

ESSAY WRITING GUIDE

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- 1- Essay Writing: Why?
- 2- Three 'moments' in Essay-writing
- 3- Referencing
- 4- Self-assessment
- 5- Checklist before Submission
- 6- Dos and Don'ts
- 7- Criteria of Assessment
- 8- Further Reading

1- Essay Writing: Why?

Assessment in politics is based largely on written work. Written work involves seminar papers, dissertations, essays and essay-style examinations. Learning basic key skills for producing such work is therefore essential. Increasingly, a mix of innovative forms of assessment is being introduced in the politics department. It includes electronic tutorials, peer-assessed presentations, book reviews, journals and short reports. However, there is no escape from writing.

The chief aim of this guide is to introduce you to essay writing and help you understand what it involves. Writing simply and clearly, coherently and logically, and marshalling evidence for what you write has application not only for university, but also for your future career.

Why are you assigned writing tasks? To answer this question, the purposes and values of essay writing must be distinguished.

Four purposes stand out. You write to:

- 1- Master material on a specific topic
- 2- Develop & show capacity for acquiring, understanding and using knowledge
- 3- Engage in detailed investigation of a subject
- 4- Respond to a specific question

Also, the 'worth' and utility of writing can be summed up in seven values:

- 1- Develop your ability to write clearly and logically
- 2- Communicate meaning
- 3- Analyse, interpret, compare, make connections and judgement
- 4- Document your own ideas
- 5- Provide a basis for revision
- 6- Indicate your progress in a particular module
- 7- Self-assess your performance & be assessed

EXERCISE: Discuss these purposes and values with your peers. Try to come up with a list of your own. There have to be other purposes and values that sum up some of your own thoughts about writing.

2- Three 'moments' in Essay-writing

There are three parts in an essay: an introduction, the body and a conclusion. Each has a utility. But the key issue is how to integrate them in order to achieve thematic unity, logical sequencing and effective communication of ideas on a single topic. Here is a summary of the highlights of each component:

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>Body of the Essay</i>	<i>Conclusion</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce subject • State analytical aims • Give a summary of your substantive argument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present your argument • Implement your plan • Support your argument • Project your ideas boldly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restate main points

However, an essay has more than three structural parts. It has three 'moments', stages of progression, forming a continuous process, which unifies thought with paper. They are as follows:

- 1- A pre-writing moment
- 2- A writing moment
- 3- A post-writing moment

Each of these moments is now considered separately.

Pre-writing

Essay writing involves non-writing activities. The main ones are:

1- Analyse the question: what is being asked?

- 2- Look carefully at any imperatives: e.g. "assess"; "discuss", "compare and contrast", etc.
- 3- Generate ideas about how to answer the question
- 4- Construct an argument
- 5- Isolate key issues

All of these activities have to do with the nature of the question at hand. The next step is to start thinking about your 'plan of action'.

- 1- Structure your essay
- 2- Ensure your plan addresses the question in a logical way

A solid plan will help guide your research as well as write the essay later on. Headings and subheadings in your plan can be adopted for the essay. Thus the next pre-writing step is to start your research in order to:

- 1-Decide what material is relevant
- 2-Consult resource material
- 3-Vary your tools of research
- 4-Ensure that your research is structured by your plan in order to save time

All research requires reading, a key learning skill. It is a time-consuming activity that is integral to essay writing. However, whether you are perusing or just skimming, ensure that you:

- 1- Take accurate and properly documented notes
- 2- Treat source material critically (e.g. from what perspective does it argue?)
- 3- Compare and review literature consulted to maximise analysis and avoid description

Writing

This is the 'moment' of integrating your plan, research material and constructed arguments together. The challenge here is to live up to the standard expected of written work: having an argument. Essay questions have no 'exact' answers. Writing an essay is about engaging in a thinking process. You will not be assessed on whether your answer is 'right' or 'wrong'. Your tutors will most likely assess you on how you develop your argument, and how your thinking process leads you to making a case for or against a particular position. Right and wrong answers do not exist in the humanities and social sciences. Rather, most questions invite you to discuss an issue critically, to assess the validity of a statement, to compare and contrast or to defend a particular position, which you may not wish to do. But your evidence has to be convincing. Making judgements in politics does not have to be a case of complete acceptance or rejection. An argument involves generalisations or propositions, substantiated by evidence or reasoning. They are connected in a logically sequential manner, often leading to a justified position. Learning what counts as good evidence and valid reasoning comes with practice, mentoring and supervision. The thinking process in essay writing does not just involve writing according to a plan and drawing on relevant sources. That thinking process may, more importantly, mean:

