

General advice on writing linguistic assignments

This guide gives advice on tackling essay-style assignments. Although different types of coursework assignment test different skills (so that it is difficult to give any general advice which is applicable to the full range of assignment questions set in this course), there are standard criteria by which we judge the level of an assignment for a linguistics course.

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Student Support Office Information

Are you having trouble with phonetic transcriptions and think you might possibly have dyslexia or another literacy impairment? Don't worry! The Student Support Office can help you, with help ranging from academic workshops to individual tuition. Visit their website for information:

<http://www2.essex.ac.uk/stdsup/disab/home.shtm>.

Contents

A substantial proportion of the marks for an assignment will go on contents. There are three main aspects to contents:

- coverage;
- argumentation; and
- evaluation.

In the case of an essay-style assignment, coverage means: 'Have you covered all the main points relating to the relevant topic, without digression or irrelevance?'

Argumentation means 'Have you presented a properly argued case, using the accepted canons and style of argumentation in the relevant field?'

Arguments should be based on objective rather than subjective evidence, and show evidence of a clear understanding of each of the relevant arguments, rather than simply regurgitating arguments from lectures or published works without any apparent understanding of their true nature or significance. Subjective evidence is evidence based on personal opinion; objective evidence is evidence based on experimentation, or observation: a subjective (non-)argument against a particular theory would be e.g.

'Theory X is obviously too complex to be a plausible model of human behaviour.'

An experimental objective argument would be e.g.

'Theory X is falsified by the experiment by Smith (1996), which showed that...'

An objective observational argument would be:

'Theory X cannot account for the following range of observed phenomena...'

Evaluation means: 'Have you shown clear evidence of the ability to make a reasoned evaluation of particular claims, ideas, hypotheses or theories, and the ability to identify their relative strengths and weaknesses?' In the case of a set of exercises, contents refers to the depth and perspicacity of the

analysis of the exercise material. Overall, it is the quality of your work which counts, not the quantity (which is why we provide recommended word-limits for assignments).

Organisation

Two assignments which cover more or less the same ground can be awarded very different marks, depending on the degree of internal organisation of the material being presented. What we are assessing (in part) is the ability to see the relevant issues clearly, and a well-structured essay suggests a higher level of understanding of the complex inter-relations between key issues. Hence, it makes sense to try and structure your assignment into separate sections: indeed, you can make the organisation into sections clearer visually, e.g. by using underlined/*italicised*/CAPITALISED numbered section headings, and leaving a couple of lines blank between the end of one section and the start of the next.

Include a brief (5-10 lines) introduction at the beginning of your assignment, setting out clearly the approach you are going to adopt to the assignment topic, e.g.

'In the first half of my assignment I shall give a brief outline of the X theory, and then present a number of arguments which appear to lend support to X; in the second half, I shall present a detailed critique of these arguments in the light of more recent research, concluding that X may not be as convincing as was once thought.'

The main body of your assignment should be clearly structured into paragraphs of roughly equal length; each paragraph should contain **one and only one** argument/point expounded clearly and concisely.

In order to provide essential continuity in your assignment, you should link each paragraph both to the preceding one and to the following one, making the relation between adjacent paragraphs totally explicit. In other words, don't leave the internal and external examiners to try and work out just how paragraph 3 links to paragraph 4 - assume that they won't be able to work out the link for themselves unless you tell them directly. This is particularly important at major turning points in your assignment, e.g. where you turn from **exposition** of some idea to **criticism** of it. You must make it obvious to the examiners that you yourself realise that there is now a major change in the direction of your argument, e.g.

'Hitherto I have presented three arguments which appear to lend support to X, namely (i) A, (ii) B, and (iii) C; now I turn from exposition to criticism, and attempt to assess the validity of this type of argumentation by presenting an in-depth critique of just one of these arguments, viz. B. I shall attempt to show that B contains 3 major deficiencies relating to (i) P, (ii) Q, and (iii) R. I shall look at each of these deficiencies in turn...'

You should end your assignment with a brief conclusion (5-10 lines), summarising the main points you have made (in case the examiners forget any of them), the overall conclusion(s) which you have drawn, and the implications of your work for future research (e.g. If some issue is left unresolved, you might suggest a future line of research which could help to resolve the issue).

Presentation and Style

It is important that your work shows clear evidence that you are familiar with the typographical conventions and style of presentation used in the relevant technical or professional literature. This means that you should set out your assignment in exactly the same way as a published article in the relevant field would be set out. As far as style is concerned, you should always use the appropriate technical terms and phraseology in discussion and avoid folk terminology (Hence, talk about 'segments' not 'sounds', 'graphemes' not 'letters', 'morphemes', not 'parts of words', etc.).

Balance

Try and see both sides of the question - i.e. points in favour of and points against whatever idea(s) you are discussing. Uncritical regurgitation of Bloggs' book/article/lecture (or part of it) will be heavily penalised. Don't spend 3 pages making one point and 3 lines making another: rather, spend about 200 words on each of the major points you are making. Any argument which is so contorted that it needs to be spread over 3 pages is probably best avoided, since it will doubtless confuse both you and the examiners, and produce an unwelcome imbalance in your assignment.

