English Literature

Writing Guide

Contents:

GUIDELINES FOR ESSAY WRITING

These guidelines provide help with essay writing. Students might also find it helpful to consult the following (available in the University Library):

Nigel Fabb and Alan Durant. *How to write Essays, Dissertations and Theses in Literary Studies* . London: Longman, 1993.

INTRODUCTION

While most of you have already had experience of essay writing, it is important to realise that essay writing at University level may be different from the practices you have so far encountered. The aim of this tutorial is to discuss what is required of an English Literature essay at University level, including:

1. information on the criteria in relation to which your essay will be judged
2. how to plan and organise an essay
    - Planning an Essay
    - Essay Structure
    - Independence and Critical Reading
    - Use of Secondary Material
3. advice on writing style
4. a final checklist
5.

WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA?

In assessing essays, your tutors are asked to bear in mind:

- Relevance to the essay-subject as it has been set;
- A well-defined line of argument, with each stage clearly marked;
- Appropriate, economical, and accurate illustration;
- Mastery of the relevant background material (contextual, critical, theoretical), and evidence of independent and wide-ranging reading;
- Evidence of independent thinking about the subject, and, where ideas are taken from critics, ability to apply them to materials of the student's own choice;
- Crisp expression. Failure to stay within the maximum number of words set for written work will be penalised;
- Spelling, punctuation, grammar;
- Accurate and comprehensive referencing of sources and list of Works Cited.

See also the **Grade Descriptors** for the English Literature department below.

HOW TO PLAN AND ORGANISE AN ESSAY

Planning an Essay

Careful planning is the key to producing a good essay. Do NOT begin to write your essay the night before it is due to be submitted. You should allow yourselves time to consider, plan, write, rewrite and revise, and proof read your essay before its submission. The diagram and questions reproduced below will assist you in planning your essay.

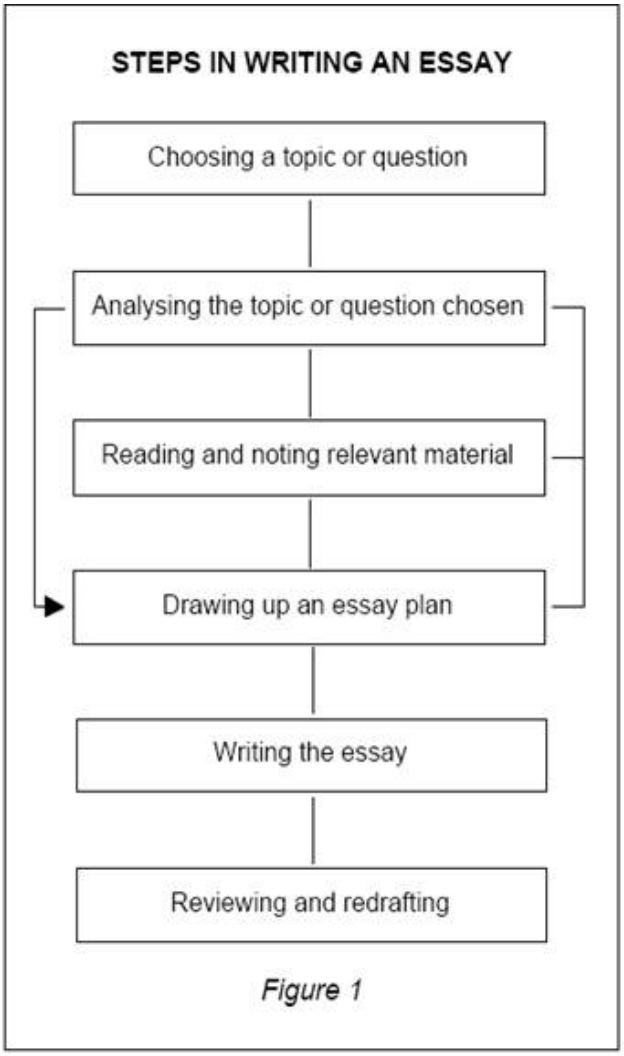

Figure 1

TACKLING AN ASSIGNMENT:
NINE QUESTION-STEPS FOR STUDENTS

What do I need to do?
(formulate and analyse need)

Where could I go?
(identify and appraise likely sources)

How do I get to the information?
(trace and locate individual resources)

Which resources shall I use?
(examine, select and reject individual sources)

How shall I use the resources?
(interrogate resources)

What should I make a record of?
(record and store information)

Have I got the information I need?
(interpret, analyse, synthesise, evaluate)

How should I present it?
(present, communicate)

What have I achieved?

