate focus or a host of reasons; alternatively you may have made a simple slip (and only need to make a firm mental note not to let it happen again). There may be lessons to learn, but ultimately the emphasis needs to be on what happens next, and this allows a return to the most constructive elements of the critique and dialogue.

ACTION: if there is one area that needs particular care it is in your response to criticism. You will often know what is likely to be raised (be honest!): be ready for any such feedback and have a constructive response ready.

A final point here: the constructive approach commended as a response to criticism is something that can be usefully deployed in many ways, formally and informally in everything from a one to one meeting with a tutor to a moment of self-reflection.

Summary

Let's recap: while noting again the contribution that careful research, analysis and preparation make, there is no doubt that being able to write well has a direct effect on your life, work and results at university. It:

- Enables you to complete your work, assignments and obtain good grades
- Saves you time by enabling you to get assignments completed, and completed well, without endless uncertainty and revision
- Contributes to you being seen as having a positive profile with academic staff (and maybe others) as a serious student. This is true of everything from putting in written work on time to the quality of work itself, and the impact of being well thought of may have wide implications
- Ultimately it is a significant factor in influencing the grades you get in exams and in whatever qualification you receive as you finish your course.

As such embracing a suitable and appropriate writing style is something well worth any effort it takes to achieve. It is important to make a good start, viewing your early efforts constructively and working to make any changes that may be necessary to achieve what you want. It may seem daunting initially, yet it is very much an area where practice makes perfect – in other words this is something that gets easier (and quicker) with practice.

AFTERWORD

And finally …

A final thought as we come to the end. At this point, I intend that you will be aware of two things. First, you will know the importance of having good academic essay writing skills. The time it takes to write a good essay in the style and form that academia demands may be little more (or the same) than is needed to write a lack-lustre one, but what it will do for you is so much more.

Secondly, you will know something of how to go about acquiring and deploying suitable writing skills. The process of getting to grips with this is not complex. Some time and effort is certainly necessary and every stage from how you view a question to research and actually "getting it down on paper" needs care, but each stage of the process is essentially manageable. It is something best tackled early in your course so that you can benefit from being able to create good essays and do so more easily throughout your time at university.

Whilst not wanting to devalue anything said in the course of the book (success is largely in the detail), one thing is sure to help. All writers are commended to read widely. The essayist Richard Steele said: "Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body". He was probably talking about the content, the power of reading to inform, but it is a truism that exposure to writing, particularly if you take note, can progressively teach you a good deal about everything from grammar to style. Every kind of reading can help: a novel may contain powerful language and description and something like popular science writing can help with the process of explaining difficult ideas in a comprehensible way.

Your course itself may necessarily involve a good deal of reading. Professor Mark Connelly, who kindly helped with this book, tells me that students studying history on the kind of course with which he is concerned are often surprised at the number of books they must read before they get to the final exam. So opportunities abound in addition to any recreational reading you may undertake. In addition it may help to read books about language and writing.

The more interest you take in language, the more you notice what makes it good or bad, then the more it will influence you. There is no harm in copying examples of style and approach that appeal to you, nor is there in adapting and tweaking things for your own purpose.

For instance, I noticed only recently the device of the very short sentence turned into one word sentences to create added emphasis. It. Really. Works. And, like much else, provided it is not overused, it adds to the power to make the point you want. And making a considered point and making it well can without doubt help you towards an excellent essay in suitable (academic) style and ultimately to a successful graduation. Besides sound writing skills are a career skill that can potentially help you throughout your working life.