

A Guide to Better Essay Writing

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Introduction

This booklet aims to be a practical guide to essay writing. A generic approach to writing is introduced, enabling you to write in a clear and structured way, while at the same time allowing you to develop your own argument in a creative way. A good essay combines your own content with a clear structure.

I wrote this booklet because many mistakes in writing essays are unnecessarily repeated times and times again. These mistakes can easily be avoided, and will allow you to get the credit you deserve. Nothing in this document is rocket science, but most students enter university without having been taught how to write effectively. Merely by studying at a university, however, no-one will learn how to write good essays. By following just a few steps, most mediocre essays can be improved. I tried to include many examples taken from my own essays to make this guide a practical one.

A key idea that I wish to convey, is that it really matters *why* we write an essay. There is no universal approach to writing, and the reason of writing will be the best guide as to *how* to write. It'll guide us to *whom* we write for, what level of details we include, what kind of language we choose, and so on.

Audience

The audience is whom we write for. In the situation of a university essay, the audience is often imaginary. That is not to say that your essay will not be read properly, but that whom you write for sometimes actually differs slightly from who is marking your essay.

Assuming your essay is being marked by a knowledgeable teaching assistant, why write at all? She might know everything you have to say, or even know it better... On the other hand, you might be writing an essay about an area your marker does not specialize in. Hard to tell? The solution is to pitch your essay towards a reasonably well educated person, but one who lacks the specific expertise. Imagine someone who has done an introductory course in your subject, for example.

By writing for an educated person, you no longer have to explain some of the fundamental aspects of your subject matter. However, it'll still be necessary to explain some of the more specialized issues—maybe just to remind your reader. Practically, pitching your essay this way means that a non-specialist will not be lost when reading your writing. It's a useful skill to write difficult things in a relatively easy way. At the same time, if your essay is read by your really knowledgeable teaching assistant, she will immediately see that you have grasped the subject matter: that you know what you're writing about.

Sometimes, the question you're set will clearly say what kind of style and level of language is expected. A conventional essay is not the same as a report, nor the same as a press briefing, an entry in an encyclopaedia, or a memo. In each case, you'll have to think about the particular needs: who is your (imaginary) reader, what will they know, what will they want to know?

Preparation

When chefs prepare a meal, they often put all the necessary ingredients on the table before starting (*mise en place*). This is a good way to make sure everything is ready. With essay writing, the process is similar. We don't jump in straight away and start writing, but instead spend a few moments thinking about what we want to achieve in our essay. What do we want to communicate? You may think of these considerations as a plan of attack.

What are the essential ingredients of an essay then? First, you should know what you're going to write. Once you know that, you probably want to consider some examples to illustrate the argument. Illustrations have two functions: firstly, they show that what you write is relevant, and secondly they make your argument more approachable. Having worked out the content—what you're going to include—you'll also need to think a little bit about the structure: in what order you're going to say it. The approach introduced in this booklet will help you with this task.

What Goes In—What Stays Out?

Planning an essay can be difficult. Sometimes there is just too much that you could write about; at other times, there just does not seem to be enough. The following approach may help you to decide what you include in your essay, and equally important, what you don't.

1. **Brainstorming:** Write down the key concepts of the essay in the centre of a page, and link as many ideas that come to mind. If you're unsure what the key concepts are, look out for terms you have come across a lot when reading. In many cases, you're looking for arguments for and against a proposition, so take care to include both sides. If there is no argument against something, make a note of it. Don't be shy to state what you think of the different points.
2. **More material:** Once you're reasonably happy with the ideas you have collected, you should go back to your course material. Sometimes the essay question will identify relevant material for you, but most of the time, it's up to you and your notes. Obviously, if you need more material, this step is important to identify further points to include. It may not strike you as obvious, that you should never skip this extra step, even if you have collected tons of ideas in step one. Going back to your course material will not only ensure you have not missed something important, but also help you decide whether your points are balanced.
3. **Grouping:** By now, you should have a reasonably large collection of ideas linked to your key concepts, and it's time to think about structure. Use coloured pens, numbers, letters of the alphabet, symbols—whatever works for you—and try to group similar ideas together. You might find points for and against a proposition, different theories, or the different components of the concept you're examining.
4. **Selection:** At this stage, you should be very selective. You might have tons of ideas that are linked to the question, but we are not normally interested in quantity. Go

over the different points and ask yourself whether they are relevant to your answer. Does this particular point tell us anything new? Be rigorous, and kick out anything that will not help answering the question.

5. Illustrations: Having decided what stays in, try to think of useful examples. An example is useful if it's apparent how it links with your argument. If you need an extra paragraph just to establish the link, then you might not have picked the most suitable example. It's often possible to use the same example for different points.
6. Ordering: Now that you know what goes into your essay, think about the order. The way you grouped the ideas will determine much, and should you have time to spare, you even might want to consider alternative approaches: and then pick the best one. Realistically, we never have that much time, and you should focus on a coherent line of thought. Sometimes it's reasonable to first look at the arguments for, then those against, and finally mitigate. At other times, it makes sense to look at what different theories say in turn, or work from one example to the other. What is important is that there is a clear line of thought, where one bit builds on the other. Make a note of this ordering, and you have just written most of your outline.

Why do we bother going through this procedure? It helps to work like chefs do: having all the necessary ingredients at hand before starting with the actual writing. Imagine a chef starting to bake a lemon tart, finding out half way though that he only has strawberries in the fridge. Surely he can cobble something together, maybe even produce very nice strawberry tartlets. This is no problem for our chef preparing a meal for the family at the weekend, but what about if he entered a competition for the best lemon tart in town?

I use a special essay organizer to make sure everything is in place before I start writing. A sample planner is included in figure 1, a full-sized version can be found in appendix 1. You can use this template, or create your own. At the top, I collect the course the essay is for. Normally I use the abbreviations the university uses, or make up my own where there are no such given abbreviations. I also record the number, such as 3 for the third essay in that particular course. The deadline comes in big letters at the top. The essay question is central, so I copy this onto my planner. To make sure that I have understood the question, I rephrase it. Ticking the format needed (essay, report) and word limit makes me aware of these. Similarly, I collect the process and content word separately, making sure that I really identified them. The relevant material is also collected. I usually use the name of the author, or simply *chapter 3*. The key concepts and theories have

Course	#	Deadline	Grade	
Question			Words: _____	Format: <input type="checkbox"/> Essay <input type="checkbox"/> _____
Rephrased			Process Words	Content Words
Material	Knowledge and Skills		Approach	
Contents	Key Concepts	Key Writers/Theories	Include	
Illustrations	Skills		Structure	
Outline	Notes		References	
Points to Work On				

Figure 1: Sample essay planner. A full-sized version can be found in appendix 1.

their separate place at the centre. Sometimes your tutor or the written instructions will tell you that a particular skill is focused on: I make a note of these, too. Under *Approach*, I take a note of some key points or illustrations that just have to go in. I also write down any hints or considerations regarding the structure.

In the bottom half of the organizer, I work these hints into a proper outline with an introduction, definitions, a main body (with sections), and a conclusion. I usually assign a certain number of words to each section, and write them down, too. There is also space for notes and references. At the very bottom, I include what essay skills I want to pay particular attention to. If my tutor mentioned that I should use more examples, that's what comes here. This way I make sure that I at least try to improve on the previous essay. See the section on using feedback on page 36 for more on this.

Using some time to prepare your essay will make sure that you answer the question, and thus you maintain your chances of winning that competition for the best lemon tart in town... None of this work preparing the essay will be wasted. On the one hand, you have made sure you have everything ready to write this essay: no more running out of ideas half way through. On the other hand, your marker will appreciate an essay which is both relevant and coherent.

Getting Directions

Before you can start writing, you have to make sure you understand the question. Some questions are difficult to understand, but usually there are lots of clues as to what is expected. Look out for content and process words. Content words tell you what you're going to write about. Process words, on the other hand, tell you how to do it.

It's a good idea to spend a few moments identifying the content and process words. You may want to underline them in different colours. Once you really know what your task is, you're ready to go. There is a simple way to check yourself whether you have understood the question set: rephrase it. If you're able to write down the question again, using your own words, then you can be sure you know what the question is about. Make sure, though, that you really use your own words, and not just reshuffle the different bits in the question.

For example, take the following question: "Distinguishing between conformity, deviance and crime aids our understanding of British society. Discuss." First, you want to identify the process word, which tells you what kind of answer is required. In this case, the process word is *discuss*. What are the content words? The question tells you to focus on *British society*. This does not mean that you can't bring in an example from the US, for instance, but that you should focus on Britain. Maybe the examples in your course were from the US, and the examiners are keen to see how you apply this to the British case? The question gives you further clues: *conformity*, *deviance*, and *crime* are the key concepts you should use in your answer. I would brainstorm these words before writing.

To make sure, you have understood the question, try to rephrase it. Use your own words, and write it down. One way to rephrase the question is: "If you want to understand British society, it helps to distinguish between conformity, deviance, and crime." In this case, I have not bothered to rephrase the key concepts. This is OK, because I will need to define the key concepts anyway. In most cases, however, try not to use any of the words from the original.

Unfortunately, identifying the content and process words is not always a straightforward task. Sometimes you have to read a bit between the lines, identifying the implicit tasks. Every essay question has some implications that are not immediately apparent. Look out for assumptions, schools of thoughts, or particular theories. Often, essay questions include a statement to be discussed. Such statements in many cases make quite strong assumptions about the world, or follow a certain school of thought. Although these links are not physically written in the question, they too are content words. If you're trying to get very good grades, it's important that you identify such assumptions and work with them.

Process Words

In this box, you find a list of process words that are often used. This list is in part based on Jordan (1999). The process words are given in alphabetical order. Probably the most common process words are: *discuss, describe, explain, compare, evaluate, and criticize.*

Account for asks for an explanation. Even though it looks similar to *give an account of*, this process word is rather different. You should give a description with details. The description should clarify the concept, and don't forget to give reasons.

Analyze calls for an outline of the components. Take the issue, and break it down (divide) into the parts that make up the issue. Your task is not only to describe the different parts of the issue, but also to show (examine) how they relate to each other.

Argue is about making a case. You're often asked to argue for or against something. In order to make a good case, your answer will need to include convincing evidence. Your argument will be more convincing if it's logically structured. Even though the question often asks for a one-sided case, don't forget the arguments against: even if it's to dismiss them. If you don't agree with the proposition, this is fine: what counts is the case you present.

Assess asks you to make a judgement of the value or importance of something. Your answer should focus on both sides of the coin, weighing up the positive and negative aspects. It's often necessary to spend much time on the areas that are disputed. In order to provide a credible answer, back up your answer with references and good examples. Even though you may have a good example from your own experience, it's usually better to choose a more authoritative source.

Calculate asks you to estimate the extent of something. You should take great care to define the key dimensions and determine how they are measured. Weigh up different reasons carefully. In the social sciences, the estimate itself is often secondary to how you evaluate the key dimensions.

Characterize is mostly another word for *describe*. You're looking for the key dimensions (characteristics) of a concept. Often it's necessary to compare to other concepts to make clear the limit.

Classify is very similar to *analyze*. The key difference is possibly that this process word explicitly asks you to come up with some sort of classification: a way to divide. You probably want to spend a bit more time on the boundaries, on how the identified dimensions are different.

Comment is similar to the content words *analyze* and *assess*. It's indeed often considered a combination of the two. Be careful not merely to summarize the issue, but include some form of evaluation. This process word asks you to explain the importance of something. Your ability to describe an issue is usually only appreciated in conjunction with a critical argument.

Compare always involves two or more issues. Focus on what characterizes the issues, and your answer will include both the similarities and differences. This content word often occurs in conjunction with *contrast*. Technically, *compare* is about similarities, but for a balanced answer, you'll need to include the differences, too. Your conclusion may include a statement of which of the issues or options discussed you consider preferable.

