**ESSAY WRITING GUIDELINES**

1. **Preparation**

**2.1 Time Management**

Allow yourself enough time. Aim to have what you subjectively feel is a “final” draft at least a week before the submission deadline. Use the remaining days to review your work at well-spaced intervals. This will help you look more objectively at your own work.

**2.2 Getting Started**

First—plan! Don’t just start writing, and hope that it will work out first time: many people find that their ideas and arguments develop during the process of planning and/or writing. You should, therefore, expect to be writing more than one draft. As you are required to process your work electronically, editing and re-drafting is a relatively easy task.

These simple steps will guide you through the essay writing process:

• Decide on your topic or, in most cases this will be provided for you.

• Prepare an outline or diagram of your ideas. The purpose of an outline or diagram is to put your ideas about the topic on paper, in a moderately organized format. The structure you create here may still change before the essay is complete, so don't agonize over this.

• Write your thesis statement. The thesis statement tells the reader what the essay will be about, and what point you, the author, will be making.

• Write the body. The topic you have chosen must now be explained, described, or argued.

• Write the main points. Each main idea that you wrote down in your diagram or outline will become one of the body paragraphs. If you had three or four main ideas, you will have three or four body paragraphs

• Write the sub-points. Write down each of your supporting points for that main idea.

• Elaborate on the sub-points. Elaboration can be further description or explanation or discussion.

• Write the introduction. The introduction should be designed to attract the reader's attention and give her an idea of the essay's focus.

• Write the conclusion. The conclusion brings closure to the reader, summing up your points or providing a final perspective on your topic. All the conclusion needs, is three or four strong sentences.

• Add the finishing touches. Before you can consider this a finished product, however, you must give some thought to the formatting of your paper. Check the instructions again. Check the order of paragraphs. Do they have a logical continuity and flow? Is all your information relevant? Check your writing. Do a grammar and spell check.

1. **Relevance to Question**

Although this may sound obvious, a lot of essays lose marks for containing material that is simply irrelevant. Make sure that you *read the assignment thoroughly and are sure about what it asks for* before you start reading for the essay. While you are reading, bear in mind what sort of material you are looking for in order to address the assigned topic. Even if you do come across a lot of interesting material when researching for your essay, be selective. Interesting material won’t gain you extra marks unless it is relevant.

Remember that relevance does not only apply to the material you use, but also the way that you use it. Summarizing each relevant research area for an essay does not constitute an answer: you have to orient the material you use towards the assigned topic. Part of what you need to learn consists of relationships among ideas.

It is also a good policy to check your final draft with this in mind. Read each paragraph and ask yourself whether it addresses the topic. It is all too easy to drift away from the point.

1. **Structure and Content**

**4.1 Structure**

An important skill of essay writing is learning how to structure what you want to say. All essays should have an introduction and a conclusion. In most cases these will be your first and last paragraphs, respectively, although once you’ve mastered the art of essay writing, you will be able to vary your structure somewhat.

**4.1.1 Introduction**

In your introduction, say:

•  what the essay is about; e.g., “In this essay I shall consider the question of ….”

•  what material you intend to cover; e.g., “I will look at ….”

•  what argument you intend to follow; e.g., “I will suggest that ….”

Finally, make it clear where your introduction ends and the rest of your essay begins; i.e., start a new paragraph!

**4.1.2 Body of the Essay**

A well-structured essay should consist of a series of paragraphs that progress logically through the series of points that you intend to cover. Obviously, the difficult part is working out what that order should be. In essence, an essay is an argument, so your structure should be based on the particulars of your argument.

Remember that good essays don’t just give evidence for their point of view, but also demonstrate why opposing views are flawed. Imagine a reader, then try to predict their objections to your argument, and then demonstrate why they are wrong.
 **4.1.3 Conclusion**

Your essay should have a definite ending, in the form of a conclusion. Here you should summarize what it is that you have said in your essay, stating what your answer to the question is and why. Often, there is no simple answer (which is why you are writing an essay, and not a two-mark answer on a class test), so you should state what the complexities of the issue are. You may feel that you are repeating yourself, as the body of your essay should have made your argument clear already, but the reader will appreciate a good summary.

**4.2 Originality**

Originality is one of the hardest things to achieve in an essay, but any effort you make at being original will be noticed by the marker. This doesn’t mean that you have to invent a new theory each time you write an essay. You can still achieve originality in a number of smaller ways, such trying to make new connections between particular viewpoints.

Reading through some other books or papers in addition to, say, the two or three that everyone else is using, is also likely to help you to gain a wider perspective on the question you are studying. Academic works normally contain bibliographies that can point you to other papers. The Internet provides an incredible library of online resources.

**4.3 Length**

Often you will be given a word limit, or suggested length for an essay. Use this information to gauge the level of detail, and degree of coverage that is expected. Obviously, an essay of 1500 words will have a narrower focus and will require greater summarizing skills than one of 3000 words. Being able to extract what is important about a particular paper, and to summarize it, is an invaluable skill that can be applied in all kinds of real-world situations (to use the currently fashionable jargon, it is a “transferable skill”). Note that markers will penalize essays that are too long. Keeping to the limit tells the marker that you understand what is important in your argument.

1. **Presentation and Style**

**5.1 Presentation**

Although there is no strict convention on layout, do consider how the essay looks on the page. Several studies have shown that presentation does have a subconscious effect on markers, even when they’re not explicitly marking on that criterion. Choose your desired font and line and paragraph spacing. We suggest 1,15 in line spacing.

