#### HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY

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### 1. What is an essay?

* + - An organized collection
    - of YOUR IDEAS
    - about literary texts
    - nicely written
    - and professionally presented .

In other words, the essay must be well structured (i.e. organized) and presented in a way that the reader finds easy to follow and clear: it must look tidy and not present any obstacles to the reader. It must have a clear readable interesting style. But, above all, it must consist of your ideas about literary texts. This is the centre of it: this, and this only, gets the marks. Not quotes from critics, not generalisations at second hand about literary history, not filling and padding; your thoughts, that you have had while in the act of reading specific bits of literary texts, which can be adduced in the form of quotations to back up your arguments.

### 2. Why write in this way?

#### 2.1 Learning how to write professionally

In the English Department you learn how to respond to literary texts. This is an interesting and worthwhile thing to do, but unless you become a teacher of English remarkably few people in later life will be interested in your thoughts about Jane Austen. What they will be interested in (I'm talking about potential employers now, but not only them) is your ability to talk, to think, and to write. This part of the course is where you learn to write: professionally. The guidelines that follow tell you how to do it, or rather how to learn to do it.   
  
 They set a higher standard than is usually asked of a first year undergraduate essay in this Department. This is for the following reasons. (1) I think it's my job to offer you the best advice I can, not to tell you how to get by. (2) If you learn what these guidelines teach, you will get better marks in all the essays you do from now on until finals. You will surprise the markers with the quality of your presentations, by producing a better quality than they expect. (3) You will learn a skill, a not-very-hard-to-learn skill, that will last you for the rest of your life.

**3. Collecting the material**

The first task is to get the material together. The material comes in two kinds: primary and secondary sources. Primary sources in this case are literary texts: the actual material that you work on. Secondary sources are works of criticism. Here is your Second Important Message:

(ii) It is always better to read an original text and refer to it than to read and refer to a critic.

The more literary texts you read and can refer to the better. You can't possibly read too many. Remember, the key to your essay is the number and quality of your ideas about literary texts. If you casually refer, from at least an apparent position of familiarity, to some obscure literary text, you will win the admiration of your marker. If you refer to a critic, particularly an obscure one, the chances are his or her eye will glaze over. There are exceptions to this rule, which I will mention later, but the basic principle is extremely important: original texts are better than critics, and you can't know too many. Whereas it is possible to get a first class degree and never to have read any critics at all.

#### 3.1 What are critics for?

The short answer: to be disagreed with. A longer answer: reading critics can give you an idea of what the state of critical opinion is about a literary text, to save you re-inventing the wheel and coming up with some brilliant original perception that William Empson thought of sixty years ago. Reading critics means that you can start at the coal face rather than have to dig your own mine. Secondly, they can stimulate your ideas. But the thing to remember is: only your ideas obtain merit. Therefore, never, ever, quote a critic just to agree with him or her. Always, under all circumstances, quote a critic in the following form: Leavis says x, but I disagree as follows. Or: Leavis says x, and this is very true, but I would develop his thought as follows. Never, NEVER: as Leavis says, followed by a quote, followed by nothing. This is very common in undergraduate essays, and it is simply a waste of space.

#### 3.2 Books and articles

A secondary point about critics. They publish in two forms, books and articles. You should be familiar with the library electronic catalogue and the ways of searching it, in order to find books: it's not difficult, and if you don't know how to do it by now go immediately and find out. If you have a problem, ask a librarian, they'd be happy to help. Just spend half an hour simply playing with the library computer, finding out what it can do. But: books are not usually much use. They're usually out, as you will surely have discovered by now. And you gain no special merit points for having read them, because so has everyone else.   
  
 Articles are a different matter. Articles in academic journals are (a) not normally read by undergraduates, and therefore (b) normally on the shelves. They are more work to track down, but success will be rewarded by the admiration of your examiner, because undergraduates aren't expected to know about such things. And they are full of interesting, original, and up-to-date ideas about literary texts, that, maybe, your examiner won't even have heard of (but don't count on this: stealing ideas is heavily penalized). Also of dross and garbage, of course. But this is good too, because you'll have plenty to disagree with.  
  
 The way to get hold of articles is to go to the library and play with the CD ROM workstation. There's one on every main floor. I can't tell you here how to work it: find out, it's not difficult, and, as before, a librarian will be glad to help you; also there are copious instructions. Spend some time playing with it: the database you want is called the MLA Index. You will come up with a lot of titles that aren't in the library, which is very frustrating, but from every search you will find at least a few relevant articles, and some of these will be valuable. This is almost guaranteed.