Consider asks you to think carefully about something. This process word is sometimes followed by an example or case study, but also a theoretical perspective. Take great care to include these aspects, because you'll be (partly) marked on how well you apply whatever the question is to this particular example or theory.

Contrast is like a twin to *compare*. Two or more issues or options are involved, and your answer should focus on the differences. Technically, *contrast* does not ask you to include similarities, but a balanced answer will include these, too. Your conclusion may include a statement of which of the issues or options discussed you consider preferable.

Criticize asks for a careful judgement of a statement or point of view. You're often asked to make statements about the value or truth of a statement. Make sure you point out faults. It's important to state by which criteria of evaluation your answer is guided. Your illustrations should not be of general nature, but specific. If the illustrative examples are not general in nature, too, then say so. Your answer will judge the merit of the views included in the statement. Often you can—and should—link to underlying theories and approaches. These should be included in the evaluation, too. Your answer also needs to discuss the nature and quality of evidence you cited for and against the different views. Always back up your argument with evidence and reasoning.

Deduce asks you to reach a conclusion based on something. Make clear how you reach this conclusion.

Define may look innocent, but the devil is often in the detail. Similar to *analyze*, you're after the components of an issue of concept. You don't want just any definition, but one that discusses the different meanings of a concept, the different ways it can be interpreted. Often, you can link the answer to how different schools of thought use a term. In this case, your task is to tease out the different understandings and state the different meanings. Your answer necessarily includes an appreciation of the different components, but you should also pay attention to the differences to other concepts: how is it distinct from something else. Precision is important in your answer, and your answer should always go beyond common-sense interpretations. Sometimes you're asked to write for a specific audience, such as a student encyclopaedia, and you should bear this in mind.

Demonstrate asks you to show something as clearly as you can. You'll need to use an example (illustration) to this extent. Make sure the illustration is relevant and state clearly *how* it is relevant.

Describe is one of the most straightforward tasks. You're asked to outline the main aspects of an issue or point of view. Say what something is like. Sometimes the order of events is important. Your answer should always include illustrative examples to bring the argument alive. The structure of the answer is important: don't jump around, picking up bits and pieces on the way. Instead, plan a logical and coherent way in order to cover all the main aspects. This process word often occurs together with others, such as in *describe and criticize*.

Determine asks you to find out something, maybe to calculate or estimate something. You should always describe how you arrive at the answer, including an appreciation of how not to proceed. Be open about the shortcomings or potential dangers of your approach.

Differentiate between something and something else is a combination of *describe* and *define*. You're asked to focus on the differences. Often it'll be necessary to discuss the similarities, too.

Discuss. It's very common to be given a quote or provocative statement, followed by just this word: discuss. Your answer should include an outline of the problems and then evaluate the different arguments or points of view. Weigh up the points for and against. It's important to illustrate your argument, and refer to established work. Very often, your own opinion is asked, usually in form of an evaluation of the different points of view. Look out for key debates that are involved. The statements that come with this process word are often deliberately provocative.

Distinguish between is just another process word for *differentiate between*.

Elaborate asks for a discussion in great detail. Always give reasons and include illustrations. Think carefully about which aspects of a theory or concept are worth exploring in great detail. In this sense, this question often asks you to—implicitly—determine the key components of something. Avoid repetitions of the same point.

Elucidate is very similar to *explain*. You're asked to make clear something. This often involves a clear line of argument, and usually a number of illustrations to bring the argument alive.

Enumerate in principle asks you to put a number to something. In practice, you're normally asked to name and list different aspects, giving an explanation. You should always try to estimate the extent of something, having outlined how you reach this estimate.

Estimate is a close relative to *calculate*, but you're also asked to judge and predict. State clearly how you reached your conclusion or estimate.

Evaluate is similar to *discuss*, but it asks you to focus more on the value or importance of a certain argument or point of view. You should weigh up the different aspects, illustrate the argument, and refer to established works. You'll usually be able to make a statement of the worth of something. Also, see the box on persuasiveness on page 24.

Examine is a process word that asks you to have a close look at something. Consider the different components and parts. Often you can examine an issue using different theoretical perspectives. Always make explicit which perspectives you use.

Explain asks you to focus on how things work. Rather than focusing on things as they are, this process word asks you to focus on how things got there. So you'll always need to give reasons. The answer will include some *describing* and *analyzing*. It's important to make explicit the workings and mechanisms.

Express is just another word to say *describe*.

To what extent is similar to *assess* or *criticize*. You're asked to explore a statement or view. Look out for theoretical and practical limits to the statement, but also include evidence in favour. The typical conclusion highlights the limits of the proposition, but will be neither total acceptance nor total dismissal. Watch out for changes over time and across space: Is the proposition also applicable in other cultures? Was the proposition also applicable in the past?

Identify is a process word that allows you a great deal of liberty. You're expected to choose the examples, features, or arguments for a proposition that you regard the most important ones. It's usually a good idea to point out and list the features first. The choice of these key aspects, however, is often secondary to your answer. Instead, you should focus your attention to the criteria of evaluation: *why* a feature is central. You should defend and justify your choice of picks.

Illustrate is similar to *explain*, but the person writing the question appears to be very keen on illustrative examples. Make sure you have a relevant example, and include enough details to make clear the relevance. Sometimes, you may illustrate the argument with statistics. What is important is that the examples support the argument, and you therefore demonstrate how exactly the examples are relevant. Sometimes a question will ask you explicitly about a figure or diagram to explain or clarify. Take care to follow such instructions carefully. Where nothing is stated, assume that you should include concrete examples.

Indicate asks you to show and explain. Usually you're expected to use a good illustration. Make sure you demonstrate how the example is relevant to the question.

Infer is a process word that asks you to conclude based on facts or a clear line of reasoning. It's important that you state clearly how you reached the conclusion, not just what your conclusion is.

Interpret asks for a clarification and explanation. Rather than just *describing*, you should also give your judgement. An interpretation often highlights how an issue or point of view relates to others, or outlines the different meanings and interpretations there are to it. Usually you're expected to give your own judgement as part of an evaluation of the different aspects.

Justify on the surface asks for a defence of a particular statement, theory, or point of view. You should cite evidence and give examples that support the case. However, for a balanced answer, it'll be necessary to look at the arguments against. The justification thus is a form of evaluation. Your conclusion may be that the statement can't be justified (in the light of certain evidence), or outline limits.

List probably looks as innocent as *describe*, and is in fact closely related. You're asked to classify or catalogue something. Make sure you include how you decided to classify, what criteria you used to put the list in sequence. This process word may mean that you have to list the key components of a concept.

Mention asks you to describe something briefly. This process word usually is used together with others, but do make sure you don't skip this part of the question.

Name is another word for *identify*.

Outline asks you to indicate what the main characteristics or features of a topic or point of view are. Sometimes you'll need to indicate the key events in a sequence. It's very important to follow a clear and logically coherent structure. Your answer may focus on how the different features relate to each other, rather than just describing them.

Prove is a rare process word in the social sciences. You should try to demonstrate that something is true and certain. On the one hand, you should provide convincing examples and evidence that something is the case. On the other hand, you should also demonstrate that the opposite is not the case either. Your conclusion may well be that it's impossible to prove something, but make sure your answer is relevant to the question, not just a philosophical treatment of whether we can prove things.

Quantify is another word for *enumerate*.

Relate is similar to *giving an account of*. You're usually particularly asked to relate one thing to another, demonstrating how they link.

Review is very similar to *assess*. The key difference is that you're asked to write about a topic or area rather than a specific case or statement. The answer will thus include a selection of everything about a topic. Usually it's a bad idea trying to include all the different angles and all the different authors. Instead, you should try to organize your answer, such as into schools of thought, or key proponents. Leaving out less relevant contributions is often the key to a successful answer. Take care not merely to describe who said what, but also to assess the merit of their argument.

Show asks you to indicate something. Make sure you use appropriate evidence and examples to back up your claims. Make clear what something means.

Speculate is similar to *prove*, but different in that you're not asked to come up with a definite answer. The very word used indicates that there will be many different explanations, and you'll have to evaluate the different possibilities. You're thus asked to form an opinion. Very often, this process word is given where you don't have complete knowledge of the circumstances. You should suggest the most likely case.

State asks you to express something carefully. Make sure you cover the different components and be clear. Often you're asked to illustrate something, or demonstrate how two different things link.

Suggest is somewhat similar to *speculate*. You should mention the different possibilities, and choose the most likely one. Make sure you include in the essay the criteria how you evaluate the different possibilities: how you can say that one is the most likely possibility.

Summarize is about the identification of the key points and aspects of an issue or topic. Details can often be omitted, as can be illustrations. However, depending on the tasks, illustrations may be necessary: try to identify the key examples. This process word often occurs together with others, such as *analyze*. It's often easier to first summarize and then move to the second task, but make sure the different parts of the answer link.

Trace asks you to provide a narrative that outlines the progress or sequence of an issue or certain events. Often, a chronological order is the easiest form of structure. Sometimes you'll be asked to write from a particular point of view. Usually, however, you can include the different points of views. The same sequence of events may be interpreted or experienced in different ways by the different participants.

Verify asks you to make sure that something is the case. You're looking for evidence and examples for and against the case. Evaluate the evidence and provide a judgement whether the statement is true or accurate.

Why should we bother with process and content words? You might consider this all a waste of time. Unfortunately, most essays that fail or get a poor grade are essays that don't answer the question. Sometimes, the markers get essays that are brilliantly written, but they can't give a good mark, because the question set is just not addressed. You're not primarily assessed in your ability to write eloquently, or for showing off how much you have read or learnt this term: what you're assessed on is how well you answer the question.

This booklet introduces a simple yet powerful approach that is flexible enough to allow creativity in what you write. Bearing in mind the reason why you write, following this simple approach your essays will come with the necessary structure and be focused on the question set. You still have to write it yourself though...

The Structure

You can follow a simple structure for your essays. The details of this approach are discussed in detail in the subsequent sections. The key idea of this approach is writing in a structured manner, focusing on answering the question that you were set. Not only does this approach help you making sure your answer is relevant, but also will it guide your

reader through your writing. There are specific parts to your essay that you should never leave out. In terms of space, obviously, some parts are more important. Whilst the approach outlined here is very useful for essays, bear in mind that if you write a report or dictionary entry, it'll need adapting. The key ideas, however, can be applied to other forms of writing.

First, you *delimit*. By this, I mean that in your introduction, you address the question. You should not only state how you understand the question, but also how you decide what ideas are not relevant. Next up, you'll need to *define* key terms. The idea is the same as before: to demonstrate that you're aware of different interpretations, but also making sure that your readers understand things in the same way.

The *main part* of your essay is where you do the actual writing. Here you follow the outline you devised during preparation, making sure that it all links to a coherent answer. Next, it's important to *discuss* the implications of your answer. If you discuss strengths and weaknesses of an approach, this is where you want to evaluate them. Now you're done, and you demonstrate this in your *conclusion*. The conclusion demonstrates that you have actually delivered what you promised in the introduction.

Delimiting the Question

First, it's necessary to state to the reader how you understand the question. Not only raises this expectations, but also can you demonstrate that you're focused. Furthermore, you'll avoid that your reader will misunderstand you, or think that you have left out critical aspects. For example, if your question is about crime, you may want to delimit this to contemporary white-collar crime in Britain. Your reader will not be puzzled not to read about the dungeons in medieval France, since you stated that these will not be addressed here. By explicitly delimiting your answer, you also demonstrate that you're aware of the greater picture, or the other possible interpretations. This bit should be as short as possible, but never leave it out.

