

Essay Writing Guide

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26 February 2015

Version 1.06

Introduction

An undergraduate education and a good degree can be the key to your future.

And, in the humanities, the essay is the key to undergraduate education. Your performance is based on how you deal with answering a set of questions in writing i.e. the essay.

This is an indication of how testing the essay can be. Make no mistake: this is a major step up from secondary education. However, should you persevere, you will find that all the talents that you put towards answering essay questions will have a transformative impact on how you understand the world and your chosen subject.

This brief guide should get you started in understanding what you are expected to do.

- “1. How to be a successful student” covers the importance of motivation to your studies.
- “2. An approach to essays” gives a brief argument about creativity in your writing.
- “3. Just answer the question” attempts to explain why essay writing is so important.
- “4. Academic writing” tries to summarize what academic writing is and gives some ideas about vocabulary.
- “5. Getting started: the question” looks at how to understand the question.
- “6. Getting started: writing exercises” gives you 5 ways to get writing.
- “7. Getting started: research” works through the type of reading you will have to do.
- “8. Structure” – provides a brief overview of structure and what introductions and conclusions do.
- “9. Editing” looks at how you will spend more time editing than the initial writing.
- “10. Note taking” looks at how your notes in class will help you get started on your essay.
- “11. Common mistakes” looks at common feedback given to students.
- “12. Plagiarism” explains what plagiarism is and how you must avoid it.
- “13. Grammar: the sentence” gives a way of understanding sentences that should help your writing.
- “14. Grammar: the comma” explains comma rules so that your work is crystal clear.
- “15. Using referenced material” explains why and how to use quotes etc (not yet finished)
- “16. Referencing” gives a very short overview of referencing.
- “17. Academic comparisons” explains how you might start comparing arguments and ideas
- “18. An example essay” provides an example 3rd year essay that got a first – so that you know what you are aiming for.
- “19. Resources”: a few important sources of further information

1. How to be a successful student

Consider these points step by step

1. The more time you spend studying the more successful you will be.
2. You need motivation for that study time to be productive.
3. If you are not that interested in studying but see it as a necessary way to get to your ideal career or even if you just want to get a degree then this is called an “instrumental approach”.
4. If you are being “instrumental” and you are not that interested in studying you will be poorly motivated and you will find it difficult to have quality time spent studying.
5. If you are not motivated then academic study will seem like a burden, be more difficult and it is likely that you will become cynical and either fail or get a low degree.
6. For success (and an easier life) you must have a motivation towards academic enquiry that is separate or independent from your career aspirations. You must learn to love (or at least like) what you are studying. You must get into the study itself.
7. One key motivation is when study helps you understand something. However, getting started is often difficult. This means an open attitude to new ideas and different ways of seeing the world is important.
8. The idea of academic study (for everyone from undergraduates to professors) is that we do not know enough but that through research, writing and reflection we can understand more and more.
9. Academic study at its best is transformative: students will have a different relationship with the rest of the world. And, rather than reflecting fixed intelligence, the results of study point towards continually developing knowledge and understanding.
10. However, there are absolutely no shortcuts to this process: it requires lots of hard work.

Exercise: Write a paragraph explaining what you find interesting about your course.

Exercise: Calculate how many hours you expect to spend on your university work each week.

2. An approach to essays

[reading time 5 minutes]

We couldn't do it; it was such a slog. The lecturer was sighing and we were moaning. The class I took recently (at another University) was less than half-way through the essay and we simply gave up. And that was just reading and critiquing, done so that we might learn about writing.

People in the class expressed disbelief that the lecturer might have to sit through 10 of these. Sure the essay was about taxation, but specifically the Poll Tax and whether the opposition outside of Parliament, culminating in mass riots, was effective. The lecturer said, "I don't expect any to be an interesting read. I'm just pleased if the English is okay and they have a structure."

However, to disagree with the sad-faced tutor, if we aspire only to writing that ticks some boxes that's the best we can hope for. This is not to say the "gramma don't matta", but it matters because getting a point across is much more difficult when the reader is constantly distracted by mistakes and unclear sentences.

Everybody at University should aspire to good writing, to lively prose, and to ideas that leap out of the page to stick in the mind. Writing is a skill that can help you through the rest of your life, and doing it well can even improve how well you think. Getting thoughts onto paper forces you to clarify those thoughts.

There is no secret to good writing: as Matthew Arnold once said, "Have something to say and say it well." As an exercise, find things you like to read, whether newspapers, magazines or even novels – and work out why reading these are a pleasure. You will see they have ideas to get across, facts you must know. They want to grab your attention and make you keep reading. They structure their points, so that you too can see what they believe, or what it was like to be there. Closely study effective writing: it pays off.

To write well, first you must have something to say, and this means you have to read. One important reason the Poll Tax essay so deadened the soul was the writer had just one main reference: a deadly dull textbook on eighties' politics. While at the time there was heated debate and clashes of ideology nothing of this made it to the page. Looking at a few more points of view might have brought the subject alive in the essayist's own mind. Then the excitement of understanding what was said, and why it might be right or wrong, could spill out onto the page.

In just a couple of thousand words or so essays can't be definitive. But they can develop a point of view, an argument, and weigh up all and sundry in its pursuit. Having that argument needs facts, characters and viewpoints to engage with. Finding these means reading, reading with intent, to get what you need.

Once you have something to say, then, how to say it well? There are scores of books in the library explaining how to write essays. None of them are great, but they do tell you something of what is expected in the structure of an academic essay. Find one that you like the style of and photocopy the pages on structure. These pages can remind you of the bits that must be in an essay. But, put simply, they repeat the advice sometimes given to public speakers "Say what you are going to say. Say it. Then say what you have said."

Structure, or the overall building up of an argument, like much of writing, takes practice. You should get somebody you know will enjoy ripping your essay to shreds and ask them if it makes sense. They will see gaps in logic on the page that you have missed, because it is already obvious in your head. You will learn to spot these gaps yourself, but even the best writers rely on editors to spot missing links. Get a mate, who'll read it late.

This isn't and couldn't be a comprehensive guide to writing. But one guideline is to try to take pleasure in the construction of what you write. Have your paragraphs express one idea, and use the first sentence to say it and then explain and expand on it. Vary sentences in length, to vary the pace, like music. Staccato points work. But this is especially true when mixed with long, flowing sentences that engage your reader.

Enjoy cutting unnecessary words out. Find active, striking words and phrases. Resist clichés like the plague. Above all writing is about communicating. Smile, if others can see inside your mind, because you have taken the time to write clearly.

There are several books that have helped improve my writing – see below. And your university offers help from enthusiastic staff to improve your writing skills. Let's face it, if you think essay writing is a just a chore then it will be. And your suffering readers will agree.

Further reading: Evans, H. (2000) *Essential English: For Journalists, Editors and Writers*, London: Pimlico // Orwell, G (1946) *Politics and the English Language* // Trask, R.L. (1997) *Penguin Guide to Punctuation*, London: Penguin

Exercise: find two sources that have a writing style you like and explain in a couple of paragraphs why giving examples.

3. Just answer the question

[reading time: 20 minutes]

It seems obvious that undergraduates should use essays to answer the question that has been set. However, the main comment made on essay papers is “Answer the Question”. Academic guides often use detailed explanations of the terms used in questions to help students. However, as this complaint crops up time and again, there seems to be a more fundamental problem of communication between those creating questions and those required to answer. This piece is an attempt to address this by discussing why the essay is counterintuitive, then looking at what the ideas are behind an essay, and finally look at an alternative way of approaching the essay.

So why the difficulty?

Perhaps the chief explanation is that step-by-step reasoning and finding evidence to tackle a particular problem is not a regular occurrence for most. Take, for example, day-to-day conversations, the main way that people communicate ideas. In a conversation, ideas bounce back and forth. There is a to and fro of questions, examples, arguments, interpretations and interruptions. There are deviations from the main topic or an entirely new topic is created and then the old topic is revisited (or not). Even subtle alterations of body language and tone can change a discussion’s dynamics.

Also, narrowly focusing on a subject is rarely how we think. Our thoughts tend to wander from one thing to another. If, for example, you are reading a novel your imagination will start working. You might wonder what a character is feeling or what comes next or how it will all end. Thoughts often “jump out” rather than going from A, to B, to C. In many ways this type of thinking is a good thing. We are not computers or mathematical equations; we can use our imaginations, make strange and wonderful connections and develop unique points of view and novel insights.

This difference between everyday thinking and communication on the one hand and the academic attitude to writing about a problem on the other can help explain why students often feel uncomfortable with essays. In the same way that children finishing GCSE maths are happy never to have to solve a quadratic equation again, undergraduates on finishing their degrees can sometimes be heard saying how much they disliked essays and how pleased they are to see the back of them. There are two points here. The first is that students can experience essay writing as a constraint on how they normally think and express opinions. The second is that essay writing can seem a very artificial exercise which, like solving quadratic equations, by and large only occurs in education.

From the other side of the classroom there is another problem. The academic tutors that are insistent that the student “answer the question” already understand why this is important and have made this approach to knowledge an important part of their lives. Clarifying the need to answer the question can often seem like explaining the obvious. Explaining the reasons for setting questions in particular ways and getting answers that directly respond can also seem repetitive. Often the necessary working assumption is that “how to do essays” has been covered so that the tutor can get on with teaching their subject. Another factor at work is that lecturers are loathe to spell out details of a question because they want students to think about it and analyse it themselves. The result can be that many undergraduates are uncertain about why they are doing essays and being asked to conform to a rigid style of response. Sometimes, even as they collect their degrees, students have not quite understood why these degrees required such an amount of formal writing.

Having set out some of the reasons essays are unintuitive, what is the idea of having essays answering set questions? Are criticisms that essays are artificial and constraining correct? Why would someone create this type of obscure, anachronistic exercise? Couldn't tutors be more flexible and instead accommodate students' creativity? Why require them to stick rigorously to jargon-laden questions?

To understand the importance of essays, it is necessary to draw out how this type of formal writing is connected with the modern world's approach to knowledge and how it is a partial solution to the limitations of previous forms of communication. The question for those wanting to test ideas and develop knowledge was (and is) how to do it. Informal discussion, the way that people have communicated for millennia, is often unsatisfactory. Although sometimes great insights can develop from a remark made in a conversation this is haphazard and often derives from a great deal of experience or prior thought. Instead, an approach is needed that is systematic and can continue developing.

A historical detour is useful here. The word “essay” first appeared in the fifteenth century where it meant to “test the quality of”. The fifteenth century English word developed from the Old French *assay*, itself a development of the Latin word *exagium* which means “weighing” (Oxford University Press, 2011). We still use weighing in everyday speech when talking about ideas: people are said to weigh up the arguments. Likewise in law, juries are asked to weigh the evidence. Justice has even adopted the symbol of a woman blindfolded with sword and weighing scale. The period when essay started being used is significant. The fifteenth century saw the drawing to an end of a period marked by superstition, often referred to as the Dark Ages. The idea of being able to test the quality of ideas was developing. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, in 1473, William Caxton produced the first

English language printed book. Knowledge was expanding throughout Europe and, using this knowledge, previous ideas about the world were beginning to be tested. The century saw a doubling in the number of universities in Europe to satisfy a “thirst for knowledge”. These institutions were to play an important role in both the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance (Grendler, 2004: 1-2).

It had become clear that our individual perception of the world was on its own insufficient to understand it. However even when we made and communicated discoveries, there could be facts that pointed to one conclusion and yet facts that pointed to the opposite conclusion. The solution was to apply logical reasoning to these discoveries. This involved creating theories based on a chain of reasoning and evidence – with each bit of evidence being checked and assessed – that sought to understand a particular problem. If a theory had been tested enough and still seemed to explain the situation then others could start to use the theory and do this without trying to understand every new thing as if it were completely new. Theories could then become tools or methods to help understand novel situations.

One example of how this works in practice is Darwin’s theory of evolution. Darwin collected detailed information about the wildlife on the Galapagos Islands and tried to explain the small variations in the birds he found there. His chain of reasoning led him to argue that natural variations within a species could produce a particular bird that did very well in its particular environment. This variation would allow the bird to survive and successfully raise offspring where other variations of bird would cause it to die or to produce less offspring. The successful variations would then become more common and the species would break into different types exploiting different food sources. Eventually the differences might become so large that entirely new species would emerge. Darwin posited that this process of natural selection explained the many species of wildlife. Over many years this theory has been tested as a way of seeing nature and now informs all those examining natural life. Scientists trying to answer the question of how characteristics were transferred and how variations were made looked for, found and modelled the double helix of DNA.

