

WHAT NOT TO WRITE IN UNIVERSITY PAPERS AND EXAMS

You are measured by your essays!

Your future success depends on your skill in essay writing!

You will not change the world without significant essay skills

The essay is a fundamental form of communication: book chapters, blogs, dictionary articles, emails, book reviews, conference papers, job applications, newspaper articles, lectures, op eds, films, letters, television, speeches, reports, journal articles, magazines, web pages, sermons, Bible studies, debates, advertizing copy, interviews.

I. WHAT IS AN ESSAY?

A 500 to 5,000 word paper arguing and clearly communicating a point.

1. The essay is difficult!

“ . . . grind & the screw & the torture ”
Virginia Woolf (1882–1941).

2. Road blocks to success!

- Arrogance
- Entitlement
- Grace is no more appropriate in grading papers than in determining sports results!*
- Laziness; Lack of discipline.
- Obsession with short term personal advantages.
- Deaf and resistant to criticism.

3. Road ways to success!

- Long hours of hard work, reading, thinking, writing and revising.
- Humility, Open minded, Adventurous
- Openness to criticism: thick skinned!

II. MECHANICS OF SUCCESS

1. 40+ hours
2. 20 hours reading, 20 hours writing
3. Read two or three dictionary articles:
 - (A) “Maps the territory”
 - (B) Identifies a bibliography
 - (C) DON’T cite dict. articles in your footnotes.
 - (D) Use Wikipedia, but don’t cite or rely on it.
4. Write a rough outline for your paper.
5. Read and take brief notes from your reading of 4 to 6 key books.

6. As you read, frequently rework your outline.
7. After 20 hours, when you have finished the key books, settle your outline.
8. Type out your first draft in one sitting, if possible.
9. Revise, revise, revise, revise and revise.
10. Ask someone to read your essay.
11. Leave your essay for two days.
12. Revise and submit.
13. Submit hours before the dead line; avoid computer problems.

Shape of success

A train, not a flower or a bowl of porridge

<p><u>Hook or introduction</u>: invites reader and prepares for . . .</p> <p><u>Thesis statement</u>: manageable, measurable, precise.</p> <p><u>Method statement</u>: simple, clear orderly, followed absolutely.</p> <p><u>Body</u>: logical, orderly, interconnected, supported, tight, elegant.</p> <p><u>Conclusion</u> (including summary?): affirms and mirrors the method and thesis.</p>

III. COMMON PROBLEMS

1. Not providing the “shape” of success

- Introductions irrelevant, or too short or long
- Theses: ✗examine, ✗discuss, ✗explore, ✓show, ✓establish, ✓test, ✓evaluate, ✓enumerate, ✓argue, ✓set out.
- Conclusion: If you can’t cut and paste your (a) thesis and (b) method statements into your conclusion, you probably lost your way, confused your reader and failed to make a case!

2. Disordered paragraphs

- Straight line, not a pot pourri.
- Mini essay: logical progression through a small set of ideas.
- Separate each sentence to analyze the progression of ideas.

3. Unbalanced

- Barely relevant material from other essays.
- Rabbit holes and rabbit trails.
- Covered all the positions and people?
 - Dictionary articles
 - Introductions
 - The BIG books of the field
 - Establish the key ideas, key authors—and their relationship to each other
 - Reviews and Abstracts
 - The conversation changes: be time sensitive and use recent literature.
- Fairly represented ideas and ideologues?

4. Scholarly Who's Who

- Take the reader behind the secondary literature to the issues and the texts (this separates the men from the boys!).
- Write about the issues and the text, not about the conversation about the issues and the text (well, mostly!).
- Don't let the secondary literature get between your reader and the issues.

5. Unsupported ideas

SAY ABSOLUTELY NOTHING WITHOUT EVIDENCE!

In research every assertion requires the support of evidence:

- (a) Primary
 - (b) Secondary
 - (c) Argument
- If you can't support it, don't say it!

6. Sloppy style

- Pompous language usually houses tiny ideas.
- Cut: shows forth, avers, declares, contends, postulates.

➤ Don't (do not) contract words!

➤ Don't split the infinitive.

Write to offend the least number of readers!

➤ Simple, clear, direct, elegant language.

➤ Allow the ideas to come to the surface.

➤ Allow the ideas to control the language:

if you are thinking clearly the language will take care of itself as you struggle to write ***exactly*** what you mean.

If you have a clear idea, the vocabulary will (eventually) fall into place.

➤ Readers should be thinking about your ideas not your vocab or style.

➤ Bad sentence starts: And, Because, But.

➤ Don't put material on the page hoping it will convey more than you know, it won't!

➤ Underline (in draft only!) key sentence (or idea) in each para to help identify and control material.

➤ Using type face (e.g., italics) for effect is an admission of an inability to write English.

➤ Think: What do I want to say? Is that on the page? From what is on the page will the reader understand what is in my mind?

➤ Write at the speed people are reading!

III. EXAMINATIONS

- Get organized!
- Make notes of notes of your notes.
- Memorize mnemonics.
- When you enter an exam room write out what you have memorized.
- Look at the examination.
- Plan your time, including for revision.
- Write full outlines for each question to be answered: carefully organize your material.
- Start with the easiest question.
- Answer the question asked not the one imagined
- Check and revise.
- Do not write (abusive!) messages to the examiners.

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