In an exam situation, it's very important to delimit your answers. Sometimes a particular question is, to a certain extent, tied to a particular module or even a single lecture. By delimiting your answer, you demonstrate that you're aware of this link. In other cases, questions are much more open. In these cases, you also need to delimit your answer. The limits of your analysis are both in terms of content (the medieval dungeons in France) and theories (such as feminist perspectives on consumption). Delimiting works in two ways: saying what is in, and stating what is out.

You may imagine that the essay question is a brief for a job. You have landed the task described, but have not the time to do it yourself. As you are in charge, you decide on a contractor. Think about which contractor is best suited to fulfil the task. In the social sciences, the contractors often are theories or schools of thought. Once you decide who is

best suited for the job, you should state so, and also include a brief justification. It's not uncommon that you'll want to hire out different parts of the job to different contractors.

For example, take the following question: "What kind of mechanisms can explain sudden changes in collective action?" As a typical essay question, it leaves lots of scope. Practically, we can never write everything we know about the topic. Just like we can't try out all the contractors to build a house and decide later on which one was best, we need to make decisions here, too. We want to quash diversions before they develop, and signal to the reader that we know what we are writing about. Answering this question, I might want to focus on tipping models. However, I am aware that there are alternatives, and will state that these will not be ignored completely. By stating, for example, "this essay will focus on tipping models, but alternative approaches will also be outlined briefly," I signal that I know that tipping models are not the only way to go.

Guiding the Reader

After delimiting the answer, we will need a short outline. On the one hand, this gives the reader some sort of direction. This can be really useful, if we are not so successful at linking the different sections later on. The reader will already have an idea what comes up, and not get lost, even if a paragraph diverts a little bit. An essay with an outline will almost always come across as more coherent. On the other hand, the outline will make sure that you—the writer—know where you're going. In other words, an essay with an outline will almost always *be* more coherent.

Such an outline can be understood as guiding the reader. It should be short, because it does not actually answer the question. It should, however, be long enough, to include all the main sections that will be included. Because the guide will be kept general, it acts as a guide to you as the writer, too, not as a straitjacket. The following is an example of such an outline:

This report describes the experience of carrying out a survey in order to measure cultural capital. The actual questions used in the survey are discussed, as are the sampling process and the data collection method. This is followed by an examination of the scale building, with a focus on reliability and validity. At each step, the actual work done is critically examined with regards to how it could have been done better. A short discussion about whether anything was learned about cultural capital completes this report, but first the definition and conceptualization of cultural capital needs to be addressed.

Such an outline gives an idea of what is going to be addressed in the answer, and also roughly in what order. The length of the guide will depend on the essay. A much shorter version is just as good in a different context:

This paper critically reviews an article by Katz-Gerro (2002) that examines this link. In order to do so, there is a focus on research design and the persuasiveness of the results, but other aspects such as the mechanisms included will not be ignored.

There is a simple trick to make your outline a little bit more interesting: keep the first topic you'll write about until the end of the outline. So in your outline, you state in order what you'll do, only that the first topic is mentioned last. The longer example just above makes

use of this trick. Use phrases like “firstly, however, it is necessary to”, or “but before these are discussed, it will be useful to consider first of all.” Not only does this raise expectations, but also does this give you a chance to demonstrate the relevance of the opening section after the introduction. This sense of direction is something your readers will appreciate.

When to Write the Introduction

There are different views on when it’s best to write the introduction. Many write it first, because they write the essay from beginning to end. This is not a good justification as such. It’s a good idea to write the introduction first, because the introduction will delimit the answer, and provide an outline. As such, by writing the introduction, you commit yourself to a plan. It also helps you to stay focused.

This view is countered by those who argue that you never really know where you end up when writing an essay. This is the case, because writing the essay itself is a process by which the outcome—or conclusion—is not always known. Even where you have an idea, where the essay will take you, you might not know the precise details. For these reasons, some write the introduction last: after completing the essays and writing the conclusion. The benefit is that the introduction is about the essay as it exists, not about the essay as it was initially intended. Consequently, the introduction will never make false promises and be tightly focused.

Probably the best alternative is to combine the two, especially when using a word processor where you can change what you wrote. Start with writing the introduction. This will help you stay focused, and make sure you think about the structure and order of the answer before you start writing. This is a good way to make sure the answer is relevant. However, after completing the essay, you come back to the introduction, and modify it as necessary. Maybe the focus has changed; maybe there is now an extra section. Having a careful plan before writing will mean that such changes are often of minor nature.

Defining Key Terms

Having decided what to include in the answer, there is another way to make sure the answer is focused: telling the reader what we are talking about. By defining what the key terms mean, we do two things. Firstly, we show that we know what we are writing about. Secondly, we avoid misunderstandings by settling on a single understanding of the key terms. It might be that your marker understands power in a Marxist way, and you want to approach the essay from a feminist point of view. By providing a brief definition, there will be no misunderstanding. Your marker may not agree with you, but that is not necessary to get good grades. A definition makes sure you and your readers talk about the same things. For example, you can define fruit salad as consisting of bananas, pineapples,

and yellow apples (ideally, you would have a reason for this, too). Having done so, your reader will not object when you later state that fruit salad lacks the vital bits of red.

In order to define the key terms, you first have to bluntly state what they are. Always include the key words included in the question. These have been identified as central concepts for you, and by excluding them, you'll be very likely answering a different question from the one set. There are often other key terms you want to include, and it's usually worth spending some time thinking about which ones are the key concept. This is time worth spending, because you can later use the concepts without giving any further qualifications or comments. For this reason, you should also define the terms carefully. Having defined power in a particular way, for example, every time you use the term in the essay, it only means what *you* want it to be.

Providing the definition of the key terms also works as a signal to your marker that you know what you're talking about. By defining power in a certain way, you demonstrate that you're aware of other interpretations. In fact, it'll often not be necessary to state what the other interpretations are, unless the distinction is a key aspect of the argument. Very often, you'll use the work of somebody else to help you define the key terms. Make sure that you put references accordingly.

The following three paragraphs define the concepts social disadvantage, social mobility, and siblings. The definitions are taken from a range of sources, and referenced accordingly. In the context of another essay, these definitions may be too long or too short.

Social disadvantage, to start with, refers to a range of difficulties a person can be exposed to. Social disadvantages include a lower expectancy in educational attainment, lower prospects at work, or lower status in society (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). It has been demonstrated that social and economic disadvantages in society often come together, leading some sociologists talking about *underclasses* (Steinberg, 1999). Social disadvantage, however, does not necessarily have to be as extreme as that: it describes a relative difficulty in reaching a similar position in society than people not disadvantaged.

Such disadvantage in society has been shown to be transmitted from one generation to another. The term *social mobility* is often used to describe this phenomenon (Braham & Sherratt, 2002). Intergenerational mobility describes the difference between a person's location in society as compared to his or her parents (Goldson, 2004). If social disadvantage is sustained across generations, it is often argued that in one way or another, the disadvantage has been passed on.

Siblings, finally, in the context of this essay, refer to brothers and sisters of the same birth family. This means that siblings are biologically related, as well as living in the same family. For consistency reasons, often siblings are chosen that live in the same family with one other sibling only. This is thought to reduce influences of effects between siblings that are not the concern in the case here (Sandefur & Wells, 1999).

Depending on the length of your essay, you'll have between 2 and maybe 5 key terms. Sometimes it takes a bit of time to think which terms are the central ones. Consider the following phrases as ways to define terms: *X is understood as a process by which, X regards Y as, one view is that there is X so that Y, or X is commonly considered as.*

Sources for Definitions

When writing your definition, there are a number of sources you can use to help you. Using a common-sense definition is hardly ever suitable. In many cases, a definition as found in a specialist dictionary will do. In other cases, you want something even more specialized, and consult your course material. Many introductory books define key terms, and then discuss them in more detail in the chapter. It's important not just to simply copy a definition, but choose what is suitable for your needs. Bear in mind that every text, even a specialized dictionary, was written with a specific purpose in mind. What you need for your essay is likely to be a bit different.

Google and other internet search engines may be an easy way, but they are usually not suitable. Apart from the fact that your source may not be reliable, you're likely to end up with a definition that is either too generic, or from a different area. A definition of power from a physics text may not be what we want in our discipline.

It's often worth spending some time on the key terms. This is the case, because the way you set out this section will direct the remainder of the essay a great deal. Choosing a certain way to interpret a concept rather than another may be just as important as focusing on certain issues and not others in the main part of the essay. Despite its importance, the section providing the definitions should not be too long: focus on the concepts that are really central. These are usually the concepts that are recurring throughout the essay.

Main Part

This part constitutes the main part of your essay. Try to use about 60% of your words for this part. You can understand it as *delivering* what you have promised in the introduction. This part of the essay is often referred to as the main body, or the argument. It's the part of the essay, where you develop the answer. Whilst doing so, it's important to be aware of the question at all time. This is the only way to keep to the topic set.

Ideally, every paragraph is geared towards answering the question. It does not suffice, if you are aware of how a particular paragraph is focused on your task: you need to show the relevance to your reader. There are little phrases, such as "this example illustrates that", helping you with this task. Consider the following example: "The resistance in Harlem insisting to keep an open market in 125th street helped to point out that there are people with different needs in the city (Zukin, 1995)." After outlining resistance in Harlem, these few sentences make it plain what the example showed us: that different people in cities have different needs.

Writing an essay can take a considerable time, but it's important that you keep to your original plan as much as you can. Of course, new ideas will come up as you write. In this case, you should jot them down, so as not to lose them. Next, think about it: How will this help me answering the question? Is this relevant to the essay? Do I not have another

example of this already? What you do is to make sure that what goes into the essay has one purpose only: answering the question. Sometimes it's difficult to resist the temptation, but don't explore thoughts by the way. This should not discourage you from having original ideas, or even exploring them, but it should encourage you to use your essay for one purpose only.

Keeping to the plan means keeping to the structure. This is important, because you can lose your reader by jumping around from one topic to the other, even if all you say as such is relevant and useful. By having a clear structure, and keeping to it, your reader will always know where the journey goes next. This makes your essay a pleasant read.

When writing the main part of the essay, it's important to keep the argument and illustrations in balance. Too few examples make the essay dry and difficult. Too many, on the other hand, make the argument disappear. The trick is to include illustrations to bring the text alive, but link them tightly with the argument. Rather than stating that "this is an example of white-collar crime," you may say "tax avoidance is a good example of white-collar crime, because..." By so doing, you demonstrate the importance of the example, you highlight how and why it is important, and most importantly, maybe, you avoid that the examples take over. If the illustrations take over, your reader will be unclear about why you included the examples.

Sections

Sections are an important tool to structure the answer of an essay. The longer the answer, the more important sections probably are. Some courses and tutors may ask you to include subheadings (as used in this booklet); some institutions even have explicit recommendations on their use. Subheadings can be a good way to structure an answer into sections. However, the lack of subheadings—or the fact that your tutor discourages you from using them—is no excuse for not having sections.

Sections group paragraphs that elaborate a similar point. Often, within a section, you'll have a number of paragraphs discussing the same issue from a number of different perspectives. A section can be treated, in some ways, as if it was a mini essay in itself. This is the case, because in each section, a particular point is explored. For example, there might be a section on the arguments for abortion, and then a section on the arguments against.

What is important when writing a section, is that both you and the reader are aware of the purpose of the section. It's tiring and frustrating for your reader to read half a page before knowing what you're writing about, or more often why you're writing this here. For these reasons it's important to link the sections into a coherent one. By linking the sections, and linking the paragraphs within each section, your essay will be more focused on answering the question.

