

Guidelines for Essay Writing

Writing essays is incomparably the most effective way for you to develop the skills essential to the study of politics: the skills of rigorous argument, conceptual clarity, sensitive interpretation and effective marshalling of evidence. The essay itself is the tip of the iceberg, the visible results of considerable preparation.

1. PRE-WRITING

The planning stage is the most important stage in the production of essays. If you cut corners at this stage you will produce an essay that does not do justice to your ability.

Planning an essay involves the following tasks:

a) Research and finding sources of information

- Put aside time to read enough material to enable you to fully understand the nature of the question and the major arguments that should be included in your answer.
- The obvious sources to start with are those on the course reading list.
- Consult the bibliographies in these sources to find additional relevant sources.
- If you need additional sources, use the library catalogue, searching under 'key word' and for authors whose work you have already found useful.

b) Reading and taking notes

- **Be selective in what you read.** You don't necessarily have to read the whole book to extract the information you need! Use the table of contents and the index to help you focus on the sections most relevant to the essay title. This will provide you with a good overview of the main points made by the book and help you prepare for reading a wider range of sources.
- **Read actively.** When you are reading, look out for the key ideas and arguments made by authors and the evidence they provide in support of them. Note the ways in which they contradict or support those of other authors you have read. Don't be afraid to be critical. To write a rounded essay, you must engage with points you disagree with as well as those that support your argument.
- **Take good notes.** Summarise the main arguments or ideas in your own words. Note the page number on which you find each piece of information, in order to reference it accurately in your essay. If you plan to cite a particular phrase, sentence or section from a text in your essay, copy it out accurately and place it in quotation marks.

c) Preparing an outline

- Your plan need not be elaborate. Its main purpose is to enable you to structure your main points in the best possible order for your argument. The plan should outline what is to be covered in each section of your essay.
- When working out your plan, keep re-reading the essay question, to make sure you have understood it and are heading in the right direction.
- Concentrate primarily on identifying your key arguments.
- Remember that your time and space are limited. You cannot cover every aspect of the subject so make sure to concentrate on the points you consider most important.
- Once you have a plan, break down the total word limit and assign a general word limit to each point. This will help you give equal attention to each section.
- To help you organise your reading and notes in preparation for the essay, try the following techniques:
 - i) **Brainstorming:** Scribble down any key words, ideas or thoughts that you have. Draw lines between them to try and pull the major points together.

- ii) Write the question at the top of the page then write underneath it your answer in response to this question in one sentence. Then write down general headings you think the information falls into and under these write the sources/notes you will use for each section.

2. WRITING

The School uses six key criteria for assessing essays:

- i) Your essay must be *relevant* to the question asked.
- ii) It should be *well-organised* and under your control.
- iii) It should show accurate and adequate *knowledge* of the topic being discussed.
- iv) It should demonstrate that you *understand* the topic by expressing your views *clearly*.
- v) It should have an overall *argument* involving analysis of the issues and a *critical evaluation* of different points of view.
- vi) It should be *well presented*: the right length, legible (preferably typed), carefully proof-read, well-referenced and have a good bibliography.

The guidelines below are designed to help you meet these criteria.

a) Introduction

- The introductory paragraph should set out *why* the subject is important, *where* the focus of the essay question lies, *what* your argument in response to this is and *how* you will answer the question/expound your argument, thereby clearly laying out the structure of the essay.
- It is the point at which you try to capture the reader's attention. Therefore, it is not advisable to fill the first paragraph with long 'background' narratives, gross overstatements or irrelevant information.
- One way of starting an essay is with a general statement concerning the subject in question and then narrow this down to set out your argument. A brief outline of the main points supporting this argument should then follow.
- The introduction may be the final section that you complete. You could re-write it last to be sure that it introduces your essay well and complements your conclusion.

b) Body

- An essay is the exposition of a reasoned argument to support a point. It is not a recitation of facts nor is it a summary of events. *Analysis* should be the driving force behind the narrative, not the other way around: *why* rather than *what*.
- It is in the body of your essay that you should use the factual details and sources you discovered in your research to give your points weight and strength.
- The golden rule: *1 idea = 1 paragraph*.
- The beginning of a paragraph has two main functions: to introduce a new idea for discussion and to indicate the role this topic plays in your overall argument. The rest of the paragraph is devoted to elaborating and substantiating its central idea.
- Your points need to flow logically on from one another and you need to create a sense of progression through the way that each paragraph is linked.
- If the essay involves a critique of a particular thesis or text, don't waste valuable space on long summaries of this thesis. Instead, give a brief and accurate exposition and concentrate for the most part on analysing its strengths and weaknesses.
- However, in some *theoretical* essays the primary task might be to explain the thesis of an author, rather than to debate the plausibility of those ideas.
- Make sure you have made it clear *why* you think a piece of evidence supports your argument, or raises questions about an author's assumptions etc.
- After you have written each paragraph, ask yourself if it relates to the essay question and how it supports your argument. If it doesn't do this clearly, amend it straight away before you get stuck on a diversion.

c) Conclusion

- The whole of the final paragraph needs to be dedicated to making a strong conclusion, which pulls all your points together.
- Restate your argument in different words and allude to the main points you used in the body of the essay to support it. You may then move away from this narrow focus to the wider implications of your argument.
- The conclusion is not the place to introduce new evidence. This is a sure sign of poor planning.