Figure 5

ESSAY STRUCTURE

Your essay should present a discussion and a reasoned argument: it should not be a set of random reflections on the texts or topic you have chosen. This will require some planning and organisation of your material before you begin to write, to ensure that your argument is coherent and engages directly with the question asked.

A good introduction is often the key to a good essay. The first thing you should do is define any complex or potentially ambiguous terms in the question. This can also be one good way of effecting an introduction. Another is to consider why the question might be asked, what makes it interesting, or why it is relevant to the texts you are considering. You might also use your introduction to outline briefly your intentions in writing the essay: but remember that for a 1,000 or 2,000 word essay the introduction will necessarily be brief.

The body of the essay of the essay should relate to the issues you outline in your introduction. It also needs a coherent structure: if you have used your introduction to identify the key issues of your discussion, structuring the essay becomes easier, as you can address these issues in separate paragraphs. Make the links and transitions between paragraphs clear. Remember that every paragraph and sentence should contribute directly to your argument.

Your essay needs to strike a balance between argument and supporting evidence. Avoid unsupported generalisations. Stating that 'society is a patriarchy' or that 'evil is more interesting than good' without offering evidence to support the assertion is little different from claiming that 'the earth is flat' or 'tall people are more intelligent than short ones'. Even your more particular points about texts or issues always need supporting evidence, often in the form of quotations from the texts. Remember that you may need to explain how your evidence supports your point.

Your essay needs a conclusion to avoid it petering out and losing its force. You might use the conclusion to draw together the threads of your argument, to re-visit the original question, or even to point towards new questions that your discussion has opened up. Whatever your conclusion, you should use it to step back slightly from the detail of the preceding argument to re-consider the wider picture.

INDEPENDENCE AND CRITICAL READING

The purpose of an essay is to develop and present your own thinking about the texts and issues raised by the question. All essays are likely to draw on ideas taken from others, whether from critical books, lectures or discussions. But clearly an essay is not intended to be simply an anthology of others' ideas: those ideas should only be introduced in order to form and advance your own argument, which is both the substance and the purpose of the essay.

USE OF SECONDARY (CRITICAL) MATERIAL

Critical books and articles are often useful in stimulating your ideas about the literature you are writing on. It is also important to develop some awareness of the ongoing critical debate about works and literary issues; sometimes you may even be asked to write about the critical or theoretical works themselves. But ideas and words from other writers should never simply replace your own, either directly, or in the form of paraphrase. Quoted or paraphrased thoughts and words from another critic should be included in the text of your essay only if you wish to say something about them. You may want to take issue with them, or to develop them, or to illustrate a particular view which you then discuss. It is not helpful to quote from or paraphrase critics simply because you think their words sound more authoritative than your own.

While you will often draw on other critics' ideas, you need to distinguish their words and opinions clearly from your own. Students should exercise caution and care in the use of paraphrase in particular. It is imperative that the reader should always be able

to distinguish your voice and argument from that of the critics you cite. So avoid simply ventriloquising critical arguments and conduct instead a critical engagement with them. For example, do not accept interpretations in critical works as matters of fact; demonstrate to the reader of your essay the ways in which you have produced a thoughtful response to the critics that you have employed.

If you do not ensure that there is no confusion in an essay about the origin of its arguments, you will find that your readers are unable to judge your arguments. You will also lay yourself open to a charge of plagiarism, which is a serious academic offence. (See the section on Plagiarism below).