Note: this information is now out of date. There is a wonderful database called BIDS that lists articles published since 1981. It's on the Web; it's easy to search, very user-friendly, and it emails you the list of articles you are interested in. Remarkable. You need to go to the equally friendly Information Desk in the Main Library to get a login and password first.

#### 3.3 Using the World Wide Web

The Web is rapidly becoming a fantastic resource: easily available, full of material, and with an an answer to every question. However, there are problems, and you should use the Web carefully.

### 4. Reading, making notes, having ideas

When you have found the books and articles you are going to read, you will need to read them. Here are the golden rules:

(iii) Always carry a notebook  
Always read interactively  
File and rewrite the notes so you can find them again  
Make a bibliography

I will explain. The key is: you are in the business of making a collection of your ideas (do I have to say it again?) about literary texts. These can come to you at any time. If you don't write them down, you will probably forget them. If you do write them down, you will probably think of some more ideas while you are writing. Write them down too. It doesn't matter if they don't seem very good: just write them down. Carry one of those spiral-bound shorthand notebooks at all times, and, if an idea comes to you, however intimate or urgent the accompanying moment, write it down. No-one need ever see this notebook, so you need feel no self-consciousness about what you write in it. This is perhaps the most useful attribute of the shorthand notebook: it beats the censor. The censor is the cause of writer's block: the small voice inside your head that tells you that what you're writing is rubbish. In your notebook you can ignore that voice, and as a result you will accumulate ideas. Some will be good, some bad; when you re-read the notes you can sort out one from the other more rationally than while under the stress of creative writing. Thus the censor has been by-passed.

#### 4.1 Making notes

The best time to have ideas is when you are reading, either a literary text or a work of criticism. This is where note-taking comes in. Don't make notes in the form of summaries, unless you need it to help you remember a plot (lecture notes are an exception to this): it's normally best to read the thing again (and get more ideas the second time round). But always, always, read with a pen and notebook to hand: read interactively. Think about what you're reading and write down your thoughts. Always. When a thought occurs under these circumstances it will be in reaction to a piece of the text at hand: a quotation. Copy out the quote, and a page reference so you can find it again to check it if necessary, and then put your idea underneath it. If you tie the idea in with the quote in this way, then your ideas will always be text-based and close to the concrete life of the text, as Leavis might possibly have said.  
  
 Always write one idea and one idea only per page of the shorthand notebook. Why? So that you can file them. Once a week go through all of the notes that you've accumulated during the week. Take them out of the shorthand notebook: tear them out, or remove the spiral. You put headings on each note, throwing away the dross (the obvious dross, that is: dross can turn to gold if left to itself for a bit). Rewrite if necessary; make more notes if more ideas occur. Then file them in a way that you can find them again. Make sure you know where all the quotes came from: editions, page numbers, and so on.

#### 4.2 Bibliography

For this you need a booklist, either computer-based, or in the form of a card index. A bibliography, some call it. Every book you read should have its details listed in your master book-list, your card index or computer file. Author/s, title, date, publisher, shelf mark, place of publication. I repeat: every single book and article you read should be in this list. In (only) two and a bit years' time when you are desperately trying to find something original to say about The Book of the Duchess for an exam that is going to happen in a few weeks' or days' time, you will need this booklist and these carefully filed notes, containing your ideas about literary texts. Believe me.

**5. Planning and structuring**

So: you've gathered the material, read it, made notes, had ideas, written them down on separate slips, headed and filed them. How do you write the essay?  
  
 Like this. You gather together all of the slips you have on the topic of the essay. You read through, writing new ones and rewriting old ones if more or different ideas come to you, and making sure each of them is headed. You put the headings together in a logical order (headings, sub-headings, sub-sub-headings) on a sheet of paper in the form of an outline of the essay. You arrange the slips in order of the outline. You assemble the pile of slips, the outline, and blank paper (or a blank word-processor screen) in front of you. You write the essay, going from heading to heading and slip to slip. The essay writes itself, painlessly, because you've done most of the thinking already. On the way, you observe the following rules and wise bits of advice.

#### 5.1 The outline

The plan you construct should be in the form of an indented outline. This is a series of headings and subheadings, indented, like this:

Main heading

subheading 1

notes on subheading 1

subheading 2

notes on subheading 2

and so on...