For example, after a paragraph outlining problems of studying and measuring the transmission of social disadvantage, in one of my essays I discussed how sibling data may be the solution. I opened the paragraph as follows: "The use of sibling data promises a

cure to at least some of the problems outlined above.” In one sentence, the new topic (sibling data) is introduced, but it is also indicated why this may be important (because these data help tackling the problems already outlined). The reader should not be puzzled as to what the link is between problems of measuring the transmission of social disadvantage on the one hand, and sibling data on the other.

Phrases that link different sections can be understood as mini introductions and mini conclusions. Particularly when a section is long, or where the link to the next section is not immediately apparent, it might be useful to write one or two sentences to summarize the section. This will indicate to the reader how far we have come in developing the argument, but also remind him or her, why we have bothered to write a section in the first place.

Useful Phrases

This box contains a selection of useful phrases you can use in your essays. You can use these words and phrases to connect the different bits and pieces of your text into a coherent whole. The following list is intended to give you an idea of all the phrases that are available to you.

Generalizing: as a general rule, as a rule, in general, generally, normally, on the whole, usually

Explaining: in other words, that is, this means that

Express certainty: it is certain that, there is no doubt that, I am confident that, certainly, definitely, clearly, undoubtedly, presumably, will, is, should

Express probability: it is probable that, it is likely that, probably

Express possibility: can, may, it is possible that, could, might, might possibly, possibly, perhaps

Express doubt: it is doubtful that, maybe

Express improbability: is improbable, is unlikely, it is uncertain

Express impossibility: impossible, cannot, can't, will not, is not

Draw attention: it is worth noting that, it should be emphasized that, it should be highlighted that, it should be underlined that, in particular, especially, mainly, chiefly, mostly, it should be pointed out that, it should be noted that, it should be remembered that, it is worth stressing that, is vital, is crucial

Contrasting two points: however, but, in spite of, despite, in spite of the fact that, despite the fact that, nevertheless, nonetheless, instead, conversely, on the contrary, by contrast, whereas, while, whilst, although, even though, on the one hand, on the other hand, in contrast, in comparison with, but, yet, alternatively, the former, the latter, respectively, all the same

Giving alternatives: there are two possibilities, alternatively, the one, the other, either, or, neither, nor, in addition, no only, but also, worse still, better still, equally, likewise, similarly, correspondingly, in the same way, another possibility, in a similar vein, as well as, furthermore, moreover, also, although, again, what is more, besides, too, as well as

Giving examples or introducing illustrations: for example, for instance, to name an example, to give an example, is well illustrated by, a case point is, such as, such, one of which, illustrates, is an example of this, is shown by, is exemplified by, is illustrated by

Stating sequence: first of all, first, firstly, second, secondly, thirdly, fourthly, now, then, next, finally, to complete, after that, 1, 2, 3, last, lastly, furthermore, to begin with, moreover, in addition, to conclude, afterwards

Reformulate the same point: in other words, to put it more simply, to put it differently, it would be better to say

Stating consequences: so, therefore, as a consequence, as a result, now, consequently, because of, thus, for this reason, then, this is why, accordingly, hence, given this, with reference to, given, on this basis, is caused by, causes, due to, has the effect, affects, the reason for, because of this, if, then, results in, leads to, produces, owing to, through, as, since, because

Stating purpose: in order to, so that, so as to, to

Giving the method by which something happened: by ...ing, by (noun), by using

Stating surprise about something unexpected: besides, however, nevertheless, surprisingly, nonetheless, notwithstanding, only, still, while, in any case, at any rate, for all that, after all, at the same time, all the same

Summarizing: to sum up, in summary, to summarize, in brief, altogether, overall

Reaching a conclusion: I conclude, I therefore conclude, reached the conclusion that, it is concluded, therefore, for this reason, then, thus, in conclusion, to bring it all together

Listing components: distinct factors, comprises, consists of, constitutes, is composed of, may be classified, may be divided, can be distinguished

Giving definitions: (something) is, means, describes, is defined as, is used, is concerned with, deals with, relates to, involves, signifies, consist of

Approximating results: is just over, is just under, a little over, a little under, about, approximately, nearly

Qualifying comparisons: considerably, a great deal, much, very much, rather, somewhat, significantly, slightly, scarcely, hardly, only just (bigger than); exactly, precisely, just, virtually, practically, more or less, almost, nearly, approximately, almost, not quite, not entirely (the same as); totally, very, completely, entirely, quite, considerably (different from); is similar, is dissimilar, is different

Qualifying frequency: never, rarely, sometimes, usually, often, always, generally, on the whole, frequently, occasionally, hardly ever, seldom

Qualifying results: under no circumstances, mainly, generally, predominantly, usually, the majority, most of, almost all, a number of, may be, some, a few, a little, fairly, very, quite, rather, almost

Qualifying change: no, minimal, slight, small, slow, gradual, steady, marked, large, dramatic, complete, steep, sharp, rapid, sudden (rise, increase, fluctuation, decrease, decline, reduction, fall, drop, upwards trend, downward trend, peak, plateau, level off)

Just like sections are structured into paragraphs, each paragraph should have some internal logic. You can usually use the first sentence of a paragraph to introduce what the paragraph is about. This is particularly useful at the beginning of a new section. Consider these phrases as bridges. For example, in one of my essays, I opened a paragraph with “It will now be necessary to consider the argument that local cultures are dominated by transnational corporations.” My readers will immediately know what the paragraph is about.

Ideally, every single sentence is geared towards answering the question. Practically, this is hard to achieve, given the lack of infinite time resources available to most of us. However, by your trying to link similar paragraphs into sections, and by linking sections into a wider argument, every essay will benefit. The result is an essay that is easier and more pleasant to read.

Each paragraph, and definitely each section, should be geared towards the essay question you’re answering. It’s therefore a good idea to evaluate each section in terms of how far this helped to answer the essay question. You do a number of things with this: demonstrate that you’re still on track; you’re working towards a conclusion; you demonstrate the relevance of what you wrote in the section. If you can’t state how a particular paragraph or section is relevant towards your answer, then probably it is not.

Structuring the Main Part

There are different ways to structure the main part of the essay. One key difference is between essays structured along the lines of analytic dimensions, and those structured

along the lines of argumentative dimensions. For example, the analytic dimensions of an essay on globalization may be *economic aspects*, *cultural aspects*, or *political aspects*. On the other hand, the argumentative dimensions may be arguments that globalization affects local consumption patterns a great deal, and arguments suggesting very little impact only. The analytic approach would examine the different views in terms of economic aspects first, before moving on to cultural aspects. The argumentative approach would first explore the views in favour of strong impacts in all the different dimensions: economic, cultural, political, and then move on to do the same for arguments against.

There is no fast rule which of these approaches is better. In fact, both approaches can be very successful. You should consider the extent to which your structure helps you avoid saying the same thing twice. Whatever approach you choose, a clear indication in the introduction as to how you approach the essay will make sure your reader will know where you're going.

Dealing with Repetition

An essay where the same word or sentence structure is repeated time and time again is often boring. Many writers consider repetitions bad writing. There are a few things you can do to avoid repetition. Where you should be careful, however, is the use of specialist terms. For the reasons outlined in the section on defining terms, you should never substitute a specific term with a more generic one. If you talk about power, then say so, even if this means using the same word over and over again. By no means use a thesaurus and pick a random suggestion offered there. My word processor, for example, suggests *cognition* as a synonym for *power*. This may be the case in some contexts, but as a key term, this is hardly ever the case.

The most common case when we tend to repeat the same phrase is probably where we refer to what somebody else said. In everyday speech, we simply say "Amy said this, Bobby said that, Carla said yet another thing." In the more formal style required in essay writing, this is commonly written in the following way: "Adams (2006) states that..., Bird (1999) suggests that."

In order to make your essay less repetitive, consider the following options in addition to the common *states* and *suggests*. Always use your own judgement, when a phrase feels overused. By suggesting that repetition may leave a less than ideal impression, it's not argued that this is an area of essay writing worth spending hours on. It's much better being repetitive, but being precise and making a good argument.

- Crouch (1977) argues that ...
- Daniels (2004) sees the problem as resulting from ...
- Elton (1848) identifies the problem as consisting of ...
- Ferro (1997) is of the opinion that ...
- Gallagher (2003) defends the view that ...
- Hall (1998) notes that the problem originates from ...
- Inglehart (2000) considers that ...

- Jackson (1984) views the issue as caused by ...
- Kanter (1970) maintains that ...
- Lewis (2002) concurs with Mann (2000) that ...
- Nixon (1955) supports the view that ...
- Orwell (1999) holds the view that ...
- Perry (2005) agrees that ...
- Quart (2001) denies that ...

These alternative ways to put the ever same idea may be particularly useful when reviewing what different authors had to say on an issue—the parts of the essay where you simply restate what has been said before. Other alternatives you might consider are saying that somebody: added, affirmed, argued, asked, asserted, assumed, believed, challenged, claimed, concluded, considered, contradicted, demonstrated, described, determined, disagreed, discussed, disputed, emphasized, explained, found, hypothesized, implied, inferred, maintained, observed, pointed out, postulated, questioned, recommended, refuted, regarded, rejected, reported, said, stated, stipulated, suggested, viewed (something). This list should illustrate that there need be no conflict between variation in writing and writing clearly. If in doubt, however, you should always prioritize clarity.

Academic Style

When writing for academic purposes, there are a number of conventions that you should follow. A key difference to most other forms of writing is that we give references to the sources of our argument. Ambiguity is something most academics dislike, and you're more credible, too, if you avoid it. Academic writing tends to be rather formal, and many will advise you to avoid writing in the first person (that is, not write using I). This makes academic writing both formal and impersonal.

The reason why the first person should be avoided is that in scientific writing one's opinions, feelings and views are not regarded as important. Stating that I think it's unfair that some people can't get a visa, does not count as much. However, urging you not to use *I* in essays can fail in two ways. Firstly, you could still write about your own feelings and opinions using different phrases, and secondly, not all uses of the first person are bad. It's a good idea to stay clear of phrases such as "I think," or "in my opinion," unless you're evaluating a claim. However, there is no apparent reason for not saying "I will first define the key terms." Using the first person in this way will make a text more approachable. Moreover, using phrases starting with I, you avoid using the passive voice which many find more difficult to read.

Having said this, some markers still consider it preferable not to use the first person. Should your tutor or marker be one of them, you may want to play it safe. Don't use *we* when you mean *I*. If you are the sole author, the use of a plural is technically not correct. However, even a tutor who hates such phrases will not mark you down: It's the argument and general structure of your essay that count for much more.

One area where there is no room for argument is the use of colloquialisms, slang, or street language. Academic writing is formal writing, and you might be penalized for using the

wrong register. A little bit of informality here or there will not normally matter much. Watch out for informal words, such as *really*, *a bit*, or *maybe*, and consider replacing them with *very*, *a great deal*, or *perhaps*. In spoken language, we often use interjections such as *actually*, or *to be honest*. These, too, don't belong into an academic essay.

Consider the following example: "To be honest, I don't think much of this theory" is something we might say to a colleague of ours. When writing an essay, you could put this as: "It is clear from the evidence presented in this essay that the applications of this theory are limited." The following list further illustrates what is meant by formal and informal English. The formal words are included in brackets in each case: Ask for (request), carry out (conduct), chance (opportunity), find out (discover), get better (improve), get worse (deteriorate), guess (estimate), look into (investigate), OK (satisfactory), tell (inform), worried (concerned).

Euphemisms, such as *passed away* for *die*, are another aspect of language you should not use in your essays: if you write about and mean *die*, then say so. Clarity and accuracy are paramount. For these reasons, academic writing can be rather tentative and cautious. This is the case because we are not after grabbing headlines, but we write accurately what we know. If our data suggest that *X possibly leads to Y*, we say just that. In this case we should never say that *X leads to Y*. In academia, we are often unsure what really goes on, and we should be upfront about this.