Make sure your essay obeys these rules:

- Words drawn directly from another writer should always be put in quotation marks: it is not acceptable to offer them incorporated into the body of your essay as if they are your own, even with minor variations.

- If you either paraphrase a critic or other source, give a brief citation within brackets at that point (but see the cautionary note re paraphrasing above).

STYLE

University level essays should be written in a formal style and demonstrate your understanding of the codes of academic discourse as they relate to the study of English Literature. While there are variations between different disciplines, there are three main characteristics that are common to all academic essays. These are:

- An overriding concern to interpret and make meaning through the presentation of arguments;

- Careful attention to the marshalling of relevant and valid facts, examples and other kinds of evidence to substantiate or refute arguments and interpretations;

- A structure or organisational framework which has not been chosen arbitrarily, but is instead designed to present arguments and evidence in a coherent and logically appropriate form.

Clarity and expressiveness of language is obviously particularly important in essays on literature, and the development of an accurate and engaging writing style is one of the aims of a degree in this discipline.

FINAL CHECKLIST

- Have I completed the cover sheet correctly?
- Does my introduction:
  - ✓ Set the question/topic against a wider background?
  - ✓ Clarify my understanding of the question/topic?
  - ✓ Define key or problematic terms?
  - ✓ Outline the approach I will be taking?
- Does the main body of the essay:
  - ✓ Present my key points clearly?
  - ✓ Develop an argument in a logical sequence?
  - ✓ Systematically support key points and argument with evidence / examples?
  - ✓ Accurately cite all sources used, even if not quoted directly?
- Does my conclusion:
  - ✓ Bring together the main points?
  - ✓ Link back to the question/topic?
  - ✓ State clearly the conlusion(s) of my argument?
- Does my essay:
  - ✓ Read clearly throughout?
  - ✓ Make correct use of grammar, syntax and punctuation?
  - ✓ Include a list of all cited sources?
  - ✓ Conform to the word limit set for this assignment?

WRITING EXAMINATIONS

Examinations can be daunting, but they remain a valuable test of the critical skills you have acquired and of your ability to deploy them. The following paragraphs will help you to understand what is being asked of you in an examination.

It is the purpose of exams to enable students to demonstrate width and depth of reading and the ability to develop an argument and support it with illustration. (It is not the purpose of exams to encourage the student merely to write out his or her class essays for a second time, or simply to transcribe notes taken in lectures that have a vague connection with the question set.) You will be expected to show your breadth of reading, and the rubrics on the papers will warn you about repetition of material. Obeying the rubrics is an important part of examination technique; disobeying them leads to major deduction of marks.

In writing examination answers, as much as in writing essays, you are seeking to **formulate a clear and well-argued response to the question** that has been asked. Of course you will not be expected to write in the same detail and depth as in your term essays. It is no good simply laying out all you know about a particular text/author for the examiner's admiration. Take time at the beginning of the exam to choose the questions you wish to answer, making sure that you follow any rubric with care (e.g. one question from Section A, one from Section B, and a third from either); if you violate a rubric, your paper will be penalised (normally this means that the answer in which the rubric is broken has its mark halved).

It is a good idea to **write out the question at the beginning of your answer** as well as numbering it. You should draw up a rough plan but remember to cross it out. Engage directly with the question asked. As with any other essay, you should have an introduction, an argument and a conclusion; the essay should offer a discussion which engages with more than a single point of view on the issues involved. Part of the skill of producing good examination answers is to know what to leave out as well as what to put in. If you have quotations that you want to use, make sure that they are fully illustrative of the point you are making and not just dragged in because you know them. If your answer consists of analysis as well as description, is clearly argued (and written), exhibiting thoughtfulness about the question asked (and perhaps some breadth of knowledge of the course as a whole), it is likely to get a good mark. If you simply describe the contents of whatever text/s you are discussing, with no evidence of analytic skills and/or any attention to the question, it will not do so well. Make sure you are answering the question asked: unthinking repetition or paraphrase of lecture material or course essays is unlikely to fulfil that requirement.

Misspelling and/or mispunctuations (e.g. failure to use apostrophes properly; using commas where full stops are needed) give a very bad impression and will also affect your mark.