- 1- determining whether or not the existing evidence justifies the conclusions reached*
- 2- questioning the assumptions that underlie the conventional wisdom in political theories*

Essays are YOUR space to demonstrate that:

- 1- You understand the issues involved in a given question
- 2- You read widely to marshal evidence for your arguments and propositions

- 3- You formulate a logical, reasoned and supported position on the basis of the material available
- 4- Share your understandings, argument, evidence and position through clear communication
- 5- Consider counter- arguments
- 6- Incorporate more convincing arguments, evidence or perspectives
- 7- Confront the deep- rooted prejudices that may inform your analysis and that may not be so obvious to you
- 8- You actually 'answer' the question, and not a totally different question, by way of the above means.

Post-writing

Having a draft completed does not mean the 'end'. It is a new beginning. Here is a summary of what you ought to do:

- 1- *Read your own work*
- 2- *Detach yourself from the draft to see whether you can follow your own argument; if you don't, others won't*
- 3- *Evaluate your evidence with as much detachment: is it convincing to you? If it isn't in your eyes; it won't be for others*
- 4- *Check important details (e.g. correct references, page numbers, authors' names)*
- 5- *Invite your trusted peers to review your work*
- 6- *Revise by incorporating valid and constructive criticism into your draft*

EXERCISE: *Discuss with a classmate your experience with essay writing. See if you can define which of the three 'moments' of essay writing require a greater effort on your part. Also, what do you think of the idea of essay writing being made up of 'drafting' stages? Open up the subject of whether you have the confidence or the humility to give your first draft to peers to review.*

3- Referencing

Intellectual integrity demands that all of us acknowledge the sources of our information and ideas. For the purpose of essay writing, you should familiarise yourself with the conventions of documenting intellectual debts. Failure to do so is an act of plagiarism. There are two major referencing systems. They are described below.

1. The Harvard system

The Harvard or 'author-date' system uses a brief citation between brackets within the body of the text. The citation is made up of an 'author-date' information. It consists of

the author's surname and the year of publication of the cited work, thus: (Gay, 1988) or (Gay 1988) – without a comma. A page number (or numbers) may, when

appropriate, follow an author-date citation. Page numbers are indicated in a number of ways in the Harvard system. Here are some examples: (Gay, 1988, 18); Gay, 1988, p. 18); and (Gay, 1988: 18). If you are citing an author who has more than two works for the same year you simply add 'a', 'b', 'c' to the year of publication, thus: (Turner, 1991a); (Turner, 1991b, p. 20); (Turner 1991c, pp. 20-21), etc. As in the last example, use 'pp' when citing more than one page.

Note that within the Harvard system, terms such as 'ibid' and 'op cit' are not used. Similarly, footnotes may be used in the Harvard system, but not for citation purposes. Rather, they are used to expand on points that cannot be explained in the body of the text because of limited scope.

NOTE:

op.ct = work cited

Ibid = same source

Loc.cit = location cited

EXERCISE: Give examples based on the following possibilities for citation in the Harvard system

1. If the author is mentioned in the text, follow with year in parentheses
2. If the author is not mentioned in the text, insert surname and year
3. Where appropriate, pagination follows the year, separated by a comma
4. When more than one work is cited, arrange the references in alphabetical order and separate them with semicolons
5. Use commas to separate two works published in different years by the same author
6. If the same author is has several references published in the same year, use 'a', 'b' etc. in both text and bibliography
7. If there are two authors, give both surnames, joined by 'and' or '&'
8. If there are four or more authors, use surname of first author followed by 'et al'
9. If two or more authors share a surname, first initials should be used for distinction
10. Enclose within a single pair of parentheses a series of author-dates, separated by semicolons
11. For author-less articles or studies, give the title of the magazine or of the institution/agency/organisation, followed by the year of publication, and where appropriate the page number (s)

Note that the basic citation in the Harvard system should enable the reader to locate the item in the bibliography.

The second component of this referencing system is the list provided at the end of the essay, arranged in alphabetical order of the author's surname. All sources consulted must be listed, thus:

Edited Books:

Inglehart, R. (1990) *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Co-authored Books:

Holliday, I., Gamble, G. and Parry, G. (eds) (1999) *Fundamentals in British Politics*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Chapters in Edited Books:

Allen, D. (1988) 'British Foreign Policy and West European Co-operation' in P. Byrd (ed), *British Policy under Thatcher*. Deddington: Philip Allen, pp. 210-218.