This might seem a world away to a young person entering higher education, but it isn’t. The idea of education today has often been skewed towards getting a job rather than the expansion of knowledge, and so an understanding of theories and facts might seem to be enough for employment. However, the modern approach to knowledge, because it runs counter to most daily activities and relies on what are often long chains of reasoning, cannot just be learned by repetition or reading a text book. Practice and application is required to get to grips with complicated theories and to see just how, where and to what they can be applied. The preparation in undergraduate

education is to understand a subject and related theories in such a way that they can be applied later in unforeseen circumstances and so that approaches and insights emerging later in one's professional life can be independently assessed and put to work.

It is an understanding of this modern form of knowledge that should sound a warning to students against seeing themselves as consumers receiving an education. Rather this education is made on purpose to put students in an uncomfortable position of having to start thinking in a different way. And rather than tuition providing answers, it provides theories, arguments, ideas and knowledge. It is the student who then has to practice using these theories – i.e. do essays – so that they start to understand them in a more complete way. The tutor can act as guide but no more than that.

An essay then can be seen as necessary practice in the construction of logical arguments using theory and evidence – so for a particular subject the question set must be made in such a way that it ensures this practice deals with the material being taught. The question is meant to be difficult so that it forces students to address difficult theories and complex evidence. If an essay question is set too narrowly then the subject that is being taught is not broadly explored. However, if the essay question is too broad then focus is lost and the subject matter cannot be covered in depth. This means that the question can be seen as being a guide that can be helpful to the student: if they answer the question they can greatly improve their understanding of the subject being taught. The process of writing about a subject, of fixing words on the page, is at the same time a process of making it more fixed in your own thought. In other words, by explaining it in your essay you are clarifying it to yourself.

The wording of the question is also an important part of getting the balance between breadth and depth right and thus ensuring the essay is an effective teaching/learning instrument. The words used in questions – such as “critical account”, “interpret”, “examine”, “explain” – are used in their most specific sense. The question often takes a long time to understand, however if the ten words of the question are to be converted into 2,000 words of writing then the time is well spent. There is another important point here and a clue to help in writing. Words themselves are the basic building blocks of an argument – the bricks and mortar. Starting to see specific meanings in words is an important discipline in this type of modern knowledge which allows more exact expression and meaning where required (similarly, sometimes words with fuzzier, less exact meaning are needed as part of constructing an argument). The implication here is that there can be as much content and meaning in each sentence you write yourself.

The discipline of concentration on a particular question might seem to be a limit on creativity but can rather be seen as framework to allow creativity. Think of the modern pop song. Its three minute format is a constraint which has allowed an explosion of talent to come forward since it was introduced. By having something fixed concentration can be maintained. Students who, later on in their degrees, do a dissertation where they get to decide on their own topic understand that there are much greater difficulties to be found there – although other constraints are added to the dissertation format. However, the bigger picture is this: once you start to master how to do an essay your ability to communicate in a way that others can understand, follow and, perhaps, agree with increases. Your point of view can be clearer in an essay, for example, than in an informal chat.

Having hopefully explained what is behind the essay and why it is important to answer the question, I want to suggest an analogy that is instructive and can help fix the correct type of approach in mind. There is a form of speech that has many similarities with essays: the legal trial. This is a type of formal discussion that was developed alongside modern thinking that we are all familiar with from movies, television and the newspapers. In a trial there are rules to the discussion. The judge uses these rules to ensure the discussion is conducted in the set order. Each side gets to present its full arguments and evidence, which is done largely uninterrupted by the opposing side. However, each gets to test the other's arguments and evidence. The judge ensures that the evidence presented matches important criteria to do with its reliability. However, the judge also filters everything presented to the court so that it addresses a very narrow question. In a criminal trial this narrow question is: is the accused guilty of the charges presented against them. Here the judge forces the focus on facts and arguments that touch on that one question.

Let's stretch the analogy to breaking point. In an essay you are a defence trial lawyer. The question of guilty or not guilty of the charges has been replaced by your essay question – only address the court with evidence relevant to this question. The jury are the readers you are addressing. They must understand the arguments you are making, be wowed by the expert witnesses you call who backup your arguments, be impressed by the evidence you present and they must follow the theory you are creating for what really happened that on that dark night. However you must also anticipate the prosecution lawyer. Where there is clearly evidence that contradicts your account you must attempt to discredit it and explain the presence of those bloodstains as the result of a domestic accident. You must use your expert witnesses against your opponent's. You must make the opposing expert witnesses sound uncertain in cross-examination. Remember, if you put forward what is just your opinion then the judge will throw it out of court as speculation and if you don't stick to the question then the judge will rule it out of order, embarrassing and discrediting you in front of the

jury. At the end of the trial the only measure of success is if the jury thinks that you defended your answer to the question successfully.

One final note. It may be that often the student is presenting whatever they do know about the subject, because they haven't done the work needed to answer the question or even to understand the question. Only by thoroughly reading about the subject, by tackling the reading list and by following up on your thoughts by research will you be in a position to answer the question. Poor preparation cannot be fixed by this piece. However, students who don't address the question at hand are extremely frustrating to those marking essays and hopefully after reading this they might understand why.

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References

Grendler, P. (2004) "The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation", *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Spring, 2004) Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1262373> (Accessed 20 April 2011) Oxford University Press (2011) "Essay: Oxford Dictionaries" Available at http://english.oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_gb0273980#m_en_gb0273980 (Accessed 20 April 2011)

Exercise: write in a paragraph why it is important to answer the question in academic essays

4. Academic writing

Academic writing is not the same as a conversation or of you simply putting your point of view. The idea is to leverage the years of work that some of the brightest people on the planet have put into thinking about problems to help you in the pursuit of answering a question. This answer should be impersonal, formal and analytical rather than personal, informal and descriptive.

To do this type of writing you need to spend a large amount of time and effort time digesting and thinking about the question you are answering and finding and understanding the academic literature on your subject. You will need to put into context and test the ideas and theories you find in academic literature in the pursuit of the answer to the question you have been set.

Your writing should *not* be over-dependent on lecture material. Lectures are only the starting point or introduction to the reading on the subject.

Your writing should not merely state your opinions, without reference to the academic literature.

Your approach

You must consider whether your approach is appropriate to answering the question. Consider whether you have tackled the issues in an appropriate way in terms of your method (the step by step approach to get to an answer) and conceptually (the appropriate concepts and theories for your question).

For example you might deploy an historical approach or an in-depth case study to illustrate broader issues, or the analysis of industry procedures, technologies or detailed textual analysis of a cultural artefact such as a film or television programme or piece of journalism.

Be wary about presenting too much history. It may be that you have to explain the concepts rather than explain the history of something. Sometimes students present undigested historical background that does not get to the question. This is because they have not been able to think through the problem – perhaps they started too late. So they are presenting what they know rather than applying what they know to the question (which is the point).

Your research

Because academic writing stands on or relies on previous academic interpretations you must ensure you have used the highest quality research possible. This will mean that academic sources such as books and academic papers are your starting point – guided by your course materials. Do not jump

to a search engine such as Google because this material does not have the same rigour and has not been tested to the extent that academic literature has by the review of other academics (i.e. peer review). With much of online material the quality is variable: it can be too basic, impressionistic or descriptive for what you want to achieve.

Your approach to the material you use and analyse should be critical. Critical does not mean to say: “it is bad”. Rather critical means testing one argument against another for logic and as to whether it fits the evidence.

Your understanding of relevant academic literature

As part of your presentation you will need to outline the arguments and ways of thinking used in literature which has already covered your topic or which feed into your topic. You must show how you have built on these concepts and ideas or perhaps criticised them in order to develop your own argument.

Remember that critical engagement does not necessarily mean criticising a reading so much as responding to it, commenting on it and *evaluating* its strengths, weaknesses or usefulness for your own work.

Avoid simplifications such as “plus points”/“negative points”. This is not secondary education: you are testing quality through analysis and critical comparison not simply listing strengths and weaknesses.

Your writing

You must try to make your writing as clear, accessible and enjoyable a style as possible while retaining an exact use of language and clarity of meaning. You must maintain academic conventions i.e. quotes, references, bibliography in the course of your argument.

Academic style and vocabulary

(Adapted from Cottrell, S. (1999) *The Study Skills Handbook* London: Macmillan)

Remember to use a formal (but not a pretentious) tone in your work. Academic writing demands that you avoid the personal. Personal writing tends to be emotional, intuitive, uses the active voice (e.g. ‘I find that’), is anecdotal, uses data from one source, and is subjective and does not get to the point.

Academic writing should be logical, use reasoning, evidence and data from a range of sources, be objective and keep to a logical sequence. Such writing often uses the passive voice, e.g. 'it was found that'.

Using three types of words can improve academic writing style significantly:

Vocabulary: emphasis markers

Use this kind of language to show clearly what you think is most important but avoid using personal language like 'I think'.

Adjectives: main, crucial, important, significant, essential, key

Nouns: focus, element, concept, theory, aspect, part, idea, point, argument, discussion, debate.

Verbs: to emphasise, to summarise, to focus, to highlight.

For example:

The key aspect of this argument is...

The most crucial point made so far is...

To summarise the essential elements of the discussion up to this point...

It is important to emphasise that...

Using these phrases will make what you say appear more authoritative.

Vocabulary: evaluative language

Use this kind of language to show more clearly what you think about different points.

Adjectives (positive): remarkable, innovative, complex, interesting, profound, logical, comprehensive, powerful, sensitive, incisive, rigorous, systematic, considered

Adjectives (negative): flawed, modest, unsatisfactory, inadequate, limited, restricted.

Nouns: synthesis, survey, topic, study, history, concept, area, theme, overview, analysis, system.

Verbs: explain, survey, discuss, study, present, describe, bring into focus, consider, explore, illuminate, introduce, analyse, constitute.

Vocabulary: modals

The group of 11 words called modals can help you avoid over-generalisations. These words express degrees of certainty and possibility, thereby avoiding making statements which claim too much or suggest you know everything about a subject.

The 11 modals are:

can, may, could, might, will, would, shall, should, ought to, must, need not.

By far the most useful are *can*, *could* and *might*.

Checklist

Content and argument:

The text answers the question or fulfils the brief set.

Sufficient attention has been given to the most important points.

All the information included is relevant to the set question.

The main line of argument is clear.

Research material:

There are sufficient examples and evidence to prove or illustrate your points.

Structure and grouping:

The text is in an appropriate structure or format.

Each paragraph is well structured.

Ideas are presented in the right order.

It is clear how each paragraph links to the others.

Style:

The style is appropriate, i.e. not chatty or flippant and free from slang and colloquialisms.

Technical vocabulary is used correctly.

The words used are your own – and suitably referenced when they belong to someone else.

The text is not repetitive.

The text can be read aloud easily.

Clarity:

There is nothing the reader will find confusing.

The language is clear and straightforward.

The reader will easily follow the line of reasoning.

Sentences are of reasonable length and are uncomplicated.

General:

The introduction and conclusion are clear and accurate.

Spelling, grammar and punctuation are correct.

References and bibliography are correct and accurate.

You have taken into account feedback you received for earlier work.

5. Getting started: the question

A) Choosing your question

In most cases before starting an essay you must choose which question you want to answer.

There is a balancing act to be done when making this choice. On the one hand you must be as thorough as possible when making your choice because choosing the wrong question can make a big difference in how difficult your task is, how enjoyable the essay is and the mark you will get. On the other hand you have to choose as quickly as possible because you need as much time as possible to think about the question, to do research and finally to answer the question. It is possible to switch questions after you have chosen one, but it requires a lot of extra work to get back on track.

First read all the questions so you have them in the back of your mind. Then work out criteria to decide how to make your choice.

Personally the types of considerations I would make are:

- i) Is it an interesting topic?
- ii) Could I give a good answer to the question now?
- iii) Could I write a good essay on this?
- iv) Do I understand the question?

Do not choose a question simply because you think it is the easiest or that it requires the least work. While some questions may be easier than others there is usually not a great difference. If the question appears simple, it does not mean that the required answer will be. It is also not possible to know beforehand how much work a question requires until you have got into detailed research and thinking about the subject. Remember many degrees are determined by essays and so questions are designed to test you. It may be though that if you find a subject interesting that this will make the essay easier for you to work on.