Behind every essay there must be a plan of that sort. This essay on essays is built from such a plan, as you can see. If you remember any lectures that use outlines, you will (I hope) remember how useful it was to have that written out in front of you so that you knew where you were in it. Now think of an examiner, having to read up to a hundred student essays. A decent level of concentration is hard to maintain. They get lost, and lose the thread, just as you do in lectures. It is essential therefore that an outline like that must be obvious to him or her, clearly perceptible in the way the essay is written. In order to achieve this effect the easiest way is to have one, written out for your own benefit beforehand.

#### 5.2 The paragraph

The second thing, in order to maintain and make obvious a clear structure, is to be aware of the nature of the paragraph as the basic structuring unit in the essay. Basically, every paragraph should represent and flesh out a heading or sub-heading in the outline. The paragraph is the building block of the essay. Therefore:

* It should be at least a third to half a page in length, but not too long or the reader will get lost. No one-sentence paragraphs! They give the impression that you read the *Sun* a lot. It's not good to give that impression.
* It should have what's known as a topic sentence, near the beginning, that announces the theme of the paragraph. The paragraph should not deviate from this theme or introduce any new themes.
* The first sentence should somehow be linked to, or contrast with, the last sentence of the previous paragraph.
* The first paragraph should announce clearly the theme of the essay. I prefer first paragraphs that quite baldly say "I am going to do this and that in this essay". (Some don't, however). In the first paragraph also you should define your version of the title and make it clear. If the marker knows from the beginning what you are going to do, s/he can bear it in mind and be aware that you are sticking to the point and developing it, because s/he will know what the point is.
* The last paragraph is not so important. You can proudly announce that you have fulfilled the aims of the first paragraph, if you like, or you can just end: it's up to you.

But the main thing is to make each paragraph a solid unit that develops a clearly announced sub-theme of the essay. This way the indented outline that's behind it will be obvious (not too obvious: don't write subheadings before every paragraph) and the marker will not have that terrible lost feeling that immediately precedes giving the essay a low mark in disgust.

### 6. Presentation

Behind everything I've said so far there are two themes. One, just to repeat it yet one more time, in case you might have formed the idea that I don't think it's important, is: your ideas about literary texts are what matters. The other is this:

### (iv) Always put the reader first.

Up to now, most of the writing you've done has been for people who are paid to read what you've written. They have no choice: they have to do it. After you leave here, most of the writing you will do (in the course of your working lives) will be writing you are paid to do for other people. They won't, on the whole, have to read it: if they don't follow it or feel offended by its scruffy presentation or even are having an off-day and are not instantly seduced by its beauty and clarity, they will just throw it away and do something else instead.   
  
 University teachers are somewhat in between these two classes. On the one hand, they are in fact paid to read your essays. On the other, if you can imagine the sheer labor of having to read a large number of long assessed essays on the same topic, you can imagine that no-one really likes doing it. It's extremely hard work, and they would normally rather be doing something else. Therefore, if they're not immediately seduced by the clarity and beauty of the thing they're reading, they may get irritated. If this happens they won't be able to throw it away and do something else, so they will get even more irritated. The end product of this will be: a lousy mark. Or at least, a worse mark than you would otherwise get, even if the ideas are good. This is a good thing, in fact, because you can use it to train you to

### ALWAYS PUT THE READER FIRST.

Therefore, make your essay as beautiful, compelling, and as professionally presented as possible, is my advice. Here are some guidelines.

#### 6.1. The list of works consulted

Every essay without exception should end with a list of books and articles used. Often a marker will look at this first, to see what kind of work you've done: where, as it were, you're coming from. On the whole and within reason, the longer this is, the better. As long, that is, as you can reasonably show that you have indeed used the works on the list.

#### 6.2. Styling references

This list should be set out in a particular and consistent way. The way I use is like this:

Horace Hart, Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers at the University Press, Oxford , (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) Main Library General Reference 1 Z 253  
  
 A.S. Maney and R.L. Smallwood, MHRA Style Book, Notes for Authors, Editors and Writers of Dissertations , (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1981) Main Library General Reference 1 Z 253 Main Library Lang. & Lit. Ref. 1 Z 253  
MLA Handbook for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations , (New York: MLA, 1977) Gen. Ref. Z 253and, appropriately enough, these are the books that tell you how to do it properly.