d) Referencing and Bibliography

- Plagiarism – the presentation of someone else’s work as your own – is completely contrary to good academic work and is severely penalised. To avoid any suspicion of plagiarism you should offer clear references for any quotations or substantial borrowings of ideas or facts from other authors. . If you are quoting directly you must also put the words in quotation marks (see Format section). Even if you are not quoting an author’s words directly, if you write about an idea, an example or a point that you have found in another source, this must be referenced
- The Harvard system of referencing places a short reference in brackets immediately after the quotation or material that you wish to acknowledge. The reference will have the author’s name, the date of publication, and a page reference (Devitt, 2002:23). The full details of the book or source will appear in the bibliography and it will be clear to the reader where the material came from.
- You must list all the books and articles, audio-visual, internet or other material that you have used in writing the essay in a bibliography at the end of your essay. You should list them in alphabetical order (based on the surname of the author).
- A proper bibliography will have Author (Surname, Initials), Date, Book Title (underlined or in italics, whichever you prefer but you must be consistent), Place of publication and Publisher.
- E.g. Baylis, J. and Smith, S. (eds), 2001, *The Globalization of World Politics: an introduction to international relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Or, for a chapter of a book: Halliday, F. ‘Nationalism’ in Baylis, J. and Smith, S. (eds), 2001, *The Globalization of World Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 440-455.
- Or, for a journal article: Clarke, C., 2002, ‘Writing a good essay’ *Journal of New Ideas* 5 4: 22-37.
- Or, for a web-site: Ireland: Department of the Taoiseach. 1999. Constitution of Ireland. Available <http://www.gov.ie/taoiseach/publication/constitution/english/contents.htm> [2001-11-06]
- Remember to take down these details when you take your notes!

3. RE-WRITING

- Doing a good job of proof-reading and re-writing can make all the difference to the final result of your essay.
- The best way to begin is to read the essay out loud to yourself. This not only helps you to spot spelling and grammatical errors, it also highlights the areas in which your point is unclear or poorly expressed.
- Make sure that the points you are trying to make are not implied but explicitly stated and supported with evidence. Remember that it is your job to communicate accurately and clearly –the reader shouldn’t struggle to work out what you are trying to say.
- Check that your referencing is correct.
- Edit the essay in such a way as to clarify your argument. This may include re-structuring your paragraphs or tidying up your introduction.

4. FORMAT

- Number the pages
- Leave margins wide enough for comments
- Stick to the word limit
- If you hand-write the essay, write on one side of the page only - in legible writing!

- Footnotes are the place for including information that supports your point but is additional to the main body of your essay. However, the information included in footnotes must be absolutely relevant to your argument.
- If you are quoting directly from a source in your essay, it should be placed in single 'quotation marks'. If the excerpt is a long one, of more than a sentence:
 - The quotation should be separated from the main body of the text and indented, without quotation marks. It should not be italicised.
 - In both cases, the quotation must be referenced.
- Include in the following information on the School's cover sheet for the essay: *Name; Tutorial group number; Tutor's name; Essay title; Date of submission; Word count*. Only your student number should appear on the title page and inside the essay, to facilitate anonymous marking.

5. BASIC WRITING TIPS

- Remember that most essay titles are *questions* and that questions expect *answers*.
- The person marking your essay is familiar with the core texts and theories in question – s/he is most interested in hearing *your* analytical response to these.
- Use a relatively formal style of writing, e.g. avoid slang. Prioritise *clarity and conciseness*. Yet do try to cultivate a lively writing style. Using a thesaurus can make a valuable contribution.
- Check words, spelling or grammar that you are not sure about either by using the language tools on the computer or a dictionary.
- Correct punctuation is essential to convey your message clearly.
- *Using an apostrophe*: apostrophes indicate the possessive case, i.e. belonging to.
 - For singular nouns, use apostrophe+s, e.g. Rousseau's account.
 - For plural nouns, use an apostrophe alone, e.g. voters' concerns.
 - Because 'its' (i.e. belonging to 'it') is a possessive pronoun (like 'his' or 'her') it needs no apostrophe. An apostrophe with 'it', i.e. it's, is a contraction of 'it is'.
 - *It's = it is. Its = belonging to it.*

6. SUBMISSION & RETURN OF ESSAYS

- Make a copy of your essay before submitting it, so that you have one for your own records.
- Submit the essay *on time*!
- Submission in both hardcopy and softcopy formats (via Blackboard) is required unless otherwise stated.
- When your essay is returned, *read the comments* carefully and take note of them for your next essay. These are as important as the mark given, for they will enable you to learn from your successes and your mistakes for the future. If you do not understand the reader's comments, arrange a meeting to talk about them.

7. EXAM PREPARATION & WRITING

- As the primary purpose of an essay is to answer a question, you need to be able to *apply* your knowledge to the *specific* exam question. Exam questions are *not* opportunities for you to indiscriminately write down all your knowledge of the general topic. You should make conscious decisions as to which aspects of your knowledge are relevant in answering the question - and which are not.
- To prepare for your exams, you need to break down the course you've completed into manageable sections for revision. The course outline and essay questions will help you do this in the most constructive way.
- When you are in the exam, the key rules of essay writing still apply: plan your essay, structure it (introduction, body, conclusion), and *answer the question!*