Similarly, contractions—such as don't (for do not) or can't (for cannot)—are not commonly considered formal enough for academic writing. Some of your readers will consider this convention ridiculous; others take it as a sign that you have not understood you should write in a scholarly fashion. To play it safe, use the full forms at any time. This particular academic convention seems to ease more and more.

Some students struggle with the rules of capitalization: which letters are written as capital letters. The easiest one is that every sentence starts with a capital letter. Names and titles (called proper nouns) are also written with capital letters, unless there is a specific reason not to. So, we write the name of *Mark Granovetter* with capital letters, but the special case of the *iPod* is written with a small one. Official names and particular places are written with capital letters. It's thus the *Department of Health*, and *Oxford University*. However, when we write about general places, we don't use capital letters. We study at university in general. Official titles are often capitalized, such as *Value Added Tax*. Furthermore, many abbreviations come with capital letters. It's an *MBA* your friend may be studying for. The days of the week are capitalized, such as in *Monday* and *Wednesday*, as are the names of the months. The names of countries, nationalities, languages, and people from places are written with capital letters: the *Swiss* live in *Switzerland*, and *Norway* is a country. Apart from this, about every other word is written with small letters.

Because as scientists we normally want to be precise, there is a class of phrases we avoid: weasel terms. Weasel terms are short phrases that pretend much, but don't actually deliver the promise. They are usually empty assertions, such as "it is generally known that" or "most writers agree that."

Weasel Terms

This box contains a list of weasel terms. In an essay, you should never use these phrases without a reference to substantiate what is said.

allegedly	mainstream scientists say that
arguably	many people say
as opposed to most	many scientists argue that
considered by many	research has shown
contrary to many	researchers argue that
critics say that	serious scholars say that
experts say that	social science says
it could be argued that	sociologists believe that
it has been noticed	some argue
it has been said	some feel that
it has been stated	some historians argue
it has been suggested	the scientific community
it is generally claimed	this is widely considered to be
it is widely believed that	this is widely regarded as
mainstream scholars say that	widely considered as

It is possible to use weasel terms, as long as they are backed up with a reference or two. So, saying that something is “widely considered the foremost example of” something is possible, if you either provide a reference to someone who demonstrates this, or provide a group of references to back up your claim. However, in most cases we want to be more precise. Rather than saying that “many social scientists argue that class is important”—which is probably true—and giving a couple of references to back this up, it’s better to put it as follows: “Goldthorpe (2000) argues that class remains important.” Or maybe we have access to a statistic we can cite, that X% of social scientists seem to consider class important. In either case, the solution is more precise and thus more satisfactory.

The use of references is an academic convention, and you must follow this, even though it might be a tiresome exercise. Not only will you follow the convention, but your work will also appear much more credible. You can find more on the use of references in a separate section on page 26.

Footnotes are often associated with academic writing. Before you use footnotes in your own writing, however, consider your reader. Footnotes interrupt the flow of reading: you force your audience to stop for a while, moving down to the bottom of the page, before they can read on. From the reader’s point of view, you should avoid footnotes if you can. The only general exception is if you use footnotes for referencing. Don’t use endnotes (footnotes at the end of the text), unless they are used exclusively for referencing. Asking your reader to flick forth and back through your essay is even more of an interruption. Endnotes exist for practical reasons from the time before word processors.

Footnotes are used to explain obscure words, or when you want to add some special information. In the case of obscure words, if it’s a key term, define it in the main text.

There are cases, where you'll want to use an obscure word, but it is not central to the argument. Consider the following example: "The Deputy must, with every word he speaks in the Diet¹, [...] anticipate himself under the scrutiny of his constituents" (Rousseau, 1762, cited in Putterman, 2003, p.465). Here I talk about the name of an assembly. The word is probably obscure to most readers, but not central to my argument: I write about parliaments in general, not the *Diet* in particular. Adding this footnote will help the readers to understand the quote. In terms of special information, if you make an important point, then make it in the main text. If it's an unimportant remark, then very often you don't want to make it at all. The guiding principle is whether the note is relevant to your answer.

Another area of academic writing where there are many bad examples out there is the use of jargon and specialist terms. Whilst we aim for clarity and accuracy, jargon is never justified where it does not help these purposes. Specialist terms can be very useful to summarize complex issues into a few letters. Nonetheless, all technical terms need to be defined in simpler language somewhere in your essay. Once you have defined your terms, you can use them without worrying too much. This is where the *define* section comes in. Bear in mind what your audience is likely to know.

Other aspects of writing that may make your essay easier to read, and thus more approachable are: the use of shorter words where possible, cutting out words where they are redundant, using the active voice (*I do, she says*, rather than *it is understood, it is achieved*), and using English words where they are not different from the Latin or Greek ones. We want to write as clearly as we can, because when the writing is not clear, very often this is an indication that the argument is not very clear, either.

Discussion

After presenting the main argument, it's usually necessary to discuss what this all means. The argument of the essay may have implications on policy, implications on the use of certain theories, or implications on how we (should) understand the world. Not always are these implications novel or big. Nevertheless, you should always discuss the implications of what you have just said. If you don't do so, you risk leaving your reader with the feeling of *so what?*

Obviously, this is something we want to avoid. The discussion of what it all means can often be incorporated inside the main section of the essay. This is often a good idea, too, because the repetition of the same points can be avoided. However, even where the implications of the argument are discussed as part of the main argument, it's a good idea to use at least one paragraph to make explicit that you have invested time into this section.

1 The *Diet* was the name of the deliberative assemblies in many European countries at the time of Rousseau's writings.

Rather than summarizing the argument, this section is here to draw the different sections together. Depending on the essay question, the discussion can be rather large (such as in an *evaluate* question), or very short (for example if you're asked to *describe* something).

Evaluating Persuasiveness

A number of essay questions directly or indirectly ask you to evaluate the persuasiveness of an argument or theory. There are a number of points you can look out for when making such an evaluation: coherence, empirical adequacy, and comprehensiveness.

A good approach is to think about the coherence of the argument, the empirical adequacy, and the comprehensiveness. By *coherence*, I refer to the reasoning and the argument. Does it make sense? Is the argument elaborate enough? Are there gaps in the line of reasoning? Is the argument clear? Does one point follow the other? Is it a logical argument?

Empirical adequacy is about the extent to which there is support for the argument. Does the evidence support the argument? Does A always lead to B? Are there alternative explanations?

Comprehensiveness, finally, is about the limits of the argument. Is it true in other places? Was it true in the past? Will it be the same in the future? Do other cultures do things the same way? Is the argument explicit about its limits? Does the argument attempt to cover everything (universal)?

Thinking about these three aspects alone will help evaluate arguments and claims. You'll find that sometimes the answers to the questions here are difficult to answer. Sometimes, the answers lie in the assumptions, or in what is not said.

Where you're asked to evaluate the usefulness of *models* or *terms*, consider the following criteria. You should not just state that X is being used, but always try to establish criteria for the usefulness of the model.

For definitions, look out how clearly something can be defined. Can we recognize an X if we see one? Are all X the same? Is X a neutral term? Is X value-laden? Does the definition of X depend on something else? Is X the same in every context? How can X be measured?

You may also want to consider the analytic dimensions of concepts. Is X as a concept more useful than Y? Does X contradict Y? Is X complimentary to Y? In which cases is using X rather than Y more useful? What does X capture better than other terms? What does X capture that other terms don't? But also, what does X *not* capture?

There is often also a normative dimension to terms (what should be). A full evaluation will include such normative aspects, too. What does X suggest about policies? Given X, how should society be organized? How should the world be seen?

Conclusion

Having written the essay, you state that you have done so. This section is often separated visually, or singled out with a subheading such as *conclusion* or *concluding remarks*. What this section does, is summarizing what you have done, and providing a conclusion to the argument. Never should you bring in new material—be it examples or arguments—at this stage.

In fact, your aim is to make the conclusion as short as you can. If there is much to discuss, if there are many loose ends, you should use the previous section (*discussion*) to do so. In a similar way as the introduction includes an outline, the conclusion recaps the argument. What you do is to revisit the highlights of the argument. Just like the discussion leads to a conclusion, your final section will close with a concluding remark.

The following is an example of a concluding paragraph. Depending on the length of your essay, it might be reasonable to have a longer conclusion, but try to keep it as short as you can.

This paper has critically looked at an article by Katz-Gerro on cultural consumption (2002). The article was outlined, and particular attention was given to the research design, data analysis, and the persuasiveness of the argument. It was found that the article provides a coherent and plausible argument, but one which is marred by issues around the comparability of the data used, as well as the omission of some compelling alternative explanatory variables, such as status. Because of these weak points, the findings of the article may not be as generalizable as the author presents them. The article uses a good approach, but the study could have been executed in a more rigorous way, a point that would have improved the power of the argument.

This example illustrates the two functions: summarizing, and concluding. The first bit reminds the reader how we got where we are. Then the key points of the argument are briefly revisited. Finally, the paragraph and the essay are brought to a conclusion. Nothing new is added, and no time and space is wasted reiterating what was said before. Obviously, without a substantial section discussing the different strengths and weaknesses of the article, as well as the significance of those, the conclusion could never be so short.

Writing a long conclusion means that—for the last time—you run the risk of losing your reader. Reading the same thing again, albeit put in different words, is not usually very interesting to read. By keeping the discussion separate, the final paragraph can be short and to the point.

It's important to note that you can take sides in an essay, and indeed you should. It's unlikely that you'll ever conclude that something is utterly useless or the golden bullet for that, but if your argument suggests that the statement you were given, for example, does not hold, then do say so. A good idea to conclude an essay is by referring back to the original question. This can be done in a subtle way, but often there is nothing lost from doing it head on. By so doing, you demonstrate that even after all the work, you're still focused.

When to Write the Conclusion

Just like there is disagreement of when best to write the introduction, there is no clear consensus when to write the conclusion. On the one hand, you can write it at the end, after you know where the essay leads. On the other hand, you can write it first, and thus commit yourself to the conclusion. The idea is to force yourself to stay focused.

Unfortunately writing the conclusion first is no guarantee for staying focused. Although I would recommend writing the conclusion last, because I want to get the greatest effect I can—and for that I need to know exactly how my argument went, it's not unreasonable to write the conclusion first. In this case, do so as an incentive to stay focused, but be prepared to modify the conclusion after you have finished.

Referencing

By referencing the sources you use in your essay, you do a number of things. First, you comply with an academic convention. Secondly, you make your essay look more professional. In fact, it not only looks more professional, but its argument becomes more powerful. Thirdly, you allow others to check your sources. This is often only a hypothetical issue, but a look through the list of your references will allow others to judge your argument quickly. Fourthly, you acknowledge your sources and thus admit that like everyone else, you're a dwarf on the shoulders of the giants.

The essential bits of referencing require you to provide enough information to others so that they can identify the source. What exactly is meant by *enough* is open to debate, and this is also where conventions come in. Essential is that you do provide references. Ideally, you would do so properly. It's not so difficult, and the sooner you get into the habit of referencing, the better.

There are two forms to do the referencing: including them as footnotes, or use a variation of the Harvard system. Your institution may have a preference, or even a house style. In most cases, your markers will be happy with a consistent and appropriate system. The Harvard system is also known as author/date, and will be described here in more detail.

Inside the Text

Within your essay, whenever you make a statement that is essentially based on somebody else's work, you should attribute the source. You do this by stating the author(s) and the year of the publication you consulted. Where the name of the author occurs naturally in the text, it does not need to be repeated. The references are usually included at the end of a sentence, or where inappropriate in a place where the text flow is not interrupted too much, such as in front of a comma. This may be necessary, for example, if only the first half of your sentence is based on someone else's work.

Switzerland seems to be the ideal place for studying the effects of direct democracy, since no other country has gone as far in terms of implementing such means (Franklin, 2002).