Conciseness

Present your ideas clearly and concisely. We give you recommended word-limits for assignments in order to encourage you to be concise. A good assignment can often be ruined simply because the writer felt the misplaced urge to pad it out with another 1,000 words of self-opinionated, ill-informed *waffle*, in the mistaken belief that the more you write, the more marks you get. In fact, the converse is generally true: the more concisely you make a point, the more credit you are likely to get (provided, of course, that it is properly substantiated). Conversely, the more you write, the greater the danger that eventually you will say something totally inept, and thereby lose marks.

Relevance

Everything you write must be demonstrably relevant to the title of the assignment you have been set. The guiding principle is that you gain marks for relevant observations, but lose marks for irrelevant observations. With every argument you present, you must say exactly how the point you are making relates to the assignment title (Does it support it, or go against it, and how?). Never assume that the examiners will be able to work out for themselves how what you are saying relates to the set topic: they may simply assume that if you don't say how and why some observation is relevant, it's because you don't really know whether it is, but decided to include it just in case it was.

Exemplification

Wherever possible, always give an example to illustrate the point you are making. For example, if you are talking about a type of error made by second language learners, give one or more typical examples of the relevant type of error (and give a full reference to the book or article that you pinched the examples from!).

This is particularly important where you are dealing with abstract hypotheses, simply to show to examiners in practical terms that you understand what the hypothesis is really about. Ideally, each paragraph should deal with a separate point, illustrated by a single (good) set of examples: but don't waste time giving 20 examples when a couple of good ones will make the same point just as effectively (otherwise you may lose marks for lack of conciseness, imbalance, etc.). In essays where you give a lot of example sentences, number each of the sentences consecutively, for ease of reference (both for you and for the examiners) - and leave a blank line above and below each example sentence in the text.

Linguistic Awareness

Remember that your work is being assessed by examiners whose professional training is in some area of linguistics, and that your degree is being awarded by a (Language and) Linguistics department. It must therefore be *linguistically informed* - i.e. it must show clear awareness of the linguistic techniques relevant to the topic you are tackling. If the topic is an experimental one, then awareness of empirical research methods is expected; if the topic is a theoretical one, then an appropriate level of mastery of the relevant theoretical apparatus is expected; if the topic is a pedagogical one, then awareness of the appropriate pedagogical concepts must be demonstrated.

You can demonstrate your 'linguistic awareness' in a number of ways - for example, by the organisation of your assignment. So, for instance, in an essay dealing with (e.g.) pronunciation errors, it is obviously better to divide the essay into sections on the basis of a phonetic classification of the sounds (e.g. dealing with plosives in one section, fricatives in another, etc.) than to do so on the basis of some non-linguistic criterion (e.g. alphabetical order). You can also demonstrate your 'linguistic awareness' by using the relevant technical or professional terminology wherever possible (e.g. talk about 'morphemes' rather than 'parts of words').

Originality

Originality is an elusive quality: much of what you say in your assignments will inevitably be based on ideas which you have gleaned from books, articles, lectures, or classes - and indeed there is no harm in that, provided that you present the relevant ideas in your own words (though being careful to use technical terminology where appropriate), and provided that you properly acknowledge the source of your inspiration in each case. However, to achieve *first class degree standard*, you must provide evidence of genuine originality.

To show originality, you do not need to invent a new theory (and it is unrealistic to expect to do so): on the contrary, it is more realistic to try and show originality in terms of description (e.g. by using an existing theory to arrive at an insightful description of some phenomenon not previously described in those terms), or experimentation (devising a new experiment to test a particular hypothesis), or evaluation (coming up with new insights or perspectives on existing work), or synthesis (in writing a novel review of existing research in some complex domain, where the originality may relate in part to the selection and presentation of the material, and the particular perspective which you adopt).

Bibliographical Informedness

Examiners want to see clear evidence that you have read and understood the key works in the relevant field. They expect to find (at the end of your assignment) a section entitled **REFERENCES** which lists all and only the works which you have cited in the text of your assignment. Examiners expect to find clear evidence that the material you cite has actually been read by you, and that you have understood its relevance to the point(s) you are discussing. They want evidence that you've read the relevant primary literature (i.e. original articles in their original form), not just secondary literature (e.g. a simplified summary of the primary literature in an elementary textbook). It is therefore important to include precise page references to specific points made in primary articles, or short quotes from one or two such articles.

A good assignment would normally be expected to contain a dozen or so references to relevant primary literature (though to some extent this depends on the field concerned). Be professional in the way you set out references in your assignments. Use the **author-date** system widely adopted in the published literature. Why? Because to do so suggests a familiarity with the literature and its conventions which will move you up a few points in the examiners' estimation (assuming that you haven't already sunk so low as to be irredeemable!). Details of the author-date system are given in the next section of this booklet entitled REFERENCES.