I would generally eliminate the questions that I think are awkward or don't interest me. Then I would mark the possible questions spend a day mulling it over and write some ideas for how I might answer the shortlist (i.e. jot some ideas and based on that ask myself how well could I answer that?). I would then try to decide. More systematic people might mark the questions out of ten on the criteria they made and then choose from the top two.

B) Obsess about the question

Write the question down long hand or re-type it (i.e. don't just copy and paste it).

Make sure the question you wrote down is **exactly** the same as the question on the paper to the last dot and comma.

Read it several times.

Whenever you are making notes or typing your essay or doing research have a copy of the question handy so that you can re-read it.

Remember everything you are doing is narrowly to be able to answer this question. You need it constantly in mind as you go along.

You will find that when it comes to working on the essay you will be using your unconscious mind or "sleeping on it" – reminding yourself of the essay question is part of that process.

If you think the question is obvious or you think that the question will not mean addressing some of the big questions discussed during lectures then the odds are that you have to rethink, that you have not really understood it. At that stage especially go to your tutor for advice.

Print it out and carry it around.

C) Some keywords in the question

Beware these are quite general – but they should help you think about *how* you are supposed to be answering the assignment.

Analyse	Break up into parts and investigate in detail
Comment	Use evidence and give a balanced reasoning for your views
Compare	Look for any similarities and note the differences that exist between them
Contrast	Bring out the differences (not the similarities)
Define	Briefly explain the exact/precise meaning of the word or phrase
Describe	Give a clear and detailed account of the topic
Discuss	Investigate all sides of the argument, give reasons for and against, and reach a balanced conclusion
Explain	Say clearly why something is so, giving your reasons
Evaluate	Give your opinion of something, with reasons for and against, saying whether you agree or not, and why
Justify	Show why decisions and conclusions are reached, and why what has been said against them could be wrong
Summarise	Give a short account of the main points of something - without opinions or irrelevant details

Trace Follow the changes in, or the history of, something; show a sequence of events from one particular point to another

Source for C:

<https://my.lsbu.ac.uk/assets/documents/academic/essay%20and%20report%20writing.pdf>

6. Getting started: writing exercises

There are 5 writing exercises presented here.

Try some or all of these (to taste).

Do some research and thinking about the essay.

Work on them again

Writing exercise 1: re-write the question in your own words

The idea is to draw out what you think the question is getting at based on the ideas you have. Take each part and unpack it to explain what it means to you.

Explain it step by step as you might to a child. Einstein said that if you couldn't explain something to a six year old child then you didn't understand it.

Do not just change "Consider..." to "Think about..." You should end up a full explanation of the questions that starts you thinking about what an answer would look like

For example take the question:

"To what extent is the concept of the "public sphere" useful in helping illuminate the role of journalism and the media today? Discuss with reference to the idea of free speech and the Leveson Inquiry."

If I wanted to set out some ideas as the question meant to me I might write:

100 Journalism lets individuals know about the public world – we mediate between the public and the private.

200 The public sphere is the ongoing argument about where society should go and how people should live. I need some information about Habermas.

300 The discussion of the public sphere highlights a changing balance between the individual and society – the public world seems obsessed with private individuals and their behaviour – this must speak to the role of journalism today.

400 Is the public world diminished and what does that mean for journalism?

500 Free speech seems important to public debate (I will need some quotes and arguments that link free speech to the public

600 The Leveson Inquiry is about tabloid journalism and poor journalistic standards: is this what Habermas argued was a “restructuring of the public sphere”? The idea here is NOT to simply re-phrase the question e.g. by changing “Consider the” To “Think about the...”.

This re-write allows me to start thinking about the question. I can come back to it as I go along and re-do it or re-work it. Remember writing is often about editing until you decide exactly what you want to argue. By the end you may have bits that would make a good introduction to your essay.

Print it out your re-write and carry it around to add to and edit.

Writing exercise 2: “Brainstorm” points

This plays a similar role to the question re-write i.e. to start yourself thinking.

It is also “brainstorming” i.e. getting any ideas you can without worrying too much about whether they are perfectly formed.

Use the question as your heading. Underneath write down any ideas you have that might go into the final essay. Use one sentence for each.

Do not worry if the ideas don’t make complete sense; just keep writing all the ideas that you can think of. Write down points you want to make, points by writers that you know of, examples and what they are examples of. Let the points you have written suggest other ideas.

Group the points that are in the same area next to each other. Write a summary for each group. The ones that are not in themes put at the end

Print it out and carry it around to add to and edit.

When you start writing this edited and grouped list of ideas will help you to create a structure.

Writing exercise 3: directly write a structure

In writing exercise 1 unpacking the question suggested a structure

In writing exercise 2 brainstorming points suggested a structure

Now write down a structure directly (you can use the ideas from C1 & C2 or go straight at it)

Give each line a number so that you can re-number it to make it fit

For example

1000 Introduction

1010 Explain the question in my own words

2000 Introduce the concept of the public sphere especially as it relates to journalism (find quotes)

3000 Present the most relevant discussion/debate about the public sphere and journalism

4000 Present a second topic that links the public sphere to journalism – find quotes etc.

etc.

Writing exercise 4: Create a draft

Combine your question rewrite, essay points and structure to create a draft

Start with the title, then put the structure in, then move the points and the rewrite into the structure

Turn the themed points into paragraphs.

Each paragraph should have one main idea. Say what the main idea is in the first one or two sentences.

Then the following sentences should:

- discuss the main idea

- give examples that relate to the main idea

- have quotes about the main idea

- qualify the main idea (i.e. suggest where it does not apply)

Edit and re-edit your draft several times. Try to make sure each point or paragraph leads to the next.

Writing exercise 5: still have nothing? – work from a boilerplate template

If you are not in a position to do some of C1-C4 you are in trouble – perhaps you are doing the wrong question?

But you can use a boiler plate template and try to fill it in as you go along

Boilerplate template example:

1000 Introduction

1010 Explain what you understand by the question

1020 Explain the steps you are going to take to answer the question (write this at the end)

2000 Introduce the main idea / theory that you are going to use and explain how it relates to the material in the question. Include quotes, evidence, references, and details.

2100 Discuss in detail one or more examples to explain the main idea (and how it relates it to the question)

2200 Discuss objections to the main idea.

2300 Discuss why the main idea makes sense despite the objections.

3000 Introduce the second idea / theory that you are going to use and explain how it relates to the material in the question. Include quotes, evidence, references, and details.

3100 Discuss in detail one or more examples to explain the second idea (and how it relates it to the question).

3200 Discuss objections to the second idea.

4000 Conclusion

4010 Summarise your main arguments

4020 Explain your general conclusions and link this to the question title

5000 References

7. Getting started: research

So far you have written down what you can think of. This may be a good start but it is almost certain that you need a lot more material and a lot more ideas.

The research lets you use the work of people who are experts in the subject you are studying – without their insights your essay will be very poor at best.

The research needs certain elements: arguments, facts, experts, arguments. Research will provide some of these directly and give you inspiration for the rest.

Remember as you are doing your research you should add to your list of ideas and points that you created in your writing exercises.

You are looking for material based on the following:

- references that show you have engaged with the ideas presented on the course
- references that help you engage with the question
- theories that you agree with (that support your view)
- theories that you disagree with
- arguments or points that you agree with (that support your view)
- arguments or points that you disagree with
- key facts on the subject
- good quotes that relate to your subject
- good examples that relate to the subject

But you are also looking understand the theories being used and to come to a conclusion about the question

Research: juggle and save

While researching you should alternate between reading your existing resources and finding new resources.

You usually cannot wait until you collect all your research resources before you start reading.

You cannot stop everything to keep reading and then find a great resource right at the end.

You will have to “skim read” some resources quickly to find out whether they are useful (one way that works for well written material is to read the first paragraph of each chapter and the first sentence of each paragraph and if the first sentence is useful then keep reading the paragraph)

You will pick up new resources that are referenced in the ones you are using.

Save each reference in a Word document with a little note – even if good or bad.

Research: start with your course materials

Start with what your lecturer gave you and work outwards: your essay must use the academic ideas discussed in your lectures and on the reading list. If it does not it will be marked down.

Do not start with Google because then your research material will be poor, you will get a poor grade and you will not get a good foundation of ideas that you have to use in following years, leading to poor work etc. etc.

Use Wikipedia only to quickly look up a point to aid your reading. Do not reference or quote Wikipedia it has the same unknown background as a piece of paper that you might find on the street and it has variable quality

Lecture notes and PowerPoint slides

Read these for an overview and to jog your memory.

They will suggest ideas to look for in your reading.

They may contain references that you want to look up.

Do not quote the lecture or the slides in your essay – the essay is dealing with the material not with what your lecturer said.

Module guide reading list

Here you will find key ideas and theories that will be used in your essay

It should be in one place and there should be some very good material here

They are not always available: even if there are multiple copies in the library they may be all out

Problems getting the reading:

- a) A chapter may be in the reading pack or on blackboard
- b) BUT If you can get the physical book still get it because it may have other relevant material
- c) Be prepared to work on it fast and make copies of a relevant chapter because others may reserve it
- d) If it is on loan then reserve it
- e) Look out for a library e-book version
- f) A Google book search may give a preview that you can read online immediately
- g) Consider buying the book as a worthwhile investment (you could sell it later)
- h) Look for buying an e-book if you are in a rush
- i) Text books often have a free chapter online – do a Google search for the book on the publisher's website
- j) Still can't get it? Then find out what other people have written about the book. Do a Google

scholar search and look for reviews of the book or people who have cited the book

h) Strike out from the book:

Use the Dewey number e.g. 315.12457 and directly browse nearby library books

Research: keywords

In addition to using your reading list you should start a search using “keywords”.

Keywords will help in a search to target the information. In our public sphere example we might have “public sphere”, “habermas”, “journalism”, “public”, “leveson”, “free speech”

Your librarian will be glad to help you with this.

Library catalogue

Because the catalogue will not have that many results search broadly and be prepared to scroll through screens without relevant answers for the one that has

Here you might search individually for “public sphere”, “habermas”, “free speech”

You might combine “journalism” and “public” with the terms shown above e.g. “journalism AND habermas” etc. etc.

The “leveson” search might be too recent so try journals

Some of the books might be very relevant indeed

A day spent in the library looking these books up and checking the indexes and the contents pages is invaluable.

Get help from your librarian with your search.

Google scholar

Your second search might be in “scholar.google.com”

Here you will have many results so use several combinations in a sensible way such as, e.g. “public sphere AND free speech”, “habermas AND journalism”

Look for results you get back to books, html or to pdfs – avoid citation only results

Also, if you are on campus, the Google scholar results will show journals that your university has access to (i.e. Available at LSBU)

Save relevant PDFs and links

Google books

Your third search might be in “books.google.com”

Again use several combinations in a sensible way such as, e.g. “public sphere AND free speech”, “habermas AND journalism”

Look for results which have a “Preview” click on the page for the contents

Save relevant links. See if these books are available in the library.

Research: Ask for help

Your tutors, lecturers and librarians are happy to help you find and to an extent evaluate resources

Always try to do something first and when you get stuck ask for help – that way the advice will make sense

8. Structure

There is not a formula for structuring an essay. It depends on your style, the material you are using and even how you try to fit your argument into the word count.

However below is a rough guide to one approach – take it as approximate rather than definitive.

You might want to also look at the section on “Getting started: writing exercises” for alternative approaches to those presented here.

Structuring Your Essay

(Adapted from Cottrell, S. (1999) *The Study Skills Handbook* London: Macmillan)

Basically the structure of an academic work includes an introduction, a discussion (organised into paragraphs) and a conclusion.

Introduction

The introduction does the following:

- Explain what the work is going to discuss and interpret the title for your reader
- Identify the issues you are going to explore.
- Give definitions of any key terms (though these may be explored in the discussion)
- Give a brief outline of the steps and order of the points in your discussion

The length of an introduction is about one-tenth of the work.

Note that often you will come back to the introduction at the end. This is to ensure that it fits the points you ended up making.

Discussion (body of the work)

In the body of the work develop your argument or main line of reasoning.