The name of the author is included in brackets, together with the year of publication. Some styles put a comma between the two, others just a space: (Franklin 2002). Where there are two authors, both names are included: (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Some styles prefer the word *and*, others prefer the ampersand (& symbol). Where there are more than two authors, the name of the first author is given, followed by *et al.* (which literally means *and others*): (Almeder *et al.*, 2001). Some styles put *et al.* into italics, others don't.

If you have two or more references for the same argument, you should separate the references with a semicolon (; symbol): (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Steinberg, 1999). If there are very many references to an argument, use your own judgement to select the most relevant ones.

What should you reference? Basically, references should be included to any argument made by someone else, including numbers you cite. However, statements of general nature need not be attributed to anyone. A statement that the sky is blue alone does not require a reference. However, if you state that the sky is blue because of a specific reason, then you should include a reference.

If you use the exact words of an author (quotation), you'll need to give the number of the page where you copy from. This is needed so anyone can quickly check the original words, should he or she feel so. See the separate section on quotes on page 33.

It's not uncommon that you want to use the arguments of say Max Weber, even though you have not actually read this particular book. Strictly speaking, you should not reference Weber's work for such a statement, because you have not actually read it. Can you really be sure this is what Weber said or meant? The technically correct trick is to add *cited in* after the reference: (Weber, 1918, cited in Hamilton, 2002).

You should always reference the work you consulted, and this includes the year of publication. Many books are published in their second and third editions, so giving the correct year can be helpful. Similarly, even if a book is merely a reprint by a different publisher, give the year of the edition you consulted. The page numbers may differ. If it's just a second print of the exact same book, use the original date. Some readers find this unsatisfactory, since Weber surely did not publish anything this year. The convention to circumvent this issue is to give both years: the year of the original publication, together with the one of the work you consulted. Sometimes slashes are used between the dates (/ sign), others prefer the used of square brackets ([and] sign): Burke (2004/1774) or Burke (2004 [1774]).

Another small issue occurs where an author published more than one book or article in a single year, and you want to cite more than one of them. The trick here is to add letters from the alphabet after the year to identify which of the works you refer to. Use the letter *a* for the first of your references, the letter *b* for the second and so on: (McManus, 1994a) and (McManus, 1994b) are two different works.

To sum it up, inside the text, you give the family name of the author, followed by the year of the publication. Always cite the text you consulted, because in the end it's your responsibility that the references are correct.

At the End

At the end of your essay, you should include a list of references. Such a list of references provides more details than just the name of the author and the year of publication. This list allows identifying the work cited. Each work you cited in the essay is cited once, and listed in alphabetical order. Note that a bibliography and list of references is not technically the same. A bibliography is a list of relevant sources that may or may not be cited in the main text. References are the sources you cited, even if they are rather trivial. Use the heading *references* for your references.

For books, you put the family name of the author(s) and their initials, followed by the year of publication in brackets, the title in italics, the place of publication, and finally the name of the publisher. If there are editors, give their names instead of the authors'. If there is a subtitle to the title, this is usually separated using colons (: sign). Where there are more than four authors, it's common to use *et al.* after the first three, but some styles insist on citing all authors. Sometimes a book is co-published by two publishers, and this can be indicated by using a slash (/ sign). Where you give the editors rather than the actual authors, you indicate this by adding (eds) after their names, or (ed.) if there is only one. The title is capitalized. For example:

Anderson, C. & Zelle, C. (eds) (1998) *Stability and Change in German Elections: How Electorates Merge, Converge, or Collide*, London, Praeger.

Granovetter, M. (1974) *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*, Chicago, Chicago University Press.

Grass, G. (1963) *Katz und Maus*, Neuwied am Rhein, Rowolth/Hermann Leuchterhand.

Hall, S. (ed.) (1997) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London, Sage/The Open University.

Halsey, A., Heath, A. & Ridge, J. (1980) *Origins and Destinations*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Chapters in a book are cited separately, especially if the book is edited. You give the family name of the author and his or her initial, the year, the name of the chapter in single speech marks (' and ' sign; not capitalized), followed by the word *in*, and the name and year of the editor(s). If you cite only one chapter, you can give the whole reference at the end; otherwise, it's enough to give the name and year of the editor. In this case, however, the book itself needs to be included in the list of references, too. For example:

Allen, J. (1995) 'Global worlds' in Allen, J. & Massey, D. (eds) (1995).

Hardin, R. (1990) 'Public choice versus democracy' in Chapman, J. & Wertheimer, A. (eds) (1990).

Leroy, P. & Verhagen, K. (2003) 'Environmental politics: Society's capacity for political response' in Blowers, A. & Hinchliffe, S. (eds) (2003) *Environmental Responses*, Chichester, Wiley/The Open University.

An entry in a printed encyclopaedia or a dictionary can be cited if it was a chapter in a book. The editors are often given on the front of the reference book. For example:

Jackman, R. (2001) 'Social capital' in Smelser, N. & Baltes, P. (eds) (2004).

Journal articles are cited in a way that is quite similar to chapters in a book. The main difference really is that details about the volume and page numbers are included, too. The reference starts with the name and initial of the author, the year in brackets, the title of the article in single speech marks (not capitalized), followed by the name of the journal in italics (capitalized), and further details. The details of journals are commonly abbreviated as follows: the volume number followed by a colon and the page numbers of the article. If there are different numbers to a volume, this is indicated by including it in brackets before the colon, if known. Online journals may not have page numbers. For example:

Burt, R. (1987) 'Social contagion and innovation: Cohesion versus structural equivalence', *American Journal of Sociology*, 92:1287-335.

Thoits, P. & Hewitt, L. (2001) 'Volunteer work and well-being', *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 42(2):115–31.

Small, C. (1999) 'Finding an invisible history: A computer simulation experiment (in virtual Polynesia)', *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation*, 2(3).

Valente, T. (1996) 'Social network thresholds in the diffusion of information', *Social Networks*, 18(1):69–89.

Pages on the internet should be cited where used. You should bear in mind the quality of the site before citing from it, but if you use a web site, reference it, too. Many internet sites are perfectly acceptable as sources for your essays. The reference includes the name of the author and initial, the year in brackets, the title of the document in italics, the word *online* in square brackets, the place of publication, the publisher, the words *available from:* followed by the URL, and the date when the document was accessed in brackets. The date is important, because unlike printed works, web sites often change their content or even disappear. Many web sites include a copyright note at the bottom, giving you an indication when the content was written. For example:

Chan, T. & Goldthorpe, J. (2004) *Social Status and Newspaper Readership* [online], Oxford, Oxford University, available from: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0006/papers/news4.pdf> [accessed 31st March 2005].

Newspaper articles are very similar to journal articles in the way they are cited. The key difference is that rather than the volume, the date is given. The reference therefore includes the name and initial of the author, the year of publication in brackets, the title in single speech marks, the name of the newspaper in italics (capitalized), the date, and finally the page where the article was found. For one page it's customary to use the abbreviation *p.*, for articles running over two or more pages, the abbreviation *pp.* is common. For example:

Cockburn, P. & Osborne, D. (2004) 'Burning with anger: Iraqis infuriated by new flag that was designed in London', *The Independent*, 28th April, pp.2–3.

Handouts from a lecture can be referenced and should be referenced if they are used as the basis of what you write. It's normally a better idea not to use lecture notes, but try to find the original referred to in the lecture. Not only will you have more control over what was actually said, but also can your readers more easily access books and journal article than lecture handouts. The reference to a lecture handout includes the name and initial of the lecturer, the year in bracket, the title of the handout in single speech marks, the words *lecture notes distributed in* followed by the name of the course in italics, the word *at* and the name of your institution, the place, and date of the lecture. For example:

Fisher, S. (2005) 'Survey sampling and administration', lecture notes distributed in *Survey Research Methods* at Oxford University, Oxford, 9th February 2005.

Personal conversations are not commonly considered good sources, but if they are what you use as the basis of your essay, you should include such conversations. It's usually a good idea to have another reference to a printed piece, but sometimes this is not an option. In terms of giving the reference, personal conversations are very easy: the name of the person you spoke to, the year in brackets, the words *conversation with the author* and the date of the conversation. For example:

Smith, E. (2004) conversation with the author 6th July 2004.

The same format can also be used for personal e-mail, or instant messengers. Once again, bear in mind the credibility of your sources. With e-mail messages, it's customary to include the e-mail address of the sender in brackets after the name, but it's essential that you obtain consent from the author. The subject line of the e-mail is often included as the title. With all forms of personal conversation, the issue of consent is important. It's always a *very* good idea to check with the author first.

Problem Cases

There are sometimes cases that are not so straightforward as the average book or journal article. There is a solution in the academic conventions for everything.² If you refer to musical works, television programmes, or pieces of art, check with your institution how this should be done. If everything else fails, remember the function of referencing, and provide a reasonable amount of information for others to chase the work.

Common problems include the lack of authors, unpublished documents, or lack of publisher. Where there is no author, often there is an organization. Put the name of the organization. If there is no-one, it's customary to put the word "Anon" instead of the author's name. For example:

IDEA (1998) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* [online], Stockholm, International IDEA, available from: <http://archive.idea.int/women/parl/toc.htm> [accessed 28th February 2006].

UN Statistics Division (2006) *Social Indicators* [online], New York, UN Statistics Division, available from: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/socind/inc-eco.htm> [accessed 20th February 2006].

Sometimes the year of a document is not known. Where you have a rough idea, you can put a *c* before the date, such as in (c.1999). Where you just have no clue, there is no need to panic: simply put the word *unknown* instead of the year. Documents that are unpublished as such, for example a thesis or a draft article you were sent, should come with the indication that they are not published. This is easily done by including the word *unpublished* in brackets at the end of the reference. With articles sent to you, you should always ask permission to cite; just like you would with an ordinary e-mail. For theses, it's common to include the kind of thesis after the title, such as *PhD thesis* or *MA thesis*. Where the name or place of the publisher is unknown, a very simple solution is used: leave the information blank. This is particularly an issue with internet sites. Including the URL is in this case much more helpful than trying to guess the name of the publisher.

Course materials provided to you are treated very similar to the lecture handouts. Give the name of the author, the year in brackets, the course code if there is one, the course title in italics (capitalized), the kind of material and its title in single speech marks, place of publication, and publisher. For example:

² The one thing I have not yet figured out properly is how to reference what somebody told me in my dreams. However, since this is probably not a reliable source, I don't see any need to ever resolve this problem.

Peake, S. (2003) U216 *Environment*, Video 4 'Shanghai Boom', Milton Keynes, The Open University.

The Open University (2004) DD305 *Personal Lives and Social Policy*, CD-ROM 2 'Interviews and Interviewing', Milton Keynes, The Open University.

The capitalization of titles may seem a bit confusing, but it follows a simple logic: the main title is capitalized. In the case of a book, the main title is that of the book. In the case of journal articles, on the other hand, the main title is thought to be that of the journal itself. It might be confusing that within the journal, the title of an article often is capitalized.

Capitalization is not very hard to achieve. Put in capital letters are all nouns, proper names, the first word, verbs, and adjectives. This is in fact almost everything. Not put in capital letters are words like *and*, *in*, *or*, or *with*. Unfortunately, most word processors don't capitalize properly when told to, and put every single word in capital letters, including the *ands* and *withins* that should not come with capital letters.

Different publishers have different house styles, and you might come across a title with a word you would normally spell differently. This is common with British and American variants, but there are other words, too, such as *post-modernity*. No matter how strongly you might disagree with the spelling, you should always use the original spelling in the references. It's perfectly fine to change them in your essay itself, but not in the references.