There are various ways of styling (as printers call it) references (ie book and article titles) and it doesn't matter which you adopt, but you should learn one and adopt it. Hart's Rules is a beautiful little book, the printer's bible and ultimate authority, and it's very nice to own a copy; the MLA \f16 Handbook is more use for students (it has a chapter on how to do indented outlines, for instance--see section 8 for more on this.) I have both, right by my desk, all the time. These books will tell you how to style your references and how also to lay out quotations in an essay, how to refer to a book or an article in the body of an essay, how to punctuate, and so on. I would buy one of them, if I were you, and use it. I very rarely look at mine now: I more or less know what they say. So should you: it's the essence of professionalism in writing.

Note (1997). The English Department has now published its own ideas about how to do styling. There are here. My advice is, start using this document NOW!

Check also the method for arranging references in the text. They should be indented on each side and separated from the rest of the text with a white line above and below, if they are longer than a line or so. And they should have a reference: author, title, and page number.

#### 6.3. Type it if at all possible

No, you don't have to type it. But if you do then it will be far easier for the reader. And rule (iv) is? Right: put the reader first. In any case, studies have shown that particular kinds of handwriting influence (without their knowing it) readers of literary essays such that they get lower marks. I would guess that typed essays tend to get higher marks, but this is just a guess. But it is my honest and truthful opinion that if you hand in an assessed essay (that is, an essay written for marks that will count towards your final degree) and it's not typed, you would be making a foolish mistake.

If you are using a word processor, take some time to get the layout right. Double space, with an extra space between paragraphs. The first line of a paragraph should be indented. Number the pages, and put in a header with the short title of the essay and your name in it. A4 paper. If you want to beautify it with illustrations, drop capitals, a beautiful title page, hand illuminated or gold leaf embellishments, that's fine, though it's not expected. (I should perhaps stress that the gold leaf is a *joke.)* And: make sure you use the spelling checker, before you print it.

A note on safe computing. While you are actually working on a document, it is held in RAM. All that you need to know about this is that RAM is volatile. This means that if a passing friend trips over the power cable, pulling it out of the wall, the computer will go down, and everything in RAM will vanish utterly for ever. What you will lose is everything you created since you last saved to disk. Moral: save to disk frequently. At least every ten minutes. Secondly, you should develop the feeling that whenever you switch the computer off, you are doing a dangerous thing. Dangerous to your data, that is. When you switch it on again, there is no guarantee whatsoever that it will come up and present you with your work. It might crash. It probably won't, it's quite unlikely that anything bad will happen, but nonetheless this is the time of maximum danger for your essay. I have been working with computers equipped with hard disks since 1987, and in that time so far I have had three hard disk crashes. Wipeout. Obliteration. Everything gone for ever. I have also had computers stolen twice, from burglary: end result: once more, all the data on the hard disk gone for ever.

As a result, I never switch off the computer without making sure that all the data on it that I don't mind losing is backed up. Never. Ever. This means that whatever I've worked on since the last time I switched the machine off gets copied on to floppy disks or zip disks. If it's creative writing, like your essay, I usually make two or even three copies. If I feel really nervous about losing it, I print the file out on to paper, as a final security. I really advise you to do the same.

One final point: the last time I had a computer burgled, I was immaculately backed up, and I still lost some data. Why? I left one of the backup disks inside the machine...

#### 6.4. One side of the paper only

When I tell students to write on one side of the paper only, they give me the same look that I frequently get from my cat: "Is this man totally out of his mind?" it says. Look: it makes it easier for the reader. A lot easier. Rule (iv) is? If that doesn't convince you, try sending any piece of writing whatsoever to any form of publication whatsoever, written on both sides of the paper, and see how long it takes for them to send it back. Unread. (They'll also send it back unread if you don't type it, incidentally.)

#### 6.5. Spelling and punctuation

There is a simple but unpleasant rule about this.

(v) If you produce work that is mis-spelt and/or badly punctuated and/or ungrammatical, however good the ideas are, people will tend to think that you are stupid.

They will be wrong; it will just mean that you can't spell, or can't punctuate, or don't know some of the grammar rules. Nonetheless, that's what they will think. Since it will almost always be in your best interests to show that you are intelligent, rather than stupid, if you have a problem in any of these areas you should do something about it. If you have a word processor, get a spelling checker. Persuade someone you know who can spell, punctuate, etc. to read over your work first and check it: learn the sort of mistakes you make, and don't make them again.

There are very good suggestions on how to manage punctuation in the Oxford Guide to Writing. If you have a problem with punctuation, I strongly suggest you get hold of this book.

Another much cheaper and also excellent book is Plain English, by Diané Collinson et al. (book details and current price) (Library reference).