Organise the discussion into paragraphs. A paragraph is a collection of sentences based around one main idea or point. Have each paragraph try to make a step forward in your points. Each main step in your argument will correspond to that described in your introduction.

Use the first sentence to make the main point of your paragraph as clearly as possible.

Use the following sentences to develop the main idea. This might be with examples, evidence quotations and references. The following sentences may also qualify the main point i.e. discuss its limits or where the main idea does not apply.

Sometimes the first sentences will stand on its own, but sometimes you will need to link it to the previous paragraph.

As a test try reading only the first sentence of each paragraph to see if the points follow.

Conclusion

The conclusion does the following:

- Summarise the main arguments and themes.

- State your general conclusions.

- Make it clear why those conclusions are significant.

- Refer back to the title or brief and directly address it or 'answer' it.

The conclusion should not introduce new material. This should have been in the discussion.

You should write explicitly about what you think the significance and the limitations of your research are – it is easy to assume that it speaks for itself or that other people are as familiar with it as you.

The conclusion will be about a tenth of the word count.

A checklist

Keep in mind these points as you are writing:

- How effective is your introduction?

- Have you answered your question directly?

- Have you identified the key issues clearly?

- Have you appraised your material critically?

- Have you foregrounded your own ideas?

- Is your argument presented coherently?

- Is the material organised tightly?

- Have you drawn on a wide range of sources?

- Is your argument well supported by evidence?

- Have you referenced your sources honestly and accurately?

- Have you checked for spelling and sentence structure?

9. Editing

As a rule you will not write your essay and then present it. Instead you will produce several drafts that you read through, correct, alter and edit. Personally I go through about ten drafts over the course of several days or even weeks before the final version. This means I will have read the piece ten times at the very least and spotted a lot of flaws and problems along the way.

You will generally spend more time editing your work than you did writing it in the first place. This means that if your early versions are too long or badly written this is not a problem: you will expect as part of the process to spend time editing them thoroughly.

The key is to get your ideas on paper and to start thinking the argument through to the end. You can then sit back, re-read it, and reflect on how you might make the argument clearer and which points need to be stressed and which left out.

Sometimes it helps to discuss it with someone else - you may find that this helps you identify the main ideas as you try to explain it to them. Bear in mind the assumption that the reader of your work is an intelligent person with a good general knowledge but without extensive expert knowledge of your topic.

Editing and proofreading your work

Each edit should test whether each point made is clear and logical especially to a reader and that each point follows from the last.

You must give yourself time to edit your work – to go through it several times – to remove mistakes and improve your writing. Typically the editing can take as long or longer than the initial writing.

Simple strategies can help:

- read the work out aloud (this engages a different part of your brain)
- leave time after writing so it is fresh when you read it again
- try to put yourself in the mind of a reader
- get a friend to look through it for mistakes and comments

In particular you need to try to put yourself in the mind of a “reader”. This person is intelligent and broadly educated but without specialist knowledge and the reader expects the piece (and your writing) to be straightforward and clear.

The re-write technique

If you are not pleased with your writing then try re-writing. Simply copy out a paragraph and put it on a blank page. Then underneath the paragraph, try to write the same points but in different words. Importantly do not edit the original paragraph: keep it there for reference and force yourself to start afresh. You may find that you will make different points or put your points in a different order. Compare the two paragraphs and use the best one. You can also try this technique with sentences.

A variation on this technique is to do a word count on the original paragraph and then try to write the same point underneath in fewer words. Often if you can make the same point in fewer words it will also be better written.

10. Note taking

Why take notes in lectures?

The lecture provides a good introduction to a subject in a short space of time and taking notes will help you take full advantage of this. For example, notes can be a useful as quick reminder of a logical approach to a subject when doing essays. Notes will also help your concentration in class because you are taking a more active approach to learning.

Notes will help your memory. By writing you will reinforce points and be forced to mentally process what is being said. According to one source if you do not write anything down you will forget 42% of the information in 20 minutes, 56% after 1 hour, 66% after 1 day, 75% after 1 week and 80% after 1 month (see: <http://www.edison.k12.nj.us/cms/lib2/NJ01001623/.../1453/NoteTaking.ppt>)

Note taking methods

There are three main approaches to taking notes:

- Linear i.e. start at the beginning and go to the end

- Visual / Map – create a picture of related ideas

- Audio i.e. make an audio recording of the lecture (BUT make sure the lecturer allows this)

There seems to be no one method of writing notes that works for everyone – you have to experiment with what works for you. You can, for example, mix small diagrams in with your linear notes. Even if you record lectures you should also make written notes to help your concentration and learn more actively.

Note taking basics

Your notes:

- identify and summarise the main ideas and concepts

- record examples, references, definitions and theories

- should be short enough to get an overview of the topic

- should be long enough not to leave out important details

- are a work in progress that you may need to add to later (so leave space on the page)

- should be readable

Make sure you label your notes so that you can see exactly what they are for. Put the date, lecturer, title of the lecture and the module/course name at the beginning of your notes. Put page numbers on your notes.

Make sure taking notes does not stop you following the lecture. You must work out how much you can write and listen at the same time. Do not take notes word for word because you will not be actively engaged in thinking about what is being said.

Review and correct your notes after the lecture – when it is fresh in your mind

For emphasis use underlining and/or stars

If you have your own questions or points as you are making notes put them down but prefix them with “ME” so that you can quickly find your own ideas or ideas that need clarifying. e.g. [ME what does “public” mean?]

Note taking skills

To be successful at note taking, you need to be able to concentrate on listening, work on being able to summarize information and be aware of the structure of what is being said.

To improve your listening skills try to spot key words when the lecturer talks. You may also be able to use the points on PowerPoint slides to help you do this. All the while look out for what are the main topic headings, main arguments, theories, examples and references.

To summarize information you must be able to take a long point and make it briefly in your own words and perhaps combine the main point from several points being made. This skill of paraphrasing is an important one that you will use in your essays. Consider is the information important for you in your understanding – some points may be background that you already understand, for example.

To get at the structure you must pay attention to the logical steps being made in the lecture. This means analysing information at a fairly deep level. Many lectures will have a very explicit structure but this is not always the case and you will have to spot where a new point is being made and how this logically fits into the presentation. Sometimes information is signposted and broken down into clear headings. However sometimes the lecture “takes you on a journey” and only at the end do all the pieces come together in your own mind.

One way to remember all this is the “MIDAS” touch

M	Main Ideas
I	Identify supporting details
D	Disregard unimportant information
A	Analyse redundant information
S	Simplify, categorize, and label important information

Note taking techniques

The main note-taking technique is to use abbreviates and symbols to make note taking take less time:

Experiment with omitting vowels (like txting)

Exprmnt wth omttng vwls

Use common abbreviations for your subject, e.g. jrn = journalism

Create a key for the abbreviations you use and put it at the top of your notes e.g.

“md=media”

You can also use common short versions of words:

“1^o” = primary etc.

“+” can mean “and”

“∴” means “therefore”

“th” means the

Read first

First you should read before the lecture. This will mean that you have some idea of the concepts before the lecture and then you are not hearing them for the first time and the lecture is easier to follow. You will then understand more subtle points and be less likely to miss something. The lecture can then also bring together and clarify ideas that you have already been thinking about. There will always be a set reading for a lecture.

Lectures have connected ideas so preparatory reading helps even if you don’t expect to do coursework based on that lecture. And bear in mind that you should be studying for knowledge not just to pass. This approach makes your work better and more stimulating and therefore more enjoyable.

Note taking and PowerPoint

Ask the lecturer to make the PowerPoint slides available online – don't be shy about this they may have things you miss

If they are available *still make notes* – a PowerPoint is only a skeleton of an argument and does not relate to your own individual understanding.

Your questions

Use your notes to record questions you have from the lecture and ask them. Generally speaking if you don't understand then others will have similar problems and the lecturer will welcome the question. This may be at the end but if the point is so basic that it stops you understanding then put your hand up and ask. You will find out which lecturers like this very quickly.

Further reading

Cottrell, S. (2008) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 3rd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 122-127, 134-135

Neville, C. (2006) "Effective Note Making" [online] Available at:
<http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/management/external/els/pdf/effectivenotemaking.pdf> (Accessed 11 May 2011)

11. Common mistakes

These points are based on common feedback that students get on their essays. Some are more important than others. Some are quite technical. All of them contribute in one way or another to your mark. So it is worth going through all these points to avoid the same mistakes. When a marker gets a text that is easy to read without having to put in a lot of little comments, they will spend more time giving you substantial feedback and they will be predisposed towards giving you a higher mark. As a rule of thumb the less time something takes to be marked the higher the mark it gets!

Getting the right question and stating the question

1. **Missing coursework title:** You must start with your piece with the coursework title – make sure it is in bold. This reminds you exactly what the assignment is that you are trying to address. Remember the whole point is to answer that question so it becomes a constant reminder and something you can refer back to. It also lets the marker know which question you have chosen!

2. **Incorrect coursework title:** Make sure the coursework title is correct to the last dot and comma. Getting it right tells the marker that you have attention to detail and helps to ensure you are answering exactly the right question.

Formatting your pages

3. **Not enough space for comments (various problems)**

This might seem technical, but it is about having a serious attitude towards the presentation of your work and to getting feedback from your essay that will help you improve. The basic rule is that you must allow enough space for the marker to put comments on your work. Getting comments back will ensure you improve your work and your understanding. Without the space you will get less feedback – and less readable feedback.

Not double spaced: You must double space your text to allow space for comments.

Small margins: Your margins should be the default size – again for space for comments.

Font too small: The font you use must be 12pt double spaced. When fonts are too small the work is difficult to read and even double spacing does not leave enough room for comments.

No vertical space between paragraphs: again this space is needed for comments. You want comments on each paragraph – it is at the end of paragraphs which is often the place for substantial comments.

Borders around the work: They really do get in the way of comments.

4. **Missing page numbers:** You should at minimum have the page numbers on each sheet. The marker may want to refer to something on a particular page and it helps as a check to make sure everything is there.

5. **Double sided printouts.** From experience, it really is a pain to turn over each sheet and try to mark on the back of pages and to flip through the work looking for points to highlight.

Formatting references

Many students have problems with references. So getting your references right gives the marker a sense that you have an eye for detail and can follow a complex set of rules: if the references are poor then very often so are other details. It is vital to have clear references as it lets the marker see how you build your argument – see section on referencing for a fuller explanation.

10. **In-text references incorrect:** The references used inside the text should be only: (Surname, Year: Page) for example (Smith, 2010: 57) if more than one page (Smith, 2010:57-58)

If the document has no pages then use “(Surname, Year)” only. Include page number(s) wherever possible i.e. not only for direct quotes but also for when you paraphrase an argument or simply want to refer to an idea. If the reference has no personal author, then use the name of the institutional publisher in its place. Place the in-text reference after a point is made or directly after a quote. Leave out the author surname if you have just mentioned it in the text.

11. **In-text reference has web address:** You should not have web links in your main document (even as part of an in-text reference). I know some methods of referencing specify this, but these are really ugly and spoil the flow of your writing. Just use the simple in-text reference shown above.

12. **End references incorrect:** For detailed information see the references section of this document and pick up a referencing guide from the library. But there are three general points to note here. Do not use “Bibliography” for your header above the end references – you are not showing everything you read. Use “References” as the header instead. Second, put the references in surname order. Third, put everything in one list: do not create separate sections for books and then for web pages etc.

To jog your memory here are three referencing examples of (in order) a book, a journal article and a web page:

Barker, R., Kirk, J. and Munday, R.J. (1988) *Narrative Analysis*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Perry, C., (2001) "What a Health Care Assistant Should Know About Clean Hands." *Nursing Times*, 97(22), pp.63-64.

Smith, D. (2003) "National Library of Guidelines" Available at:
<http://www.library.nhs.uk/guidelinesFinder> [Accessed: 10 October 2013].

If you have slight differences, for example a different style of capitalisation, fine. But be consistent.

Formatting (style)

13. **No bold except for the title:** You should not use bold in the body of your text.
14. **Quotes should *not* be in italics.** Italics are used for emphasis. The exception is with italics in the original quote which you should include.
15. **Pull-out quotes incorrect format:** If a quote is over three lines long then you should break it out of the text with a space before and after and an indentation, e.g.:

"Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Ex ea commodo consequat" (Surname, Year: Page)

English

16. **Confusing subject:** Sometimes when stand-in words such as *this*, *it*, *them*, *those* are used it is not clear what they stand in for. Check carefully – by looking back through the text – that with each occurrence of *this*, *it* etc. that it is clear what the word stands in place of. Think, would be clear to a reader of your work, who you must assume is not fully familiar with the subject.