**5.2 Style**

What constitutes “good style” is one of the hardest things to explain, but there are some points that you should bear in mind. You are writing an academic essay, and as such, are required to use a reasonably formal style of writing. This does not mean that you should be obscure, or use impossibly long sentences with multisyllabic words, but you should avoid being overly colloquial. In other words, don’t be too casual and don’t waffle (use too many words to express yourself, or spend too long on an issue that doesn’t merit the attention or time).

More importantly, you should:

•  **Be explicit**: Remember that you should be writing your essay for someone who has a general background in the general subject area, but doesn’t necessarily specialize in that particular topic. Also, don’t leave the reader to guess or infer your conclusions—state them explicitly.

•  **Use sign-posts**: Make your essay easier to read by being explicit (that word again!) about your essay structure; e.g., “In the next section I will …” or “As I have argued previously ….”

•  **Avoid long sentences:** They can be difficult to read. Go for short sentences: if you have a sentence more than three or four lines long, then it probably needs to be broken up into simpler structures.

•  **Avoid long paragraphs**: Try to avoid writing paragraphs more than 10 or 15 lines long. Long blocks of text have a negative subconscious effect on the reader. Of course, points sometimes take more space to make, but if you find yourself writing a long paragraph, ask yourself: “Should I break this point in to sub-points?” You could then connect the sub-points with linking sentences at the beginning and/or end of each of the smaller paragraphs.

•  **Don’t imagine that the reader knows what you mean**: If you imagine a reader, don’t imagine the marker. Imagine another student in your class. This should help you to be explicit about definitions and be helpful in relation to sign-posting.

**5.3 Stylistic Conventions**

Finally, there are a number of points of grammar and style that you should be aware of, and a number of detailed conventions that you should follow. These are discussed in the following subsections.

**5.3.1 Style and Grammar**

A few stylistic points are listed below. Use your own judgement: don’t use complicated structures simply to avoid these forms, but don’t deliberately wave the red flag if you don’t have to. Your tests should be “Does it sound awkward?” and “Is my meaning clear?”

•  **Split infinitives**: “To boldly go ….” This is a classic case of a purist proscription that bears little connection to the way most people talk and write. Still, it’s useful to practice phrasing your sentences so as to avoid split infinitives.

•  **Use of the first person**: In any academic writing the repeated usage of “I” is inappropriate (as is the repetition of any word or phrase), but for many people it is preferable to use “I” occasionally instead of “the writer” or similar phrases.

•  **Masculine generic terms**: The use of masculine generic terms such as “man” and “he” to refer to both males and females is now avoided in most academic writing. A useful alternative to generic “he” is to use plural constructions that will permit the use of “they.” However, since in the Christian tradition God is referred to in masculine pronouns and as ‘Father’ rather than ‘Parent’, the masculine form is thus acceptable to us in these instances.

**5.3.2 Spelling**

Poor spelling, reasonably or not, gives the impression of carelessness and laziness. Since your essay will be processed electronically, please use the spell checker. But don’t rely on it exclusively—proofread your essay carefully as well.

**5.3.3 Quotations**

Don’t quote for the sake of quoting. You should only use a quotation when you are unable to say something better, not just because you can’t be bothered to summarize a point of view! For example, if an author has summed up their argument in one pithy phrase, then it might be worth repeating.

If you do use quotations, they should be enclosed in quote marks “like this.” Longer quotations—if absolutely necessary—may also be set off from the main body of the text, slightly indented and perhaps in a slightly smaller type size.

All quotations should always be referenced by author, date, and page number as exemplified below. An comprehensive explanation of the preferred referencing technique can be found in ‘attachment 3’. Above all, no matter what your choice of technique may be, **be consistent!**

**5.3.4 References**

Any books or articles that you quote from (or even just mention) must be correctly referred to in *both* the body of the essay *and* in a references or bibliography section at the end of the paper. When you quote or refer to a work, give the author’s name, date of publication, and (if appropriate) the page number(s) in the body of the text. At the end of the essay include a references section listing alphabetically by author surname all the publications that you have mentioned in the course of your essay. The purpose of a references section is to enable people to find the books and articles to which you have referred. It’s not just so that the marker can see how much you’ve read.

1. **Conclusion**

Essay writing is a skill worth perfecting as the techniques you need to master in order to write good essays generalize very well to the world outside academia. Components of a good essay also relate to other communicative skills, such as giving sermons, talks or presentations.

Spending time improving your skills now certainly won’t be time wasted. Good graduates are valued for their ability to communicate and express themselves fluently through the written word. Learning to structure an argument, summarize your sources, and improve your writing style *now* will stand you in good stead, long after you escape from the realm of the red pen!

**Checklist**

•  Has the spelling been checked?

•  Is the references section correct? Is all cited material referenced? Are there any materials that you have not cited?

•  Is the word length OK?

•  Is my name, student number, instructor’s name, etc. on it?

•  Could someone read my introduction and have a rough idea of the body?

•  Could someone read my conclusion and know what they would have learnt had they read the body?

•  Were any of my arguments unsubstantiated or biased?

•  Did I leave the essay for a few hours and then read it again from a more objective perspective?

•  If I changed anything while going through this checklist did I start again at the top of the checklist?