There is one particular error that is very common, students quite often are in the habit of running two or more sentences together and joining them with commas, it is really a very bad idea to do this, a marker when he or she sees it will become very irritated, I hope you are by now with the strange breathless quality of this sentence. Don't do it. A sentence is a sentence. It should end in a full stop. Putting two sentences together with commas between them is becoming acceptable in creative writing, but it's still a bad idea to do it in an essay.

### 6.6 Handing it in.

Controversy rages over the best way to bind the thing. My own view is this. It should be simple, cheap, and easy for the examiner. The pages should not be stapled, clipped, or in any way fastened together. They should not be bound! Some people like to bind them in a presentation folder, often designed by the same person who invented the rat trap, featuring spiked and sharpened strips of brass. Sometimes the essays come back with the examiner's blood on them. This doesn't necessarily guarantee a lower mark, but there's always that possibility. I accept that the motivation behind this kind of presentation is good, and appreciate it as such, but it's really not a good idea. Go for loose sheets, each page numbered, your name at the top of each page, of course written on one side only, and held together in a simple plastic sleeve: the kind with punched holes down one side and an opening in the top only. This keeps the essay clean and coherent, is unlikely to lacerate the examiner, and takes up no extra room, so the essays can be stacked without them falling all over the place.

### 7. How to write

Style is not something I can prescribe in a set of notes like this. Write well: if you have any problems in this direction, it is for your tutor to tell you about them. But here are a few random points instead.

#### Register

This is what linguists call a style appropriate to the occasion. Be aware: a certain scholarly gravity is called for. Not too heavy so that it's uninteresting. But avoid colloquial abbreviations: should not, not shouldn't. Jokes are hazardous: if they don't [do not follow my practice as regards don't] work, they can cost you a lot. Avoid them, on the whole: or at least don't be jokey. Don't for goodness sake imitate the way I'm writing here, either the rather flippant colloquial style or the somewhat overbearing tone, or the numbered subheadings. This is an essay on how to write a literary essay, not a literary essay.

#### Quotations

Firstly, quote sufficiently but not too copiously. Not more than a third of a (handwritten) page at the very outside, and usually just a few lines at a time. It's your thought, not the quotation, that is the point. On the other hand, never forget that your ideas should be tied firmly into the text, and that you should demonstrate this by quotation. Secondly, always give page numbers for your quotations: you will need to know where to find them again.

#### Short paragraphs

No short paragraphs.

#### Length

A non-assessed essay should be about six sides of handwritten or four sides of typed A4 at least.

#### Copy it

*Al*waysmake a photocopy of any essay you do before you hand it in. Academics are very unreliable, and not uncommonly lose essays.

**8. Getting it back**

Here is a summary of things to keep in your mind about writing an essay. When I mark an essay, they are the things that I particularly look out for:

* Use of critics (ie don't slavishly agree with them)
* Range of reference to literary texts, including obscure ones
* Clear and perceptible structure
* Interesting ideas tied in to quotations
* The paragraph:

1. Length  
2. Topic sentence  
3. First sentence, last sentence  
4. First paragraph (sets out themes)

* List of works consulted (properly styled)
* Quotations properly laid out, and references styled properly
* One side of the paper only
* Spelling and punctuation

**9. Two how-to-do-it books**

MLA Handbook for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations , (New York: MLA, 1977) Gen. Ref. Z 253.

This is the most useful text to buy. It has notes on everything you need, including how to do indented outlines. It's not as full or as easy to understand as the next title below, but it's all there.

Update (27/3/99): you don't have to buy it any more. It's here, in a really helpful frame format. This is wonderful. All students should use this site all the time.

Kane, Thomas S, *The Oxford Guide to Writing* , (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

This book has it all: how to make an indented outline, how to spell, how to punctuate, how to write a paragraph, how to take notes, how to sharpen your pencil--everything. The bad news is that (a) it's rather American, and (b) it's out of print. Go and look at the short loan copy and photocopy anything you find useful. It's of particular use if you have any punctuation problems.

**10. Read a different poem every day.**

Finally. One of the key attributes of success in an English course is knowledge of a wide variety of styles, periods, and topics in English Literature. Here is a painless way of learning this. Subscribe to this site and they will email you a different poem every day. Take time every day to read the poem, think about it, and post a short comment on their bulletin board. The site is frustrating and often bizarre, but the exercise is the most useful single thing I can think of at the moment for an English student to do.