English (sentences)

17. **Run-on sentences:** This is a very common problem. If you introduce a new subject (i.e. a person or thing that does a verb) then you should have a new sentence – unless you use conjunctions such as *and* or *but* to combine sentences. For example: "Clegg took the step of apologising for the rise in tuition fees, clearly this itself shows the power of the coalition". This should read: "Clegg took the step of apologising for the rise in tuition fees. Clearly this itself shows the power of the

coalition". "This itself" is the new subject and "shows" the new verb. See section on sentences in this document.

18. Incomplete sentences: A sentence should have a subject and a verb at least, i.e. a person or thing that does a verb. See section on sentences in this document.

English (formality)

19. Use of "I": Using "I" or "my" is to be avoided. This is because the academic essay seeks to give some distance from the subject matter so that you can analyse it. An essay is not personal opinion.

20. Use of "you": Using "you" or "your" is to be avoided. This is because in using "you" the writer is making assumptions about the reader – that should not be done with an academic essay. The assumption should be that you do not know the reader but – whoever that reader is – the essay can make sense to him or her.

21. Use of "we" or "our": Using "we" or "our" is to be avoided. This suggests that you know the reader agrees with you or is from the same background as you – which you simply cannot assume. Further something like "our country" implies an agreement with the reader in nationality and in identification with the nation politically. The idea of the essay is to step back so that you can objectively analyse.

22. Use of slang or conversational English: Do not use slang. You should write in an academic or formal style or "register". You should avoid the use of slang or conversational English.

23. Use of contractions. Do not use contractions such as "isn't" use "is not". You need to establish quite a formal tone in your writing. Also note that "it's" = "it is" – this is a regular mistake.

English (quotations)

24. Overlong quotes: Quotes must not be overlong and must relate directly to the point that you are making. They must not become a substitute for your own argument or your own voice. When you are choosing a quote find the parts that make a point in a very particular, pithy or arresting way. You may well be able to paraphrase, or put in your own words, some parts of the quote that make simple factual points.

25. Quotes are "stuck in" – they must be introduced and explained: You should introduce a quote to integrate it into the flow of your writing. Otherwise it seems like someone else has just shouted something out in the middle of your writing. Think of the essay as being your voice. Do not let the quote substitute for your own writing. Importantly, you should also try to make the point in your

own words after a quote. It is not enough to put the quote in – you need to explain a difficult quote explicitly and also explain what it means in terms of your overall argument/analysis.

English (paragraphs)

26. **Poor paragraphs:** Try to create a new paragraph for a new point. The first sentences of a paragraph should state a point and subsequent sentences should explain it, discuss it, qualify it (i.e. show where it doesn't work), or give examples. You may find that while writing a paragraph you will have to revisit the first sentence to ensure it introduces what you are discussing. Ensuring that the paragraphs are clear in this way will help you to organise your piece. As a test find a good academic book. Read the first sentence of each paragraph for a few pages. If it is well written, you will see that you can get the main points just from these sentences.

27. **Poor links between paragraphs:** The links between points/paragraphs can also often be poor or insufficient – this means the piece can seem to jump from one topic to another. Take time to read what you consider good writing and see how the author creates and links each paragraph.

English (other)

28. **Capitalisation:** Capitalisation is for official titles or proper names. So, for example, "Journalism" should be "journalism"; also "the Society of professional journalists" should be "the Society of Professional Journalists".

30. **Clichés:** Avoid clichéd expressions such as e.g. sweep under a rug, rake in the cash, what's really going on, their every move. Generally speaking they make points less clear and explicit than they need to be.

31. **Misused apostrophes:** One use of apostrophes is for abbreviations where missing letters are indicated. However, "1960's" has no missing letters. Use "1960s" instead.

Introductions

32. **Missing intro:** An essay should have an introduction. An introduction, to help the reader, should explain what the question means and give a sense of the structure of the argument being made. For this type of undergraduate essay this is important.

33. **Intro did not relate to title:** Try to relate your introduction to addressing the question. Otherwise a reader having seen the question will be confused as to why you are discussing something else. One way to start an essay that you might incorporate into your introduction is to explain and unpack the question.

34. **Structure not in intro:** The structure of the essay should be made clear in the introduction. There is little clarity to what each step of your answer to the essay question is. You should explain each main step you take and how it helps you to get to an answer.

Overall points

35. **Essay jumped:** The points in an essay should proceed smoothly and logically. If the writing suddenly starts discussing a different topic this is jarring and confusing for the reader. While the structure may seem in the writer's mind, a reader needs some sense of progression to be spelled out. See if each paragraph starts in a way that links it with the previous paragraph. Ensure each paragraph is discussing clearly related points. Check out good academic works to see how they do it.

36. **Insufficient references:** There is no fixed number of references for a given assignment. Overall, you need to ensure that your piece references important debates and works on your subject. As a rule of thumb, if you only have five or fewer there is usually something wrong.

37. **Wikipedia as reference:** Wikipedia should not be used as a reference. Because authors cannot be traced, Wikipedia articles have no provenance or sense of who created them and when. This means that it is not possible to give weight to the arguments or facts used as a reference. It is a bit like having an anonymous witness at a trial – would we accept what that person said?

38. **Did not answer question:** This is a very common problem and can lead to the essay being marked down severely. Make sure you understand the question. Make sure you answer it. See other sections on this.

12. Plagiarism

The business of academics is words. If you copy other people's work then a marker can spot in a second that the writing style has changed and can quickly look up the source.

The main thing is to avoid putting yourself in the situation where you are even tempted to present someone else's work as your own. This means giving yourself as much time as possible to start on your essay rather than leaving it to the last minute.

Below are the university notes on plagiarism.

You ARE told not to PLAGIARISE. So what exactly is PLAGIARISM?

The act of plagiarism is to pass off as your own work, the ideas or thoughts of someone else, without giving credit to that other person by quoting the reference to the original. There is no standard definition and dictionaries will vary slightly, but put simply, it is a form of CHEATING and THEFT.

- ❑ Plagiarism is presenting another student's course work or project as your own work.
- ❑ Plagiarism is putting into your own words commentary or ideas from another source without giving the reference(s).
- ❑ Plagiarism is quoting phrases, sentences, complete paragraphs or more, from an existing published source without using quotation marks and full references.
- ❑ Plagiarism is cutting and pasting from a website, electronic journal article etc. without indicating where your information has come from.
- ❑ Plagiarism is buying your course work essays from an internet service and hoping your tutor will not notice.

What you should be aware of:

- ❑ Intentional Plagiarism is the deliberate failure to reference anything. Lack of time is not an excuse.
- ❑ Unintentional Plagiarism can happen if you have correctly paraphrased the originals but not acknowledged the sources. It will NOT occur if you fully understand the rules of referencing. There is NO excuse for "unintentional plagiarism". You are responsible for knowing what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it.

- ❑ Collaboration. If you have received considerable help from other people you should give credit to them for this and if you were in a group project make it clear which section each member contributed.
- ❑ Collusion. This occurs if you knowingly plan with other students to gain an unfair advantage, e.g. by allowing your coursework to be copied, or by accepting a mark for a group project to which you did not actually contribute.

THE SOLUTION = CORRECT REFERENCING, or CITING

The method of referencing used by most, but not all, departments in the University is called the Harvard system. Make sure you know which one your department uses. Referencing using the Harvard system involves giving the name of the contributor(s) to any journal article, book (or chapter within) plus the date of publication, in the text of your work, and listing full details at the end of your essay or project.

You must list all the sources of information you use if they are not your own. Sources of “Information” in this context include: music, photos, DVD or video clips, computer programs, maps, cartoons etc., as well as written texts either from an original print source or any electronic source. It covers anything produced as a result of someone’s creative and original work.

Full details are in the Help Sheet no. 30 – Referencing Using the Harvard System: Frequently Asked Questions and also Help Sheet no. 31 – Referencing Electronic Sources. These are available in all the libraries and can be copied from blackboard.

(Help Sheets section of Services for Students)

Why is referencing so important?

In a university, you need to present your work in an acceptable academic style. This includes research which makes reference to the existing works of other people and knowing when you need to reference (or “cite”) your sources. By following the recognised guidelines and respecting and building upon the existing work of other people you will get higher marks for attributing these ideas.

DO

- ❑ Always check what is required of you for each assignment, project, or dissertation. Ask the responsible member of staff – your tutor, Course Director, or Module Co-ordinator.
- ❑ Paraphrase the original work or summarise it in your OWN WORDS. Remember that you will still need to reference the original.
- ❑ Put any phrase or sentence which you have used word for word into “quotation marks”
- ❑ Use quotes sparingly – or the text may not be easy to read.
- ❑ Give yourself time to do all the references IN FULL
- ❑ Reference anything you are not sure about – just in case.
- ❑ Make a note of the full reference AT THE TIME of reading the original, especially if it is a chapter from a book or a document from the Internet.
- ❑ Try to read the ORIGINAL work you are using, rather than someone else’s comments on it. YOUR interpretations and additions are what your tutor wants to read.
- ❑ If you can’t find the original, make reference to it, AND to the source material in which you read about it.
- ❑ Evaluate carefully any information found from a random internet search where you have not linked from a reputable web page or database.

DON'T

- ❑ EVER CONSIDER using any of the essay writing or document purchasing services available on the internet. Credit your tutor with the ability to recognise a “cut and paste job”, especially if the bottom line says “from Essays-R-Us.com.” or similar. This is “Cyberplagiarism”.
- ❑ Assume information on the Internet is exempt from the need to reference.
- ❑ Let your own work be used without getting credit for it. Plagiarism is by no means unique to LSBU and students elsewhere may be using YOUR work.

Where you don't need to use references

- ❑ If you are writing up your own experiences, observations, fieldwork, etc.

- ❑ You are mentioning something which is “common knowledge”, i.e. well-known facts like historical dates, something well documented elsewhere.

Further measures to avoid plagiarism

- ❑ If English is not your first language and you are worried that your style is not good then consult LSBU’s Centre for Learning Development and Support.
- ❑ It is unwise to attempt a discussion of someone else’s ideas without fully understanding the argument they are making. If such material is not fully referenced your tutor will suspect that you have not read the original.
- ❑ Make time to develop skills in paraphrasing (putting into different words) not just to avoid obvious copying but to help clarify the meaning of your statement and to “add value” to your research.
- ❑ We KNOW it can take as long to do a correct reference as it does to write up the actual information researched. However, if you do run out of time, a poor mark is always better than a penalty for plagiarism.

13. Grammar: the sentence

This lesson is about sentences and the two most common mistakes students make with constructing sentences. This is not a grammar lesson exactly, but instead a way of thinking about sentences that can help you spot and correct these mistakes. The reason to avoid these mistakes is so that your writing is clearer. This is important not just for the reader, but also for you to use your writing to clarify ideas for yourself.

The first – and the most common – is putting two sentences together as if they are one. These are called “run-on” sentences. The second is making incomplete sentences. The problem is not just in having sentences that are not “grammatically correct”, but in making sentences that a reader would find difficult to follow.

1. Parts of a sentence

Take a simple sentence: **“The boy kicks the ball.”**

In this sentence you should recognise that we have two nouns (the boy and the ball) and a verb (to kick). The two nouns, however, have a particular relationship to the verb. Here one noun (the boy) does the verb (kicking) to the second noun (the ball).

“The boy” is said to be the “subject” of the sentence. It is the “subject” because it is the active element, the person or thing doing the verb. “The ball” is said to be the object of the sentence. It is the “object” because it is the passive element, the person or thing that is being acted on by the subject doing the verb.

Put simply, in a sentence the subject does the verb to the object. In other words, sentences are about action or activity. In a sentence people or things (subjects) do something (verbs). More often than not they do this to something or someone else (objects). This is true even if sometimes the activity is simply being or existing, for example “He is tall.”

In this example we look at how a thing can be a subject: **“The ball falls on his head.”**

The subject is “the ball”. The verb is “falls”. The object is “his head”. So the subject doesn’t have to be a person – just the person or thing that is doing the verb.