Always divide your time carefully. One very good, very long answer can never achieve a mark high enough to compensate for a second incomplete, overly short or abbreviated answer.

Take your time, think, and write clearly. With preparation and thought, exams can be intellectually stimulating rather than an ordeal. They are there to assess your capacity to respond quickly, to write intelligently and clearly in relation to particular questions, and to show your capacity for stimulating and thoughtful written discussion under time pressure. As such they are a valuable part of the transferable skills you are developing at University.

STYLE SHEET

There are many different presentational styles around. The Department of English Literature prefers the style approved by the Modern Language Association, known simply as 'MLA Style'. All written work submitted to the Department should conform to the following guidelines.

I. PRESENTATION AND LAYOUT

Essays should be typed or word-processed, double-spaced.

Pages should be numbered consecutively in Arabic numerals, including the final page which comprises the list of Works Cited. The page number should appear on the top right-hand corner of each page.

The beginnings of paragraphs should be indented five spaces from the left-hand margin. No additional space should be inserted between paragraphs.

Use a clean font in a size that is clearly legible. Times New Roman (12 point) is ideal.

As well as the use of grammatical sentences, it is important to use paragraphs intelligently. Each paragraph should represent a coherent element within a developing argument.

II. TITLES

Ideally, *ITALICISE* (or if necessary <u>underline</u>) the titles of: books, plays; long poems published as books; pamphlets; and periodicals (newspapers, magazines and journals).

> Examples: *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*; *Henry IV, Part 1*; *Paradise Lost*; *The Scotsman*; *Studies in Scottish Literature*.

ENCLOSE WITHIN SINGLE QUOTATION MARKS, and do not underline, the titles of articles; essays; short stories; short poems; songs; chapters of books; unpublished works (such as lectures, speeches and dissertations).

> Examples: 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex'; 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'; 'The Library Window'; 'To His Coy Mistress'; 'The Flower of Scotland'; 'Judges' (in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*).

This distinction is made in order to avoid ambiguity or confusion: 'King Lear is confused' is a comment on the character of that name; '*King Lear* is confused' is a judgment on the play. '"High Windows" is Philip Larkin's finest achievement' refers

to a single poem; '*High Windows* is Philip Larkin's finest achievement' refers to a complete collection.

III. PUNCTUATION

The sense of your essay depends on its punctuation as well as on the words you choose. These are some common problem areas:

a. Capitalization. In titles capitalize the first letter of the first word and of all the principal words including nouns and proper adjectives.

> Examples: *To the Lighthouse*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *A Passage to India*, *Sons and Lovers*, *The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism*).

Capitalize references to parts of a specific work.

> Examples: Mahood's Introduction (in *Twelfth Night*), Morrell's Preface (in *Four English Comedies*).

b. **Exclamation marks** should be sparingly used.

c. **Italics**. As well as italicising (or if necessary underlining) the titles of published books, plays, pamphlets, periodicals, and long poems, also italicise foreign words used in an English text (except quotations, titles of articles, proper names and foreign words anglicized through usage).

The underlining or italicising of words, phrases or sentences for emphasis should be done sparingly.

d. **Quotation marks**. Be consistent in your punctuation. If you use single quotation marks, use them in the same circumstances throughout. The British system uses single quotation marks first, double quotation marks for quotations within quotations.

> Example: According to Northrop Frye, 'The word "grace" with all its Renaissance overtones from the graceful courtier of Castiglione to the gracious God of Christianity, is a most important thematic word in Shakespearean comedy.'

e. **Rhetorical questions**, i.e., questions asked for effect rather than genuine enquiry, should be sparingly asked in your essay.

f. **Square brackets**. Use them for a parenthesis within a parenthesis, to enclose interpolations in a quotation, or to complete missing information.

> Example: F.P. Wilson suggests that 'in Marlowe's share of the play [*Doctor Faustus*] there is nothing of predestination and reprobation'.

g. **Colons and Semicolons**. These are often under-used: use them sensibly. In particular, where part of a sentence could stand on its own as a separate sense-unit or sentence (as in the last sentence) it should be preceded by a colon or semi-colon and not just a comma.