Journal Articles:

Abrahams, P. (1998) 'Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State' *Journal of Historical sociology*, 1 (1), 15-21

EXERCISE: Consult a couple of politics journals, and study their referencing system. Some, for instance, may insert the first name in full instead of the initials. Others insert a period after the brackets indicating the year of publication.

Oxford Reference System

This system gives full bibliographic details about a cited work. Full details are recorded at the foot of the page (hence the word 'footnote') on which it is first mentioned. The same is done when using 'endnotes', at the end of the essay. Footnotes or endnotes are numbered consecutively throughout the work. The note number appears in the body of the text, typed as a superscript, thus.¹ Subsequent references to the same item, Latin abbreviations ('*ibid.*', '*loc. cit.*'), cancelling the need for repetition of the full bibliographic details. The abbreviation '*ibid*' is used if it is the same reference as the one immediately preceding it.

¹ Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 189.

² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³ Michael Waltzer, "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics," *Philosophy of Public Affairs* 9 (Spring 1980), pp. 209-229.

⁴ Gay, *loc. cit.*, pp. 21-14.

⁵ Richard Pierre Claude and Burns H. Weston (eds.), *Human Rights in the World Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

⁶ Waltzer, *op.cit.*, p. 210.

The Modern Oxford System

This is not too different from the above system. Unlike the one above, it does not use the Latin abbreviations 'loc. cit.' and 'op. cit.'. Instead, subsequent references to the same item, reproduce the surname, a short version of the title and the relevant page number (s), thus:

¹ Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 189.

² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³ Michael Waltzer, "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics," *Philosophy of Public Affairs* 9 (Spring 1980), pp. 209-229.

⁴ Gay, *Voltaire's Politics*, pp. 21-14.

⁵ Richard Pierre Claude and Burns H. Weston (eds.), *Human Rights in the World Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

⁶ Waltzer, "The Moral Standing of States," p. 210.

Citing electronic sources

Many works are available online, hence the need for a system for accurately citing them in written work. The 'golden rule' is to be as comprehensive and as consistent as possible. Documentation is used to allow referees, readers, peers and other fellow researchers to verify your information, or to locate sources cited in an article or essay.

Material online poses one major difficulty. Unlike print material, it can be easily and swiftly modified and even completely removed. One way of overcoming this difficulty is by entering the date on which the electronic material was accessed.

Material retrieved from the Internet may be cited in the usual way in the Harvard system, with the date being that of publication. In the reference list, however, the date of citation must also be stated. The reference list entry for an electronic document must include the following information, in this order:

author (or editor of a collection, if appropriate)
 date of publication
 title
 type of medium (e.g. online; CD-ROM)
 edition
 place of publication
 publisher
 date of citation
 URL (Uniform Resource Locator, or electronic address)

EXERCISE: Practice both the Harvard and the Oxford referencing systems in two pieces of course work and ask your tutor for feedback to find out whether you have used them systematically. Also, try to site material that is available online, using the above guidelines.

Self-assessment

You should treat the first version of your completed essay as a DRAFT. An essay takes shape through a series of revisions in which refinements suggested by your tutor or a peer are incorporated. You are therefore encouraged to get into the habit of peer review. Demands on your tutors' time may not allow for reading draft essays. Self-assessment is therefore one form of review that students are encouraged to practice in this department. Self-assessment must take place prior to submission. You can do this by using the following questions as a guide.

Introduction & Definition of the topic:

*Has the topic been defined clearly?
Is there a clear statement of issues?
What are the aims of the essay?*

Structure of the essay:

*Does the essay have a clear plan?
Are the connections between various sections clear?
Is change of argument signposted clearly?*

Research:

*Is the breadth of coverage adequate?
How varied are the research tools used?
How relevant is the material consulted?*

Analysis:

*Is there sufficient depth?
Are arguments well supported?
Are arguments logical & consistent?
Are alternative perspectives represented appropriately?
Are opinions based on fact or logic?
Is there evidence of critical use of references?
Is there evidence of high order skills (criticism, interpretation, and evaluation)?
Is there evidence of original thought (what do YOU have to say about the topic)?*

Effective conclusion:

*Is there a clear summary of main arguments?
Is the conclusion linked to the statement of the question?
If no definite conclusion is reached, are reasons given?
Does it indicate directions for further research and analysis?*

Documentation:

*Are all sources acknowledged?
Are references presented correctly and consistently?
Does the bibliography use a recognisable referencing system correctly?*

Presentation:

Have you paid attention to the following?

- Fluency and style of writing?
- Spelling, grammar, syntax, paragraphing?
- Neatness and legibility?
- Effective use of figures & tables?