In this example we look at how a verb can be “passive”: **“The ball is kicked by him.”**

The subject is “the ball”. The verb is “to be kicked” rather than “kicks”. There is no object. Here the verb has been made passive. The sentence is said to have a “passive construction”. What was described before as the activity (“kicks”) has been replaced instead as a state of being (“is kicked”). Here the activity (“being kicked”) is being done by the ball.

There is no object here because nothing is being done to him. Instead the “by him” simply counts as a clause or part of the sentence that adds extra information.

It is often clearer to the reader when the verb is used actively. For example journalists would always write “He kicked the ball” rather than “The ball was kicked by him.”

However, where we want to emphasise the effect or the process we will often use the passive construction, for example: “He was stabbed”. In academic writing a passive construction is quite common.

We will look in more detail about how this idea of a sentence helps us in later. But for now there are two rules to bear in mind:

First a complete sentence needs at least a subject and a verb. (There are some exceptions that we will not cover here).

Second two or more of these simple sentences can be combined into one sentence (known as a compound sentence) but this requires connecting words or “conjunctions” such as “and” to clearly separate the subjects and actions described in each simple sentence.

2. Incomplete Sentences

In the previous section we learnt to recognise the parts of a sentence.

To recap, in a sentence we require a subject and a verb. The subject is the person or thing that does the verb. Remember a sentence should convey an action or activity, even if this action is merely existing (the verb “to be”).

Now we can use this information to test whether we have a sentence or just part of a sentence. We will do this by looking at four examples of incomplete sentences.

The first example is:

“Although I got a taste of independent life and what it was like to make my own money.”

This is not a sentence. This is a clause that would modify a sentence. The way that we can recognise this is that nothing is actually being done here.

This becomes slightly clearer if we make it part of a full sentence:

“Although I got a taste of independent life and what it was like to make my own money, I still lacked confidence.”

If we wanted to break this new sentence down we would get:

Although (THIS CONDITION), (SUBJECT) (VERBS) (OBJECT)]

If we remove the word “Although”, it stops being a clause that can be applied to a sentence and starts to be an activity in its own right. So the following IS a sentence: “I got a taste of independent life and what it was like to make my own money.”

The second example is: **“Just the simple things like teaching them how to count or read.”**

This is not a sentence. Here “simple things like teaching them how to count or read” is a complex noun. There is no verb (i.e. activity or action) being done by a subject in the sentence. You should ask: “Is there an activity of a subject doing a verb being conveyed?”

Our third example is: **“Raised in a family oriented culture with two parents and an older sister.”**

Here there is no verb again. Here “Raised in a family oriented culture with two parents and an older sister” is an adverb. Again the test is, “Is there an activity of a subject doing a verb being conveyed?” If we added “He was...” or “I was...” to the start, we would have a sentence.

Our final example is: **“Housewife sitting at home raising the children.”**

Here we have a compound noun again. Or, our subject is “Housewife sitting at home raising the children”. We have no verb. This is because “sitting” and “raising” are not verbs on their own. They are adverbs – or descriptions – and they need the verb to be or “is” to become part of a verb.

Correct sentences from this might be: The housewife sits at home. / The housewife sitting at home raises the children. / The housewife is sitting at home raising the children. / The housewife sitting at home raising the children longs for action and adventure.

In conclusion, you may not be able to identify all the grammatical terms for the words used.

However you should be able to apply a test of whether a sentence is complete by thinking about what the central activity being described is and whether there is the action of a subject on a verb.

Is there an activity here?

Is the sentence describing the action of a subject on a verb?

3. Run on sentences

Run on sentences are one of the most common mistakes found in the construction of sentences. What happens in a run on sentence is that several sentences are run together without a clear separation between the various subjects and verbs. This means that the subject and verb combinations become unclear and the sentence is often difficult for a reader to follow.

The basic rule is that a simple sentence should only have one combination of subject and verb. After that you must start a new sentence. Generally this is done using a full stop and a capital letter. However you can combine two or more sentences using special words called conjunctions. Examples of conjunctions are: and / but / or / yet / for / nor / so. The conjunctions mean that the subject and verb combinations in the different sentences can be distinct enough so that meaning is not lost.

Let's take a simple example: **"he throws the ball, she catches the ball."**

This is a run-on sentence. The first subject/verb is "he throws". The second subject/verb is "she catches". These do not belong in the same sentence. So we should write: "He throws the ball. She catches the ball." However, we can combine the two sentences using a conjunction to get: "He throws the ball and she catches the ball."

We should note that with more than two sentences we can create a list and use a comma and a conjunction. So this is also correct: "He throws the ball, she catches the ball and the game is over."

We will now look at some more complex examples:

a) **"I acquired general admin skills as running the office was part of the daily routine, the experience also equipped me to communicate to a team."**

The first subject/verb is "I acquired". The second subject/verb is "the experience equipped"

A comma is being used where a full stop should be used. It should be: "I acquired general admin skills as running the office was part of the daily routine. The experience also equipped me to communicate to a team."

b) **"My biggest achievement to date was buying my flat, at the time I was so green and innocent."**

This is another example of a comma being used where a full stop should be used. It should be:

My biggest achievement to date was buying my flat. At the time I was so green and innocent.

c) **“As the saying goes, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”, due to the experiences I had I learnt how to deal with small minded people better than others can.”**

Here we could join the two with an “and”: “As the saying goes, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” and due to the experiences I had I learnt how to deal with small minded people better than others can.”

Finally we come to a mixed example of run-on and incomplete sentences: “My education consisted of primary and Junior Secondary School at the age of eight to fifteen, and then passed my exams, and had admission to the Senior Secondary School at the age of 16 years.”

The subject of the first part is “My education”, i.e. “My education consisted of”. The second part has no subject i.e. the person or thing doing the verb is missing in the last part: “then passed my exams..” The correct sentence should be something like: “My education consisted of primary and Junior Secondary School at the age of eight to fifteen, and I then passed my exams and had admission to the Senior Secondary School at the age of 16 years.”

Or it may be clearer to use a consistent subject: “I went to primary and junior school from age eight to fifteen and then passed my exams to gain admission to the senior secondary school aged 16.”

So, to avoid run-on sentences there are a few things you need to bear in mind:

A simple sentence should only have one combination of subject and verb. After that there must be a new sentence.

To combine two or more sentences you must use a conjunction. Conjunctions include: and / but / or / yet / for / nor / so.

Try to be exactly clear throughout what subject is doing what verb as you write.

14. Grammar: the comma

The Comma Demystified

Essential to writing is the humble comma. Thought by many the creation of a sadist, the dot-curl combo can be the key to clarity. My comprehensive school education certainly skirted the issue. So, as a mature student, I looked into it myself. I found a few simple rules in a simple book and, in a few hundred words, here is most of what you need to know about the comma, but were afraid to ask.

Commas are not to be used to give readers a chance to breathe: they have had plenty of practice at that. No, there are four, and only four, distinct uses of the comma: listing, joining, gapping and bracketing.

The *listing* comma separates a lists and substitutes for the word “and” and sometimes the word “or”.

“The three musketeers were Porthos and Aramis and Athos” becomes

“The three musketeers were Porthos, Aramis and Athos”.

There are two extra rules for the listing comma. Listing comma rule one: use it only to separate a list of three sentences or more.

“I speak English, she speaks Italian and he speaks Russian” is correct, but

“I speak English, she speaks Italian” is wrong.

Think of this rule as that a list of two sentences is just a join between the sentences, not a list.

Listing comma rule two: if, in your list, one of the items has an “and” put in a comma before this “and” for clarity.

“He liked listening to the Beatles, Status Quo, and Gilbert and Sullivan” is good, but

“He liked listening to the Beatles, Status Quo and Gilbert and Sullivan” is confusing.

The general test for a joining comma is whether you could substitute “and” or “or” and the sentence would still make sense. The exception is when you might need a comma before the “and” or “or” for clarity when an item in your list has an “and” or “or” itself.

The *joining* comma joins up two complete sentences, but must be followed by one of these joining words: “and”, “or”, “but”, “while” and “yet”.

“His shirt is blue, but her shirt is red” is correct, but

“His shirt is blue, her shirt is red” is wrong.

Note that the joining words “and”, “or”, “but”, “while” and “yet” follow this rule. However, other joining words should be preceded by a semi-colon if the sentences are closely related or should start a new sentence. Examples of joining words that do not receive the comma treatment are: “however”, “therefore”, “hence”, “consequently” and “nevertheless”.

“His shirt is blue, however her shirt is red” is wrong.

The *gapping* comma shows that some words have been left out when those missing words would just repeat words used earlier in the same sentence.

For example:

“Churchill was famous for his cigars, Hitler, for his moustache, and John Wayne, for his walk”.

Here the words “was famous” have been substituted by a gapping comma. Sometimes this is not necessary if the meaning is clear anyway.

The most common, and difficult, use of the comma is the *bracketing* comma is a pair of commas used to isolate an interruption to the main thrust of the sentence. If the interruption is at the beginning or end of the sentence then, of course, only one bracketing comma is needed.

For example

“These findings, we would suggest, cast doubt upon the hypothesis” or

“These findings cast doubt upon the hypothesis, we would suggest”

The first test here is whether removing the interruption would leave a sentence that makes sense.

“She groped for her cigarettes and, finding them, hastily lit one” is good, but

“She groped for her cigarettes, and finding them, hastily lit one” is WRONG because removing the interruption leaves a sentence that makes no sense.

The second test is whether the interruption is just that, an interruption, not an essential part of the sentence. So:

“Note that in this example, the sentence remains clear” is wrong because the words “Note that”, as an instruction, are vital to the central thrust of the sentence.

“Note that, in this example, the sentence remains clear” is correct.

These concepts were taken from the *Penguin Guide to Punctuation* by R. L. Trask. I suggest you get one. If only they had taught me this at school!

15. Using Referenced Material (under construction)

Why are you being asked to reference other people's work in your writing?

Perhaps the main reason that you are asked to use references is that academic work (and a great deal of modern knowledge) relies on the idea that you can build on the insights and research of others. In an essay, report or dissertation you are using the theories and writing of others as building blocks or scaffolding for your argument – as all academic writers do. These sources or references can allow you to assume or state ideas that experts have worked on for years and so potentially let you build powerful and insightful arguments of your own with their backing. Alternately some of your writing will engage with important ideas to critique them and some of your work will use logic and evidence to undermine ideas you oppose. This is something that academics do in ongoing debates on many subjects – you are being asked to take part. Either way (through support and/or critique) the idea is that by engaging with ideas from the best thinkers you will be able to develop your understanding of a subject and be able to apply that to develop insights of your own.

To put this in a slightly different way, one important reason to use academic reference material to support an argument is because in the process of being published it has had to go through some quite rigorous scrutiny. This does not mean that it is necessarily correct. However, because of this scrutiny it can to a greater or lesser extent be defended and is generally based on evidence and logical argument. It therefore puts your writing on much firmer foundations than simply stating your own view. However, such references must be used carefully. They can be defended because they are put in a particular and exact way. Understanding this exactness and getting your head around the particular point is required so that you can effectively use the quote or reference in your own work. This is a key element of grasping your subject.

Sometimes the demand to use references is interpreted as being a little dismissive of your own insights, thoughts and ideas. In a sense that is true. You have not been published in twelve languages and been invited to speak at conferences around the world because people are excited by your ideas. Your ideas have not been tested by experts critiquing them. However in another sense this is false. You are being taken seriously in the competition of ideas. You are being asked to apply your abilities and understanding in the most rigorous way possible, up against (and with) the best ideas mankind has to offer. The idea is that you will thoroughly test your own views and that of others and emerge with a much stronger and clearer understanding.

The view of connected knowledge also strongly influences how your work is assessed. You are being assessed in large part on your ability to interact with the best ideas. So you must let assessors know

what ideas you are using in references. They need to check you have understood correctly, applied that understanding correctly, and they must see clearly what you are dealing with. Your work is understood as better, not worse, by taking into account what others have written. However, you are not simply copying what others say. Rather you are being asked to apply your own understanding aided by the insights of others to answer a particular enquiry or question. Thus, for example, listing a set of quotes with a little explanation could never be enough.