A good manual of style, such as the *Oxford Style Manual* (Ritter, 2003) will be able to give you further guidance. Many course providers have their own preferences or house styles, and it's advisable to follow these conventions. Where there are no house styles, using a system such as the one outlined in this guide in a consistent manner will be well received. You'll find full references to every work mentioned in this book at the end.

Plagiarism

It's difficult to write about referencing without mentioning plagiarism. Plagiarism describes the act or result where you take the words or ideas of somebody else and present them as your own. Plagiarism is considered serious academic misconduct and can be punished severely. Most importantly, however, your reputation is on the line.

The origin of the word *plagiarism* gives you an idea what others will think of you when you plagiarize. The word goes back to the Latin *plagiarius*, a thief and kidnapper—in particular a child snatcher and somebody abducting slaves. The modern use in academia brands you a *literary thief* (OED, 2005).

There are a number of reasons why plagiarism occurs. The worst case is deliberate plagiarism (for whatever reason). Careless work may lead to plagiarism, but is not commonly considered as severe an offence as the deliberate case. Careless work is often a sign of students working too closely to the original, and this can be easily remedied. Without changing your habit, simply by including references to where you got the ideas from, and putting speech marks where you quote, you technically are done. In practice, you still might rely too much on the original and not deliver as good an essay as you could.

Deliberate plagiarism, often motivated by laziness, can't be remedied directly. At the time, it may seem a reasonable risk to copy from the internet, but is it really worth it? Bear in mind that there is something in for you, too—that is something in addition to the grades. The more you write, the easier it gets.

If you work too closely to the original, there is a simple solution: don't write the essay with the books in front of you. By so doing, there is very little danger that you copy word by word. In a way, you force yourself to make the material your own: and that is a good thing—it makes a better argument, your essay will be more original, and not least, you'll also get better grades. Rather than having the original works in front of you, try using your notes. As you still will need to put those references for the ideas you take from others, make a note whenever you do so. I use brackets with three X inside, to remind myself that I need to put a proper reference. Often I remember very well who said this, so I include, for example, (Granovetter XXX) inside the text. When checking the essay, it's hard not to notice the triple X; and there is always the search facility in the word processor. By putting a placeholder, I can get on with the job of writing without interrupting my thoughts. Equally important, I leave some traces indicating to myself that there is some more work to be done: finding the proper reference, for example.

If you think plagiarism is hard to detect by your marker, think again. There are a great number of signs that give plagiarized work away. Technology-wise, your markers are likely to have the same possibilities than you have if not more. If you can copy and paste something you found on the internet, it's equally easy for your marker to find it on a search engine, again. It would, of course, be possible, to change plagiarized work to the extent that the deed is no longer easy to spot. Usually, however, this is just as much work as writing the essay yourself.

Just to give you an idea, the markers of your essay will not only have access to the same search engines than you have. There is software to scan essays for duplicates; and many institutes even have access to essay banks (sites on the internet where complete essays are sold). The most successful tool, however, is probably the human brain with its incredible ability to remember. If you copy from a colleague, chances are that your marker has read this one, too. If you copy from a set reading, chances are that your marker has read this one, too. Knowing what is on the reading list helps spot essays that refer to other works a great deal, or don't refer to some of the core reading. Your marker can estimate how many readings you had time to read, or whether you're likely to have read a great number of papers on the *Belgian* perspective of whatever issues is set in the question. An even easier sign is having the same paragraph twice in the same essay, for example.

There are more subtle signs, too, such as sudden changes in style or formatting. Many people are unaware of how idiosyncratic one's writing style is. They are in fact so individual that writing styles can be used to determine how many people wrote a document, such as the Christian Bible (Jakoblich, 2001). Writing style includes the tenses we use, the level of formality, our own choice of words, the kinds of metaphors we put, whether we use American or British English, choices over punctuation, the length of

sentences, or the use of specialist terms. Typographic signs include font size, choices of where to break paragraphs, spaces in between lines, and things like proper m- and n-dashes (when copying from electronic articles).

The presence of lack of references is often an easy sign: for example, where there are many references inside the text, but few at the end, or where the citation style changes within a single essay. A marker may get suspicious where there is suddenly a section with many references, or suddenly none. Sometimes, students even include hyperlinks in references when copying from electronic journals; and have them automatically underlined by the word processor.

Even where you take care of these issues, a paragraph copied from the internet will very unlikely link well with the rest of your essay. The style may be inappropriate, or just different. Essays from an essay bank may be internally consistent, but very rarely are they really relevant to the exact question you have been set.

In summary, you can avoid plagiarism easily. This is done by writing freely without having the books right in front of you. Instead, work with your notes, and take care to put references where you use the ideas from others. Don't use the internet to copy from, no matter how tempting it is. It will hardly ever be worth it.

Citations and Quotations

There is an important difference between citations and quotations. Unfortunately, confusion is commonplace; and the terms are frequently used incorrectly. Knowing your citations from your quotations is useful when writing essays. It's essential, in fact, if you want to reference properly.

Citations are about ideas you take from others. Quotations are about the exact words used by others. This is really the whole distinction. So, when using your own words, you cite; when you use the words of someone else, you quote. "Why can't a man be more like a woman?" (Blankenhorn, 1995, p.117) is a quotation, because I use the exact same words Blankenhorn did. However, when stating that families in the US are increasingly defined by the absence of a father (Blankenhorn, 1995), I only use the idea, not the exact words.

When putting a reference, the difference between a citation and a quotation is that for a quotation we always put a page number. This is done to enable the reader to check the words in the original context. In the list of references at the end of the text, there is no difference.

Short quotations are included in the text, and enclosed by speech marks. Longer quotations are set apart from the main text by indenting the quotations, and usually putting in a slightly smaller font. Longer means about 3 to 4 lines or more. For example:

It is true that many voters may be voting for reasons wholly unconnected with social inequalities in any of the three dimensions. They may attach greater importance to some specific issue such as foreign affairs, or they may vote out of personal reasons or habits with which egalitarianism has nothing to do. (Runciman, 1966, p.136)

When quoting someone else, you should take great care to copy the words exactly. Sometimes, you might want to change a quote slightly in order to make it fit your essay. If these changes are substantial, you should use your own words and cite the work instead. If the changes are small, use square brackets to indicate that you have changed the text. For example, you might quote Rawls (1999, p.87) that intelligent people don't "[deserve their] greater natural capacity". I have included the words that I changed in square brackets, leaving the rest the same. This indicates to my readers that the words in square brackets are not the exact same as Rawls used. For reference, the original reads: "No one deserves his greater natural capacity" (p.87). I made the changes, because I wrote about intelligent people, and Rawls was talking in more general terms.

Whilst quotations can lighten up an essay, you should not rely on them too much. Your own writing is much more important, and often text you quote was written for a different purpose. The consequence is that the quotations may be relevant in content (what is being said), but in terms of style don't fit well with what you wrote. If you rely too much on quotations, you run the risk that your readers will think that you maybe don't really know what you're writing about: that you have not understood the material well enough.

When to Put the References

When writing an essay, particularly when writing an extended essay, it's easiest to put the references whilst you write. This is the case, because you still know where you got the idea from. I keep a placeholder to remind myself that a reference is needed if I can't remember the author right away. Often, I will know at least some of it, and write this down. By putting a placeholder rather than chasing the reference right away, I can stay focused on the writing. However, I also indicate that the essay is not completed. Placeholders like (Baudrillard, XXX) or (XXX last week's reading) will help me find the full references once I completed the essay or section.

References are needed whenever you write an academic piece of writing. Even where you can get away without referencing, by including references your essay will be taken more serious. It's a good habit to put references all the time, so when you really need to—such as in your thesis—you'll not struggle, or spend days trying to find out how to reference a chapter in a book.

There are a number of software packages such as *Endnote*, *Refworks*, *Scholar's Aid Lite*, *Bibus*, or *Zotero* that help you putting references. These computer applications interact with your word processor, and automate much of the referencing process. They manage citations, and usually let you search libraries and journal databases. Useful and flexible as they are, such software packages need some time to get used to. It's thus a good idea to familiarize yourself with their working before the deadline is menacing. For example, make sure you know how to put page numbers for quotations.

Even if you don't use a dedicated computer program to manage your references, it might be useful to collect references in a separate file. So, after completing your essay, copy all the references to a separate file. The next time you cite the same paper, it'll be a simple

case of copying and pasting, without the work of formatting the reference. Keeping the full references with your notes can save a great deal of time, too.

Exam Essays

Exam essays are essays like others. They differ mostly by the constraints of time and therefore space. For these reasons, it's even more important to follow a clearly structured approach to writing. The time constraints mean that you need to remain very focused in order to make most of what is available to you.

Very important in the setting of the exam is that you delimit the scope of your answer. Often a question is to a certain extent tied with a particular module or even a single lecture. Whilst this helps you in terms of deciding what goes in your essay and what does not, you should always leave some clues to the markers. By being explicit about the content and theories used in the essay, you demonstrate that you have put thought into the question. As a result, the answer will be more focused.

Because of the time/space constraints it's advisable to reduce many sections, but don't leave them out. One or two sentences can delimit the scope of the answer. One or two sentences can outline the answer, giving the marker an idea where you're going to take him or her. The time constraints also mean that you may be better off with choosing a few key arguments and develop them properly. Don't, however, focus on one side of the argument only: the overall structure of your essay answer should be essentially the same as if you were writing a full-length version. What is different is that you may only include one example, or only consider two schools of thought in detail.

It's usually worth drawing up a quick timetable for the exam. Say there are three questions in three hours, you should spend one hour on each (assuming the same number of points to be gained). You may need 10 or even 15 minutes for a good essay plan, leaving you with about 45 minutes to write up the essay. Ideally, you should allow a few minutes to check what you have written, too.

An exam plan should be clear about the priorities should you run out of time. For example, spending 15 minutes on the introduction will waste time you'd better spend on the main argument—no matter how brilliant the introduction turns out to be. Make sure you know what your main argument is going to be before starting writing. It's better to cut short a minor point than missing the key argument. Similarly, never use time allocated for another question to finish off the one you're working on. You'll almost certainly lose more points than you gain.

Using Feedback

In many cases, your essays are not only graded, but your markers give you feedback on the writing. In order to improve your essay writing skills, you should spend a few moments to read the comments and try to take them as useful criticism. Often it's a good idea to leave the essay on its own for a day or so, after getting it back. This way you have time to cool down after receiving the mark. Marks are often different from what we expect, either better or worse. Coming back to the essay a day after, you're able to make the most of the criticism: make it work for you.

A good idea is to go through the comments and identify three good points, and three points you want to work on. For example, your teaching assistant may comment that your overall structure was good. Make a note of it. Then again, maybe you didn't include enough examples, so that would be something to work on. Even essays with full marks usually come with a few hints what could be done better.

I use a table, as the one reproduced in appendix 2, to collect the grade, three positive and three negative points. When writing the next essay, it's time to dig out this table, and focus on the three points to improve. Probably you'll want to choose only one of them, but make a real effort to improve on this one. When planning the essay, as outlined on page 5, you spend a few extra moments just focusing on what you want to do better. It's by going through this process that you really learn from the feedback on your essays: this is how you develop writing skills.

Common Essay Problems

By following the approach of essay writing outlined in this booklet, you can avoid a whole range of very common essay problems:

1. **Unstructured:** Many essays are not structured, which makes them difficult for the markers to read. Without structure, reading an essay is like a discovery journey: your marker will never be sure what is around the corner. This might sound appealing, but you're not writing a thriller. Your marker will have difficulty to see whether and how what you write is relevant to the question set. Following the advice in this booklet, you can avoid this problem by outlining at the beginning how you're going to answer the question (*delimit*). Your reader will know what is coming up. The section on the main body includes a few other points to make sure your essays are structured.
2. **Rambling:** The problem of rambling is often just a symptom of the above problem: lack of structure. By thinking in a structured way, tendencies to ramble are reduced. Following a reasonable form of preparation will also help (see the section on preparation on page 4). Once you know what you're going to say, and in what order you're going to say it, it's much easier to stay on track.