Referencing Printed Materials

One thing which irritates examiners intensely is improper, inaccurate, irrelevant, or missing references: this creates an impression of sloppiness, and of lack of familiarity with the bibliographical conventions in the published literature - which in turn suggests that you haven't done too much reading. For this reason, it is important to set out references carefully, and in a conventional format. The first question to ask is obviously: 'What works should I refer to?' The answer is 'All and only those works (books/articles/manuscripts) which you have read in their original form, and which are cited somewhere in your assignment.' So, don't refer to items which you have read but not referred to, or to items which you haven't read but thought you ought to mention anyway.

References should be set out using the standard author-date system adopted in most published works. Under this system, when you want to refer to a book or article in the body of your text, you simply identify the relevant work by the surname(s) of its author(s), followed by the date of publication (the date may be, but does not need to be, put in parentheses): c.f. e.g.

It has been argued by Smith (1996) that the claim made by Jones and Brown (1995) that sociolinguistics is easy is a fatuous fabrication and a tissue of empirical falsehoods.

Where a work has been accepted for publication but not yet been published, it can be cited as 'forthcoming', or 'in press'; where it has not yet been accepted for publication, you can cite it as 'unpublished manuscript', or simply 'ms' for short: c.f. e.g.

The claim by Skullcrusher (in press) that British bobbies suffer feelings of inferiority and inadequacy because they have smaller truncheons than their American counterparts has recently been dealt a crushing blow by the seminal study of Small Truncheon Syndrome by Bonebreaker (in preparation).

Where more than one item by a given author is published in the same year and is cited by you, then identify each work you mention in the text by the author's surname, followed by the year of publication (or 'forthcoming', etc.), followed by a lower case letter - 'a' for the first item mentioned, 'b' for the second, 'c' for the third, and so on. For example:

In three of his more recent articles, E. F. L. Teacher (1996a, 1996b, 1996c) argues that the relation of the linguist to the language teacher is analogous to that of the parasite to its host.

Where a work is particularly well known by its full (or abbreviated) title, you may cite the (full or abbreviated) title in the text as well as the date of publication: c.f. e.g.

Nim Chimpsky (1996c), in his autobiographical classic Talking in Trees, puts forward the hypothesis that linguists' morbid preoccupation with trees is a reflection of their primate origins.

As noted above, you should generally refer only to primary literature (i.e. original works in their original form), not to secondary literature (i.e. someone else's summary of a work you were too lazy to read for yourself). Sometimes, however, it may be that you are unable to obtain a primary work and have to make use of a secondary reference. When you do so, you must acknowledge the source of this secondary reference - e.g. as in the example below:

Colt 1995 (cited in Smith and Wesson 1996, p.45) shoots down the myth that guns symbolise guts.

Direct quotations from authors should be enclosed in inverted commas. Always cite the author(s), work (using the date+letter system, e.g. 1991b) and full page references for any quotation - for example:

It is the view of A. Pratt (1996, p.999) that 'The decline in reading standards in contemporary society is entirely due to the demise of the children's comic.'

At the end of your assignment, you should have a section entitled REFERENCES in which you list all and only the works cited in your assignment (NB You do not list works you have read but not cited, nor those that you have neither read nor cited). Each item included in your bibliography should be listed alphabetically by author, providing (for each entry) the information overleaf:

- i. surname and initials of the author(s)
- ii. publication date (where you have cited more than one work by the same author published in a given year, use the date+letter system, e.g. 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; where a work is not yet published, cite it as 'forthcoming', 'in press', 'unpublished manuscript', etc.)
- iii. title (Titles of articles or chapters are enclosed in single inverted commas; titles of books or monographs are underlined or italicised)
- iv. for journal articles: title of the journal (underlined/italicised), volume number and page references for book chapters: name and initials of the editor(s), title of the book (underlined/italicised), publisher, place of publication, and page references for whole books: publisher and place of publication.

Some examples are given below:

Chambers, J. (1991) 'Lawless and vulgar innovations: Victorian views of Canadian English'. In S. Clarke (ed.), *Focus on Canada*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. pp1-26

Chambers, J. (1992) 'Dialect Acquisition', *Language*, vol. 68, pp 673-705.

Chambers, J. (1995) *Sociolinguistic Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.

If you prefer, you can use one of the alternative sets of citation conventions used by well-known publishing houses (e.g. Cambridge University Press) or journals (e.g. Journal of Linguistics). The important thing is to set your references out neatly, in a standard form.

Referencing online Materials

For information on citing websites and other online resources, please see [Prof. Peter Patrick's web citations guide](#).

Discrimination

You should write in a style which does not discriminate against (or give offence to) any individual or group of individuals. For example, you should be sensitive to *gender* issues, and try and avoid (e.g.) using masculine pronouns to refer to expressions denoting mixed gender groups. Hence, rather than say '10 months after he is born, a child will generally produce his first word', say 'Ten months after *they* are born, children produce *their* first word.' You are responsible for the contents of everything you write, and hence must ensure that nothing you write is libellous, prejudiced or offensive.