Make no mistake: this is not easy. Students struggle to understand many ideas precisely because the ideas themselves required a struggle to get to. Rarely are profound insights straightforward: they often require an unusual way of looking at things or are set out specifically in relation to particular sets of circumstances and evidence, and with qualifications about how they can be applied. This is then why such a dim view is taken of using the writing of others as if it were your own – of plagiarism. Plagiarism is a way of attempting to shortcut the struggle to understand. It is you taking credit for the work of others by presenting their worked-through-understanding as though it were your own.

So, are you being asked to be an intellectual? Some students will decide that this is the way to go. However at a base level you are being asked to develop a rounded appreciation of your subject. By getting to grips with the ideas that others have used to understand this subject you will be well placed to thoroughly engage with the subject and apply that understanding yourself. This is the “shortcut” that higher education gives you. And this is done through writing. Writing makes you actively apply yourself in a way that simply reading can never quite do.

What works should you reference?

The choice of sources you use, and the works that you reference, in many ways determines the quality of your written work. A useful analogy here is cooking. Even if you are a good chef if you use poor quality ingredients then your food will be of poor quality. Likewise if you choose poor sources (and by implication do limited research) then your written work will be of poor quality. To extend the analogy, of course some of the better ingredients/sources require skill to be used well but without the attempt you will never be an accomplished cook/student.

The first works you must consider referencing are those set out in the course reading. For any given topic there will be hundreds if not thousands of examples of writing that might be relevant for you to read and use. However a few of these will definitely be essential. You should expect that your lectures and the set reading for your course will provide a guide to some of the key authors and debates you need to engage with. Some the course reading will be background that helps you

understand and you won't reference it. However, as a rule of thumb you will be expected to directly reference some of the works on the reading list. This shows an engagement with the course.

Additionally you will be expected to engage with the relevant topics, discussions and authors discussed in the core reading. This raises the second source of works to look at, which are to be found in the references found in the course reading. The academic idea is that a work will have references to other works. You can branch out from the core texts to references found there or to the works of key writers found there. Using references in this way as places to go and look, as a way to broaden and deepen your research and understanding, is similar to the idea of following links from a web page. This intellectual exploration is a key aspect of your work and should be applied to all the research and reading that you do.

The third source of material is academic sources more generally. Primarily these will likely be discovered through a combination of using a library search and by using the Google Scholar search engine (more later). To find this material you must establish some search terms that will allow you to find relevant material. The idea is that you must strike a balance between search terms that are too general and too specific (again covered later). You should save these search terms and collect key material as you go along, either by saving PDF documents or else by saving links or references in a document. However a secondary way to find material is using the indexing of the Dewey-decimal system. Each library book you look at has a number on the spine, e.g. 031.231. These are subject groupings used in the library. Often a few hours will be well spent looking at surrounding books.

The last stop, unless you are conducting your own direct research of experimental data or perhaps of opinions, is with journalistic material. It should be noted here that despite being last on the list sometimes journalistic material can be more useful for your research than many academic sources. Sometimes, for example, you want to establish a factual point or need very current material. At other times you need to find material that is from a particular perspective not covered in straightforward academic material that perhaps has a particular attitude and vitality. Notably journalistic material covers an enormous variety of sources some of which is more valuable than others.

To use journalistic material properly you need to think about the source represents, the seriousness of the argument being put forward and why a particular point is being made. Generally the more serious and more representative the better. And thinking about why a point is being made (the intention of the writer) lets you decide how you will present an argument – sometimes explaining the background or interests involved will be necessary to explain for the reader and to construct

your argument. While in some ways these criteria also apply to academic sources, you need to think quite carefully about this when it comes to journalistic sources. There are several resources you should consider. There are several specialist magazines (both offline and online) that can be useful. For example in current affairs, the Economist, the Spectator, and the New Statesman all cover important debates and contemporary events from particular perspectives. There are also the broadsheet newspapers – such as the Times, the Guardian and the Telegraph – all of which have important source material that works its way into many academic accounts. This source material can be useful both for facts and opinion. There are also some important blogs that academic authors and some influential writers use to develop ideas not yet ready for institutional publication.

16. Referencing

Academic writing builds on the insights of the academic literature sometimes even by criticising that literature. This means that references are vital for academic work – to show exactly what is being used.

In the social sciences the most common form of referencing is called Harvard referencing. It uses a short reference inside the text that points to the full reference at the end of the text. The short reference inside the text (the “in-text reference”) tells the reader: the author surname, the year and the page e.g. “(Smith, 1999: 10)” – or in context:

In the case of contemporary Hollywood, this seems to have resulted in the situation where 'it becomes increasingly more difficult to distinguish the film industry from other media or entertainment industries' (Smith, 1999: 10).

The reader then looks up the *full* reference from a “reference list” at the end of the text (which is in alphabetical order of surname) e.g.

Smith, A. (1999) *The Book Name*, City: Publisher.

If you do not actually quote from a source but are using ideas or information from that source you must also include a reference.

Note: There are many versions of Harvard references. The main thing is that you try to be **consistent** in your own references and include all the basic information in the right order.

This is not a full account of referencing. You can find a more detailed guide to the Harvard System on the Perry Library's website at: <http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/library/html/documents/HS302012.pdf>

Video example of referencing books (from start to finish):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7rWyBDEwUY>

Video example of referencing web pages (from start to finish):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sJeHZvcmok>

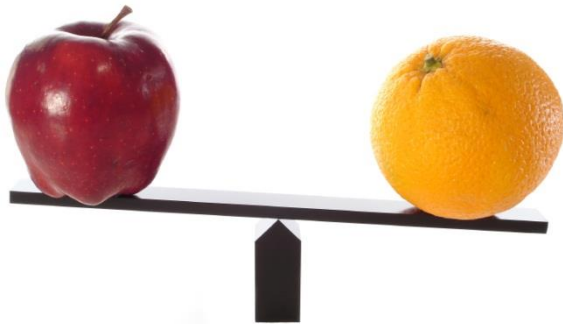
Also for definitive information on Harvard with hundreds of examples see:

<http://libweb.anglia.ac.uk/referencing/harvard.htm>

See the example essay that follows for examples of references.

17. Academic Comparisons

There is a saying “It’s like comparing apples and oranges”. This means that it seems impossible to compare two very different things. Sure, they are both fruit. But ask yourself, which is best? The only



answer seems to be “I like oranges best” (or of course you might like apples). However, this is just your view and not really a comparison.

In academic writing you have to solve a similar problem. You must evaluate two (or more) different arguments or theories.

One way of comparing two things which seem very different is by comparing the properties

that they share. For example if you are packing your bag for a long day out and so you want to minimise the weight of your bag, then you might choose either an apple or an orange because one is lighter than the other. In this case you are choosing the lightest on the basis that they have a common property, i.e. they both have a weight. This common property allows you to make a comparison. So through their properties – what they have in common – they can be compared.

In academic comparisons you perform a similar trick. However in this case you are not dealing with simple physical properties. Rather you are using abstract properties – in other words concepts. So two academic arguments can be understood in relationship to one another through how they understand or deal with common abstract ideas or theories

Let’s take the example of politics. One of the most frequent abstract properties of political arguments is that they have an explicit (or perhaps an implied) view of the state. By laying out the two views of the state that are found in the two arguments side by side we can really begin to compare the two. We are in effect using the concept of the state to get the two arguments to interact with one another

By using these concepts we are moving beyond first impressions or feelings about the arguments

Or take another example: literature. In this case we may not be comparing arguments simply put. Instead we may be comparing theories. For example, we might want to compare how two theories interpret a piece of literature, e.g. Marxism and feminism. We might discuss the meaning given by

theory A to a scene followed by the meaning given by theory B to a scene (or just one aspect of a scene). Again by laying out the two interpretations side by side we are comparing their ability to explain what is going on and get at the underlying meanings (which is what theories are supposed to do). Here we might bring out the strengths and weaknesses of the two theories in their ability to explain – and also in how they overlap in their explanation.

Currently in UK secondary education it seems to be common practice to teach comparisons by listing the good and bad features of something, e.g. they have plus points and minus points, good points and bad points, positives and negatives. However, this is not good enough for how we analyse concepts at university. We are not looking for a list of simplistic points and, let's face it, the world is not simply black and white.

Instead we must put two arguments (or theories) in a relationship with one another. This may well bring out the underlying meaning and it allows us to move beyond a simple idea of liking one argument or another. It is also practice in the use of abstract concepts – a vital part of academic study. The major concepts in an area of study are *major* concepts because they relate to so many arguments and often because their use provides us with the ability to get beyond surface appearances or impressions.

Let's take a worked example. Below are two arguments about regulation of the media, based around a discussion of Page 3 – a page featuring a topless model in the popular Sun newspaper. First is a summary of an argument by Heeswijk in the Independent. Second is a summary of an article by Shiner, from the online magazine Spiked. After the summaries there is an attempt to compare the two arguments. To do this there is an academic comparison of both writers' understanding of the state and of civil society. To make this comparison also required explaining how the writers understand the public sphere and the media.

Hopefully this comparison illustrates how it is possible to use theories to provide insights into the underlying arguments and their meanings.

1) Heeswijk argues that the portrayal of women in the press is “a form of discrimination”. Endemic sexist reporting undermines women's self-esteem, thus limiting women's participation in the public sphere, and encourages men to see women as unequal, potentially leading to violence against women. Rather than being a question of taste and decency on which people might have different views, for Heeswijk, this is discrimination in action and so a question of equality. To stop the discrimination that comes with negative stereotypes and the portrayal of women based on looks, requires regulation of the media. Heeswijk suggests that newspapers which portray women as sex

objects should be made more difficult to obtain by being removed from ready access in newsagents and by stopping sales to minors. She also argues that the Leveson Inquiry should tackle the reporting of rape and the portrayal of women more generally through having such reports scrutinised for signs of sexism by future regulators. Heeswijk makes pains to argue that “this is not about censorship” rather it is about getting press that “serves the public interest” and, “at the very least, does no harm”. (187 words)

2) Shiner objects to groups such as “Turn Your Back on Page 3” campaigning against Page 3 and the sexist portrayal of women in the press. She argues they are falsely portraying themselves as representatives of women as a means to try to “force [their] views on the public” by calling for the regulation of the press. Rather than countering the negative portrayal of women, Shiner sees such campaigns themselves as presenting women as weak, pathetic and powerless needing “paternalistic” censorship by regulators to sort out sexism and protect them. Likewise she objects to the view of men by such groups as “uncontrollable beasts” merely reacting to female flesh. Any combatting of discrimination rather than being the “government’s responsibility”, for Shiner, must come from “society” i.e. it is a question of politics and culture rather than of regulation from above. Ultimately, Shiner sees no problem in women being photographed naked. Rather the problem is the attempt to curtail freedom even to the extent of not trusting women to judge for themselves what jobs they might want to take and how they might want to express their sexuality. (186 words)

Comparison

3A) The two authors differ strongly in how they see both the state and civil society. Heeswijk follows the media effects school in directly linking media portrayals to psychological attitudes (self-esteem in women and sexist attitudes in men). In reading public viewpoints from media representations, she sees the public sphere as the location of problems, of discrimination, and downplays the ability of individuals to act for themselves (or collectively through civil society groups orientated towards the public) to counter such discrimination. In discounting the public she sees it as the role of enlightened groups to call on the state to regulate public life and especially the media as powerful and destructive private interests. In this view the state sits above society and is the only powerful actor not captured by media concerns and so able to play a progressive role.

3B) Shiner by contrast prioritises freedom of expression both for those who might want to be glamour models and for those that might want to campaign for equality through public engagement – such as women who might want to “to speak up and prove the illegitimacy of sexist attitudes by themselves”. This unconstrained public sphere can then become both the place where individuals

express the interests and concerns they have but also find others and act with them in civil society groups to try to further their interests (often by influencing the public i.e. for Shiner “society”). The media here is less important in the sense that it itself does not determine the public’s consciousness, but also more important as a key site where public discussions take place and where civil society groups might want to communicate their interests. Where the state limits freedom of expression this impoverishes the public sphere and with it civil society. State regulation to enforce particular moral standards or political viewpoints is understood by Shiner as an elite imposition on the public which undermines and demobilises the activities of civil society but also, in the end, fails to address any underlying problems. (334)

18. An example essay

Below is an example of a third year essay that got a first. Nonetheless it is not the best essay in the world. Do not think of it as a template but as an example of the approach you should be thinking about and some indication of what you are looking to achieve. Consider how something such as TV celebrity that might be discussed in a conversation is approached in the academic form of an essay.