IV. NAMES OF PERSONS

Poets, playwrights, novelists are customarily referred to by their surnames, e.g., Shakespeare, Marlowe, Goldsmith, Woolf. In essays, one refers simply to Byron (rather than Lord Byron) or Tennyson (rather than Alfred Lord Tennyson) or Woolf (rather than Virginia Woolf). Exceptions would include Eliot (which might refer to T.S. or George) or James (where it might refer to Henry or William). Well known authorities cited in your text (e.g., Barthes, Foucault, Freud, Marx) may be referred to similarly. When less well known literary critics are first mentioned in your essay the full name should be given; on subsequent occasions in the same essay the surname only is used.

V. NUMERALS

In general, **numbers** of fewer than three digits should be spelled out in words. However, if Arabic numerals are used for numbers over 99, use them also for smaller numbers in the same sentence or related groups of sentences.

Dates. Be consistent in your style: either '17 August 1991' or 'August 17, 1991,' but not both. Correspondingly, use either 'August 1991' or 'August, 1991,' but not both; 'in 1981-82' or 'from 1981 to 1982'; '500 B.C.' but 'A.D. 500'. In your text, spell out references to centuries, e.g., 'the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.

VI. QUOTATIONS

a. **Quote accurately.** If you underline words for emphasis, you should indicate that the emphasis is yours. Use ‘sic’ sparingly [within square brackets] to show that the error appears in the original and is not yours.

> Example: The *Home Herald* printed the mayor’s letter, which was an appeal to his ‘dear fiends [sic] and fellow citizens’.

b. **Ellipsis**. For ellipsis within a sentence, use three . . . spaced periods, leaving a space before the first period. Quotations that are complete sentences should end with periods even though matter in the original may have been omitted. To indicate ellipsis after the conclusion of a complete sentence, use four periods with no space before the first. . . .

c. **Integrated quotations**. Verse quotations of part of a line or a single line are normally run-on, i.e., integrated in your text and placed within quotation marks. Lines of verse are separated by a slash (/).

Example: Cummings admires his father for moving 'through dooms of love / through sames of am through haves of give', for his resilience and graciousness of spirit in confronting the vicissitudes of life.

Prose quotations of fewer than four lines should be run-on as part of your text, placed within quotation marks, and the sentence which includes the quotation should make grammatical sense.

d. **Long quotations**. When a quotation extends for more than four typed lines of prose or three lines of poetry, it should be introduced by a colon (unless it is run-on) and set off from the text by indenting the entire quotation ten spaces from the left margin. It should be double spaced and there should be no additional space above or below. No quotation marks are required when it has been set off from the text in this way. It should not be italicised and should not be centre-justified.

VII. REFERENCES IN THE TEXT

Proper referencing is a key part of any essay, allowing your reader (and you, in future) to check or work further with the sources you have used. Accurate and full acknowledgement of these sources also ensures that you avoid any risk of plagiarism – by showing clearly and exactly how and from whom you have derived any ideas or expressions not originally your own.

While footnotes and endnotes were once the convention, they have now been replaced by brief citations within the text. Your reader should be able to find the full citation for all of your references in your Works Cited List which should appear at the end of your essay.

In-text references should appear in brackets within your main text. Where the identity of the source is apparent from the context, only a page number is required. Where the source is not apparent, you should provide the author's name and the page number.

Examples: According to Fussell, 'the *Oxford Book of English Verse* presides over the Great War in a way that has never been fully appreciated' (159).
As one critic has asserted, 'the *Oxford Book of English Verse* presides over the Great War in a way that has never been fully appreciated' (Fussell 159).
The Oxford Book of English Verse played a defining role in the culture of the First World War (Fussell 159).

Where more than one work by the same author is being cited, then the short title of the relevant work should be included:

Example: (Fussell, *Great War* 159).

Content footnotes, on the other hand, may be included but should be kept to a minimum. They should be consecutively numbered (in superscript), single spaced, and appear at the bottom of the page.