3. Not relevant: Unfortunately, many essays that are written are as such great essays, but include substantive sections that are not relevant. The problem may be that not enough time is spent planning the essay. It may also be the case that the irrelevant bits merely appear to be irrelevant. The trick in the latter case is to link the paragraphs using suitable phrases, and actively demonstrate how the illustrations are relevant, for instance.
4. Unconnected: For the same reasons as in the above point, essays may be or appear unconnected. A good plan can be the first line of defence: making sure that you yourself know how the different bits link. The next thing to do, again, is using phrases that connect different paragraphs and sections. Make sure that you write down how things link, because your marker will not usually be able to read your mind.
5. Unclear: An essay can be well put together, and the reader still be left unclear about what exactly is being said. The problem is in most cases the lack of *delimitation* and *definition*. This means that the essay does not state what is and is not written about, and also that key terms are not defined. Much ambiguity can stem from misunderstandings, the reader understanding terms in a different way from what you intended them to mean. What is clear to you may not be so for the marker. Making sure it's down on paper, this problem can be prevented.
6. Difficult: Essays that are difficult to read often suffer from one of the following symptoms: lack of illustrations, lack of conceptual clarity, or lack of guidance. Illustrations are not a nice to have, but an essential part of most essays. Think about the examples when you plan the essay. Conceptual clarity can be remedied by providing definitions, as outlined in the previous point. The lack of guidance means that your readers will feel lost, not knowing where the essay will go next. Providing a clear introduction that delimits the scope of the answer is sometimes all that is needed. Within the main body, linking sections and paragraphs helps further.

The most common problem, probably, is students failing to answer the question. By paying attention to the process and content words, the first part of the problem is already resolved. Writing in a planned and structured way, the remainder is addressed, too. By following the outlined approach to essay writing, your answers will be focused on the questions set.

Getting Top Grades

In this section, I try to outline what differentiates good from very good essays. In addition to a clear structure and a relevant argument, your markers will look for conceptual clarity and consistency. You can achieve this by taking care to delimit your answer, and define key terms in a way that is relevant to your answer. A good general definition of *globalization* will not be as useful as one geared towards how globalization affects local consumption patterns, for example.

Your examiners will also look for critical engagement. Constantly ask yourself how important an argument is. Use different theoretical perspectives (for example functionalism, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis) and think about how these help understand the problem. Chances are that some theoretical perspectives have very little to say on your particular question. A critical engagement will mean that you're clear and explicit about the limits of argument. Markers look out for statements like that "X is important, but only in certain areas of life," or that "Y is important but only when considered together with other concepts," or that "Z is not as important as X and Y."

Essays with top grades identify and challenge where appropriate the assumption implicit in a question. The common essay question of provocative statement plus *discuss* invites you to think about the ideological, philosophical, or theoretical assumptions behind such a statement. A question may actually be the wrong question to ask if you're approaching the answer from a feminist point of view, rather than a Marxist one, for example. Look out for counter-claims and examine their merit.

A top essay will have a clear and systematic structure. Ideally, at any one point your readers will know where they are, and why they are there. In practice, this means that you'll be clear about what you want to write before you start, and that you organize your thoughts in a coherent manner. The different sections are thus linked in a way obvious both to you and your reader.

Exploring all possibilities is another way to get top grades. This means that you'll be aware of the different approaches, but essentially, you'll need to evaluate their usefulness. It's not just a matter of applying a great number of perspectives, but maybe more importantly one of choosing and selecting which of those carry forward the argument most. This normally involves the rejection of some of the possibilities. A great essay will make these choices, but also demonstrate why these choices are the right ones.

Top-grade essays are also clear about the relevance of what is written. In a paragraph, you not only list the different aspects, for example, and then give an appropriate example. In addition, markers look for a few sentences on the importance of what was just written. This can usually be achieved by linking it back to the question, or other underlying debates. Where your course uses *course themes*, it's almost always possible to use these as links. In their feedback, markers often use the phrase "engaging with the question" to refer to this aspect.

Word Limits

In most cases when you're given an essay to write, there is a word limit stated. A word limit is simply an indication how many words you should not exceed in your essay. Sometimes instead a number of pages is given. Word limits exist for a number of reasons. First, writing to length is considered a desirable skill. Secondly, having a limit is a way to ensure that you select the most relevant bits. Skills of selection are sought after outside of academia, too. Thirdly, word limits give an indication to you as the writer of what is expected from you.

You should always try as hard as you cannot to exceed the word limit. They are called *limits* after all, not indications. The most powerful of reasons is probably that you might be penalized. Moreover, keeping to word limits is part of good practice, nice on your readers, and a sign that you possess certain skills. Many institutions practise a formal or informal 10% tolerance. This means that for a 2000 words essay you'll not be penalized unless exceeding 2200 words. It's essential that you check, and make sure you check with someone in an adequate position. Staying within the limits is the easier and safer option.

Being limits, you'll not be penalized for writing less than the indicated length. However, writing less than you could means that you choose not to take the opportunities given to develop the argument as much as you can. It's for this reason that you might get lower marks. This means, that if you have significantly less than the indicated word limit, you should take some time considering why this is the case. It's not necessarily a bad sign, but usually means that you could develop the argument further, or that there are no illustrations to bring the essay alive. In either case, your marker will be likely to comment on this.

Planning your essay is the best way to stay within the limits. When drawing up the outline, I always spend a moment thinking about how many words I want to allocate to each section. This not only helps me staying within the word limit, but more importantly, maybe, is the plan for a balanced answer. By planning to write the same amount on two contrasting views, for example, it's unlikely that I write three quarters of the essay on one side only. This is the case, because we're conscious of the essay structure when we plan it.

During the process of writing the essay, you can monitor your progress by checking the number of words in your current section. Planning and checking section by section will prevent you from panicking when looking at the overall word count. If you go over, or run out with much to spare, flag the section. Maybe you'll have an additional idea later on in the day, maybe your plan was not realistic, or maybe you mentioned a point in another section. By having the sections flagged, it's easier to remedy the length of the essay once completed.

Sometimes there is confusion over what counts as words. Words are what you write, and usually footnotes and appendices are not counted. However, word processors often count these, too. In any case, do check what counts towards the word limit in your institution or course. Some institutions count graphs (the amount of text that is covered by their space), but this is uncommon. Technically, references don't count towards the word count. If they did, this would encourage sloppy referencing. Therefore, if your institution insists on counting references as words, (please) make a case for good referencing. The list of references at the end of the essay is not included in any case. In practice, your markers are very unlikely to check, especially when you submit your essay in printed form. It's for reasons like this that many institutions allow you an extra 10%. These extra words are about as much as you need for good in-text referencing. For the same reasons, the length of essays is frequently limited in number of pages. Do check the format expected, such as double-spacing. In any case, you should strive to keep within the word limit, because this

is expected from you. The grading of essays is always in relation to what could be said within the limits stated, not what possibly ever could be said about it.

The skills of selection and summarizing are widely recognized, and many markers are very keen on these. Without word limits, why not handing the reading list and let the markers make up his or her own mind? Surely all the relevant points would be covered...

Getting Help

It would be foolish to claim that a simple booklet could be the definite guide to writing essays. Of course it is not. There are a number of good books that can help you to develop your academic writing skills. Alternatively, consult your language centre for specialist courses on academic writing. Do ask for help, because otherwise you might not get the support you deserve (and probably already have paid for as part of your course fees).

There are books on writing that go into much greater detail than this booklet. Ask your bookshop or library about what is available, and have a good look what is covered in the book. Books on essay writing in general will never offer you as much advice as those focusing on specific aspects of writing. Everyone has different needs, and a book focusing on the areas of essay writing you're particularly good at will probably not help you as much as another. Feedback from previous essays may help you find out what areas you want to improve.

For technical details, you might need a good dictionary. If English is not your first language, get hold of a dictionary written for learners of English, such as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Hornby, 2005) or the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Woodford, 2005). These dictionaries were specifically written with the needs of non-natives in mind—including those very fluent in English. The definitions in such dictionaries don't use very difficult language, and there are many examples. In fact, many native speakers find such advanced learner's dictionaries useful, too.

The choice of grammar books is vast, and you should pick one you feel comfortable with. Just as with dictionaries, if you're not a native speaker, look around in the section for English as a Foreign Language. Michael Swan's *English Usage* (1995), for example, is both approachable and comprehensive. Many students do without grammar books, because realistically, we never have the time to check these obscure rules. Similarly, there are authoritative books on the style of your documents, such as *The Oxford Style Manual* (Ritter, 2003). Hart's rules (Ritter, 2005) are often considered authoritative, but often go far beyond the scope of general essay writing. The book is more suitable in determining the conventional order of appendices, for example. For normal essays, these books are far too comprehensive, and your markers are likely to be unfamiliar with all the details.

For advice on writing style, there are a great number of books available. Again, check your bookshop or library. Some books focus on the choice of the right word, others on different aspects of style. Note that different books give different stylistic advice. If you don't want to splash out on a good book, you could do worse than bookmark Paul Brians' page on

common English mistakes (2006). This free and useful guide can come in very handy when in doubt (see reference at the end for URL).

If you're unsure about plagiarism, or worried about your writing skills: the best way to get help is approaching your tutor or supervisor. They will be familiar with most of the conventions, and equally important, be able to guide you to more specialist assistance should this be necessary. In terms of plagiarism, there are a number of useful internet sites, including the Glatt Self-Detection Programme (2000), and their site at <http://www.plagiarism.com/> (1998).

Appendix 1: Essay Planner

Course	#	Deadline	Grade
Question		Words: _____	Format: <input type="checkbox"/> Essay <input type="checkbox"/> Report <input type="checkbox"/> _____
Rephrased		Process Words	Content Words
Material	Knowledge and Skills		Approach
Contents	Key Concepts	Key Writers/Theories	Include
Illustrations	Skills		Structure
	Outline	Notes	
Points to Work On			

Appendix 2: Feedback Organizer

# / Grade	<i>Positive Points</i>	<i>Points to Work On</i>

Summary Page

This page is a one-page summary of the whole booklet. A good essay is characterized by following a structured approach of essay writing.

Audience

When writing an essay, you should always think about the audience: whom do you write for. The audience is often imaginary, but you should never assume that your readers will be very familiar with the special concepts you use. Aim for somebody in your general subject but specializes on a completely different area.

Structure

The key to a successful essay is planning the structure: what you're going to say in what order. There is more than one way to approach every question. Following the following advice will always be a reasonable approach.

1. Delimiting the Question

As a first step, you'll state how you understand the question. By doing so, you give your reader a sense of where the essay is going. You also demonstrate that you're going to answer the question. An important point is to be explicit what goes into the essay and what stays out. A short outline is often helpful.

2. Defining Key Terms

Rather than assuming familiarity with the key concepts, always give a brief definition. Not only will your readers know what you talk about, but you also can demonstrate that you know what aspects are the most important ones.

3. Main Part

Having outlined what you're going to write, clarified the key concepts, it's time to deliver. Essays with a clear structure, following a certain logic are the most successful ones. Don't hesitate to state how different bits link, or why a certain paragraph is relevant. Include illustrations to bring the argument to life.

4. Discussion

After exploring the different aspects in your previous section, it's time to take a critical stance. Are some aspects more convincing, are others plain wrong? This is the place to bring in your own views and prepare the conclusion.

5. Conclusion

You have nearly reached the end. In your final section, summarize the main points of your essay, reminding the reader how you got to where you ended up. Refer to the essay question, showing that you have answered the question you were set.

References

Always include full references to all the material cited and quoted.

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