EXERCISE: Discuss with members of your tutorial group or study group the value of self-assessment. How would it change your practice of essay writing? Justify to one another why and how you consider it to be a good practice. Would you think of it as an integral part of essay writing?

5- Checklist

1. Is your essay written on only one side of the page?
2. Is every page numbered?
3. Have you used double spacing?
4. Does each page have a right-hand side margin for tutor's feedback?
5. Is your submitted essay stapled in the correct order?
6. Have you kept a back-up copy on a floppy disk or hard copy?
7. Does your essay use the Politics Department's cover sheet?
8. Does your submitted essay have a bibliography, alphabetically listing consulted sources by author's surname?
10. Has your final draft been proof-read before submission? (If you are a Non-English Speaking Background student, you can get assistance from your tutors or the Study Skills Centre).

EXERCISE: Copy this checklist and pin it up your notice board to refer to when submitting your essays.

6- Dos & Don'ts

<i>Dos</i>	<i>Don'ts</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always be clear and simple • Define key terms • Pay attention to punctuation • Illustrate your propositions with examples • Structure your prose into paragraphs • relate paragraphs to overall argument • Indicate direct quotation with quotation marks • Always acknowledge intellectual debt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid repetition & over-quoting • Avoid unsupported assertions • Avoid verbosity & long, confusing sentences • Avoid slang & colloquialisms • Avoid jargon unless necessary • Avoid sexist & racist language • Don't plagiarise • Don't reproduce essays by other students, current or former

EXERCISE: Can you think of other 'Dos and Don'ts'? Reflect on past experience, listing things you would avoid and practices you would adopt.

7 – Criteria of Assessment

Assessment is concerned with language (including style and spelling), structure, argument (including analysis), coverage, relevance and research (including knowledge and accuracy). In the case of work produced outside sit-down examination, presentation (including keyboard skills, punctuation, references and bibliography) is also relevant. When work is produced under examination conditions, there will be less time for evidence or data, and markers will take this into account. In assessing work, tutors will be looking for a predominance of the following:

Further material intended to assist the process of self-assessment can be found on the 'essay assessment sheets' used for formative essays.

A First (70 and above)

Is clear, effective and confident in language, structure and argument. The whole subject is covered (or a complete awareness of it is shown). Everything included is relevant, rather than appearing for its own sake. Research reflects considerable work and thought on a variety of sources, and is in command of current research and opinions. Data is accurate. Presentation is good. The work inspires trust. However, first-class work need not reach perfection; rather, it is the best work which may be reasonably be expected.

An Upper Second (2.1) (60 or above)

Is clear and effective in language and argument. Most of the subject is covered, in a clearly structured manner. The question is well answered, and most of the information is relevant, rather than being presented for its own sake. Research goes beyond the mastery of lecture notes and prescribed books.

It shows evidence of personal initiatives in reading and thinking, and is in touch with current research and opinions. The work is generally accurate. Presentation is good.

A Lower Second (2.2) (50 or above)

Language, structure and argument are fairly well developed. The question set is answered, with a substantial degree of coverage and relevance. Research shows a good understanding of lecture notes and prescribed books; if not, it compensates with evidence of independent learning and thought. Presentation is adequate.

A Third (40 or above)

Language is sufficient to convey meaning. There is an acceptable minimum coverage and relevance in that the broad area of the question is addressed. There is a basic concept of structure and argument. Research relies mainly on lecture notes and prescribed books. Accuracy and presentation are sufficient for a pass.

A Fail (0-39)

Reflects defects in one or more of the elements mentioned below, so serious as to rob the answer of meaning or relevance. Such defects include little or no discernible structure or argument, thin coverage, gross lapses of relevance, research that is non-existent, thin, or inaccurate, and presentation that shows a serious disregard of standards. Failed work falls below the levels associated with and expected of university work.

8. Further Reading

Ventola, I and A. Mauranen (eds.). 1996. *Academic Writing: Intercultural and Textual Issues*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publications.

Sproull, N. L. 1995. *Handbook for Research Methods: A Guide for Practitioners and Students in the Social Sciences*. New Jersey: Scarecrow Press.

Huffler, L. 1992. *Another Colette: The Question of Gendered Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Jordan, R. R. 1990. *Academic Writing Course*. London: Collins.

Turabian, K. L. 1987. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Howard, K. and J. A. Sharp. 1983. *The management of Student Research Project*. London: Gower.

Strunck, W. Jr. and E. B. White. 1979. *The Elements of Style*. New York: Macmillan.