> Example: Where the main text reads:
> It has been asserted that the *Oxford Book of English Verse* played a defining role in the culture of the First World War (Fussell 159).1
> The content note might read:
> 1While Fussell's emphasis on polite reading practices held sway until relatively recently, historical accounts have since emerged which emphasise the importance of popular working class culture in the British trenches.

For further advice on the use of in-text references you should consult http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04_c08_s1.html

VIII. WORKS CITED

A list of all works cited should appear on a new page at the end of your essay, arranged in alphabetical order. Use **quotation marks** (but not italics or underlining) for titles of articles, essays, short stories, short poems, songs, chapters and sections of books. Use **italics** or **underlining** for titles of published books, plays, long poems, pamphlets, periodicals, operas, films and classical works.

Please note: the following are just a few examples of the different kinds of entries that you might have to use. If you can't find what you are looking for here, you should consult http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04_c08_s2.html.

1. A book with a single author: the simplest form of reference.
Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

2. Two or more books by a single author
Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
---. *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

3. A book by multiple authors
Hughes, Linda, and Michael Lund. *The Victorian Serial*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991.

4. An edited collection of essays
Watt, Ian, ed. *Pride and Prejudice: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963.

5. A work in a collection

Brower, Reuben A. 'Light and Bright and Sparkling: Irony and Fiction in *Pride and Prejudice*. '
Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. Ian Watt. Englewood Cliffs , N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963: 62-75.

6. An edition

Shakespeare, William. *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Ed. John Dover Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.
---. *Twelfth Night*. Ed. J. M. Lothian. London: Methuen, 1975.

7. An article in a journal

Reiss, Edmund. 'Medieval Irony.' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42.2 (1981): 209-26.

8. A web site

The quality of web site content varies enormously, from refereed journals by reputable academic presses to discussion groups for teenage fans of *Wuthering Heights*. You should therefore be particularly cautious about the electronic sources that you use. As with printed sources, there is a prescribed format for the citation of electronic texts. Entries should include (where applicable) the name of the author, title of the web page, title of the site, date of publication, date it was accessed, and url:
Jones, Mary. 'Why read Wordsworth?' *Life and Work of Wordsworth*. 2002. 15 Nov. 2004 <http://www.englishistory.net/wordsworth.html>.

Detailed guidance regarding the documentation of web sites, in their various manifestations, can be found at
http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04_c08_s2.html.

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is the use of material taken from another writer's work without proper acknowledgement, presenting it as if it were your own. While it is perfectly proper in academic study to make use of another person's ideas, to do so under the pretence that they are your own is deceitful. Plagiarism, whether in coursework or examinations, is always taken extremely seriously within the university as it is a form of cheating. Work found to be plagiarised may be penalised, assessed at zero, or not accepted, and in serious cases may lead to disciplinary action being initiated.

Work undertaken for our courses is designed to help you develop your knowledge and understanding, and your own powers of analysis and argument. Essays, exams and exam essays assess these skills. Plagiarism therefore undermines the whole purpose of the academic study of literature. For all work for the department's courses, it is important to be aware of, and to acknowledge the sources of arguments and words. This applies to material drawn from critical books and lectures, but also from the work of other students (including tutorial or seminar discussions) and from the internet and other electronic sources. Lectures, tutorials and seminars must not be recorded or otherwise transmitted, unless there is special dispensation relating to disability (endorsed by the Disability Office). Tutors will check web-based material, as well as other sources, where they have reason to suspect that the writing a student submits does not represent their own ideas, words and arguments.

While deliberate plagiarism involves an intention to deceive and is easy to avoid, it is possible to fall unawares into practices which could be mistaken for plagiarism if you are not familiar with the proper means of using and acknowledging material from other writers. Inadequate referencing and inappropriate use of others' material could inadvertently lay you open to charges of plagiarism. Since different subjects involve different uses of material, and may have different conventions about how it should be acknowledged, it is important that in each of their subjects students consult departmental guidelines about the purpose and presentation of written work in that discipline.