Identify and analyse some of the roles television plays in the creation and reproduction of celebrity culture. Discuss with reference to one or two reality TV programmes.

There is considerable academic debate about what exactly constitutes celebrity, the reasons for celebrity and the social role of celebrity. However, it seems clear that celebrity concerns individuals with a presence in the public sphere and how their lives both public and private – with an emphasis on the personal attributes of the individual – are given public meaning, are culturally constructed, both by activity in cultural industries and by the reception of the public.

Three key writers serve to illustrate this. David Marshall, for example, describes celebrities as “overtly public individuals” (1997: ix) emphasizing celebrity as the “empowerment of the people to shape the public sphere symbolically” (1997: 7) and discusses the specific forms of celebrity relating to television and film. Chris Rojek calls celebrity the “attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere” (2001: 10) which takes place through the “cultural fabrication” of cultural intermediaries (agents, the media etc.) (2001: 10-11) which are “inflected, revised and recast by the direct circumstances and relations of life in which we are located” (2001: 16). Graeme Turner sees celebrity as a “genre of representation and a discursive effect” produced by the publicity and media industries (2004: 7) which is at least to a degree “productively consumed” (2004: 109).

It is also clear that both the public and the media have a heightened fascination and engagement with celebrity: celebrity today is ubiquitous (Rojek, 2001: 185). Celebrity is pervasive across today’s mass media and the role that celebrity plays has expanded through many areas of life (Turner, 2004: 4). There is a strong sense that there is a significant and influential “celebrity culture” the importance and seeming public relevance of which has increased over the last decade at least.

Television has from its inception a track record of a relationship with celebrity, however, prior to television newspapers, magazines and film were involved with celebrity. For example, the “Hollywood system” created a publicity machine to promote individual actors into stars, whose lives became the subject of numerous magazines and were the subject of widespread newspaper

reporting from the early part of the twentieth century (see Marshall, 1997: ch.4). Television did not originate celebrity culture, it already was part of the mass media. Television celebrity exists in a symbiotic relationship with celebrities created through other media – and today through the internet.

The particular form of celebrity culture created through television relates to its role of mediating the public sphere to the private sphere – responding to a society increasingly dispersed and physically mobile while at the same time centred on the family home, a home dependant for its upkeep, and thus required to attend to, the latest news and views from the outside world (Williams, 1990: 26). The two features of its location in a domestic context and its near universal saturation means television is “a feature of modern *public* life that has a place in nearly every *private* home” (Stokes, 1999: 1).

Television’s “domestic ubiquity” means it is part of ordinary, private and domestic life – an ever present household object, practice and occurrence. This creates the potential for individuals who appear on television to take on some of the attributes provided through the setting and repetitive – and so everyday – mass exposure. The construction of television celebrity operates through notions of familiarity and ordinariness; or as Marshall puts it “television celebrity is configured around conceptions of familiarity” (1997: 119).

A comparison with celebrities of cinema is appropriate here. Stars on the silver screen, have a distance, “star qualities” placed in the firmament far above us – “film celebrity plays with aura through the construction of distance” (Marshall, 1997: 119). This is not to say that stars’ personalities and private lives were not the subject of intense speculation and managed disclosure. However, top Hollywood stars were generally considered as being above everyday concerns both materially and spiritually: they became seen and are often still seen as American royalty (USA Today, 2008). Television celebrities in contrast can have a more workaday and accessible relationship with their audience; for example soap actors are hailed on the street, often by the names of the characters they play, in the same way one might shout to a friend.

As part of domestic everyday life television is also caught up with the politics of the family and morality. There is a sentiment that appearing on television, because the audience is encountered in their own home, is similar to being invited as a guest into people’s homes – whether that is for long-standing television actors, advertisers or for politicians (see for example Flint, 1990; Schmuhi, 2004). Especially when there were few television channels readily available and there was a strong emphasis on the defence of “family values” in politics, there was pressure to conform to

conventional norms. There is still regulatory support for these ideas in the form of the 9pm watershed and regulation of balance and decency on television couched in terms of what is currently generally acceptable.

When celebrities break some of the conventions of behaviour on television, this can cause considerable controversy – television celebrities become the focus for a discussion on what is or is not acceptable behaviour. The Jonathan Ross / Russell Brand affair, where the performers caused outrage for behaving badly on radio (stoked by controversy about Ross's performances on television) illustrates the continued influence of ideas of television's responsibility to act as a guest in the familial home, but also the partial dissolution of these ideas by the many people who thought their behaviour was merely boyish hijinx (Guardian, 2008).

Increasing numbers of channels allow for a multiplicity of celebrities, the audience for each is smaller and so the celebrities are not perhaps as widely known as previously. Reactions and associations to other than a generic pleasant guest have become possible. Celebrities for all tastes – celebrities that are loved, hated or seen as irrelevant according to taste – have developed. The extent to which this is caused by the active segmented-marketing of cultural agencies or else prompted by varying tastes, associations or even perceived needs of the audience caused by wider social change is an object of academic dispute.

One area covered especially well by television is the creation of short-lived celebrities having in Andy Warhol's expression their "fifteen minutes of fame", what Rojek calls "celetoids" (2001:20-23). The sheer amount of airtime and the responsiveness of television to what is new in the world guarantee a churning of transitory individuals that are placed in the public eye for reasons ranging from winning the lottery to being bad at skiing, like Eddie the Eagle.

These celebrities are often cited as examples of the shallowness of celebrity culture. Momentary, accidental or trivial events propel individuals to centre stage rather than "real talent", often earned over years of effort or else real social standing – even if earned as an accident of birth as with the Royal family. When such individuals do not return quickly to obscurity as, for example, in the case of Jade Goody this becomes further cause for consternation.

A specific television celebrity type is the news anchor. As a presenter this class of celebrity speaks directly to the audience and as interviewer works in front of us and for us to attain understanding. The anchor acts as an anchor, a stabilising presence, or a voice of authority against a backdrop of news – the relaying of events from the public world to the private – that can be unsettling or disturbing (Marshall, 1997: 124). Over time such figures can become icons of respectability, for

example Dan Rather in the United States and Trevor McDonald in Britain. Presenters embody a reasoned, rational, controlled response to what can be seen as unwieldy events. This perceived and attributed public authority means that news presenters often have contractual limits put on their political activity.

Another common form of television celebrity is that of the chat show host – here the host often assumes celebrity through repeated association with celebrity guests. Television brings into the home a relaxed, informal discussion where often through humour celebrity guests can let slip elements of their private lives (Marshall, 1997: 125). The familiarity of the host, at once known to all of us and at the same time on a par with the celebrity – can recreate the informal relationship between friends or acquaintances that might naturally bring secrets, indiscretions and otherwise private moments to light. Occasionally a host will joke: “Just between us. No one is watching”. This humour is a way of negotiating the contradiction of a conversation that is at once extremely public and at the same time a private chat open for personal revelations. By sharing the joke with the studio audience (playing the part of the audience at home) we are invited further into the relationship between the host and guest: as friends listening to their conversation.

No contemporary discussion of television celebrity could be considered complete without reference to the development of “reality television” – which over the last decade has become a mainstay of both television output and celebrity culture.

Reality television occurs in a myriad of forms – new versions and hybrid forms of previous types of shows such as documentaries, game shows, talent competitions and makeover shows are innovated continuously. This has made the genre difficult to define and investigate, many dealing at length with the extent to which any claims of reality are justified. What is presented on television is inevitably editorially selected, heavily edited, and often heightened with mood music and set in a dramatic story arc (Brooker, 2007; Brooker, 2009).

However, running throughout reality television is the premise of deploying a number of inexpensive cameras to capture something of raw human responses to unfolding situations, and to have the television audience engage with these reactions. Reality television is about the “tension between performance and authenticity, asking contestants and viewers to look for the “moment of truth”” (Hill, 2002: 324)

Reality television plays a part in celebrity culture through public engagement with the behaviour of people on screen. This behaviour can propel “ordinary people” to celebrity status overnight; but

existing celebrities also feature in many shows either hoping to reinvigorate careers or else showing themselves in situations where the audience can get to know more of the “real person”.

It is often the case that reality television is inexpensive compared to traditional forms of television. Compared to drama especially, there is a lack of the need to script, build sets and have actors paid to work through a dramatic narrative. Constant format innovation by television companies is premised on relatively low production costs. This is no doubt a factor in how widespread reality television has become in a multi-channel television environment.

Big Brother, aired from 2000, is an important show in the development of reality television and serves to illustrate some features of the genre. Individuals, plucked from obscurity, have their entire lives placed under the gaze of cameras filling a house isolated from outside influences or prompts. Posed initially as a unique anthropological experiment it featured expert psychologists to guide us through the personal interactions on screen.

Public engagement is heightened through voting for who should stay on the show. Strong audience attachments are often formed to the contestants and debate, both in the press and in the public at large, as to the behaviour and character of the participants is generated. Television’s ability to have both immediacy and show things “as they really happened” forms the basis for establishing a more intimate link with celebrity. The live character of television coupled with telephone voting enables a stronger engagement with the audience.

The British presenter of *Big Brother* has recently predicted that, after a run of ten years and falling ratings, the show will soon be axed. Over time more extreme measures have been taken to induce a reaction from contestants who now know what to expect – and people with borderline personality disorders introduced to spice things up. The “reality” of reactions has reduced, undermining the premise of the show – this year there will be no live streaming of video from the house to cut costs.

Continued demand for authenticity – for something real to relate to – can be seen in the ITV show *Britain’s Got Talent*. This follows a traditional talent show format, but with reality television modifications: reactions backstage, interactions with the audience and between the judges are edited in and later in the series television audience voting plays a part. The recent appearance of the dowdy 48-year-old Susan Boyle, a hitherto unknown, was not only praised for its ability, but for her lack of pretension and caring about “putting on a front.” The clip from the show has been viewed on YouTube 186 million times, the singer now internationally famous (Mail Online, 2009).

Television, then has become the location for the extended development of celebrity culture, creating a slew of celebrities – some specific to the medium – and further mediating society’s

relationship with existing celebrities. Television, through its characteristics as a medium – familiar, domestic, ubiquitous, interactive and live – becomes the site for a deeper and broader engagement with celebrity and the “active construction of identity in the social world” that it represents (Marshall, 1997: ix).

(2197 words)

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19. Resources

a) LSBU resources

Student advice

They will point you in the right direction for help with academic problems including English support.

<https://my.lsbu.ac.uk/page/student-advice>

Communication Skills Development

Offers one to ones sessions with tutors and a range of courses and workshops

<https://my.lsbu.ac.uk/page/communication-skills-development>

Library skills

This links to a set of tutorials on how to find various types of material.

<https://my.lsbu.ac.uk/page/library-how-to>

Online academic resources

This page is a good starting point for collections to search using your keywords.

<https://my.lsbu.ac.uk/page/ahs-resources-culture-writing-performance>

b) Further reading

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5. Who Are You Writing For?

If you were writing a report, or a newspaper or magazine article, or a book an important consideration would be who is the audience for this. Even before you started writing you would want to have in mind who would read it. If you were creating a sales pitch to get an editor to commission your piece, you would even have in mind what the editor saw their audience to be. While you wrote you would try to keep in mind what the level of knowledge and what are the interests of the people you are writing for. What do they know already? What do they need to know? Who are they?

Often students don't think this way about their essays. This is largely because your essay is not for public consumption. Most undergraduate essays are not published; meaning they are not made public (the clue is in the word). Most essays will have a double existence: first in the archives of the university and second in a pile of papers you put away thinking that one day you might come back to that. The university archive is just in case there is some future dispute; for academic misconduct or checking. Eventually they will be pulped. Your own personal archive may last many years. Eventually it is likely that you will clear your essays away as you are clearing house.

Of course this is not always the case. Hopefully, you will show it to friends and family to solicit their feedback. And if it is good enough you may well try to get it out there – though depending on where you want it shown you may want to edit it.

, but it is far from being a private or personal affair. However, to consider your essay as simply a private exercise is missing the point.

An essay should be no different. Before you start writing ask yourself this: “who are you writing this for?”

Should you write the essay for you?

It is practice to enable you to produce works worthy of public consumption in the future.

When a book, a magazine or a newspaper article is being created the author may be writing it for themselves.

Imagine It is not meant to go in a gallery, but it is meant to get you towards that goal – towards public exposure.

But they can be.