

## Profile of a good essay

### A general note on academic writing conventions

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Academic writing is bounded by strong conventions, some of which are common across academic schools and subjects, whilst others are discipline-specific. Some may be more to do with departmental protocols and therefore need checking in specific settings. Many academic conventions also have a strong cultural component (international students should bear this in mind and check out their former experience against expectations here)

Having said this, even within formal academic writing there is room for individual style and some scope for compromise between academic protocols and personal preferences. In the early stages of your undergraduate studies though, and until you develop confidence in your academic writing, you should err on the side of the former.

#### **A good essay...**

1. Answers the question
2. Develops a strong argument
3. Has a clear structure
4. Employs an appropriate style
5. Shows clarity of thought
6. Demonstrates breadth of reading, and familiarity with a range of relevant debates and/or viewpoints
7. Shows originality of thought
8. Is appropriately and accurately referenced

#### **1. Answers the question**

- No matter how interesting or cleverly argued, the content of your essay is only of value insofar as it directly addresses the specific question asked.
- Answering the question is about applying the material you've researched.
- Your argument / evidence must all be relevant to the question – if it is not obvious that it is, it should either be removed or reframed so that its relevance is clear.
- Avoid waffling and going off on tangents

#### **2. Develops a strong argument**

- An 'argument', in an academic context, has no negative connotations! It is best understood as *a line of reasoning* in support of your *position* (i.e. *your answer* to the question posed). Your argument explains your thinking in this respect to your reader. It demonstrates how you have reached the particular conclusions you make.
- A strong argument is *persuasive* – it makes sense to the reader and convinces them of the strength and logic of your position.

### **3. Has a clear structure**

- Your essay should have a clear framework: a beginning (an introduction or introductory paragraphs), a middle (the 'body' of your argument), and an end (a conclusion or concluding paragraphs).
- Use paragraphs effectively and appropriately to structure your argument into a logical and persuasive sequence.
- Signpost your argument i.e. explain the sequence of your argument as you progress and the connections between each stage

### **4. An appropriate style**

- Your essay should employ an academic i.e. formal style – avoid familiar speech-type expressions
- The Narrative Voice: It is acceptable for your essay to use either the 1<sup>st</sup> PERSON ('I') or the 3<sup>rd</sup> PERSON ('one', 'it' or 'this essay...'). However, if you use the 1<sup>st</sup> person, be particularly careful you don't slip into casual, familiar or 'opinionated' language.
- Never 'chat' to your audience! e.g. identify or address them as 'you'.
- Keep your audience in mind. Don't assume that you can omit aspects of your argument/explanation because your reader already knows it. The purpose of the essay is to demonstrate that you know it. Imagine you are writing for someone who is intelligent but not necessarily well-informed on the subject.
- Check your work is grammatically accurate – poor punctuation and weak sentence construction creates a bad impression from the start.

### **5. Shows clarity of thought**

- Ability to identify different issues and discuss them in a logical manner
- Organization of material into a coherent structure
- Ability to make important distinctions and insights

### **6. Demonstrates wide reading and understanding**

- Demonstrates competence, understanding, and breadth of research
- Demonstrates intellectual curiosity beyond the minimum 'set' books and acquaintance with secondary works of commentary and criticism as well

### **7. Shows originality of thought**

- An essay that competently reviews the well-known arguments in a subject and reaches a balanced conclusion will achieve a good mark. A really excellent essay however, typically demonstrates something extra e.g. original ideas or an unusual, imaginative approach.
- Remember though, it is not a requirement to be original, and being 'original' doesn't mean making unsupported claims; it's still necessary to show where your idea/s came from i.e. the thought processes behind them.
- See FAQs (below) for more guidance in this respect

## **8. Is properly referenced**

- Your essay should employ a recognised scheme for in-text referencing (acknowledgement of sources), and likewise for the layout of the full list of 'References' at the end of your work. In both respects it is most important that your referencing is comprehensive and consistent.
- The Department Style Guide covers all aspects of citation and referencing practices based on *Harvard* referencing conventions, and includes examples of set-out covering a wide range of source types. All 1<sup>st</sup> year students and Masters students are issued with a hard copy of the Style Guide, and it is also available on Moodle for core modules. You are strongly advised to follow it, especially if you are unfamiliar with or inexperienced in referencing practices.

## **Frequently asked questions**

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### **The Narrative Voice: which 'person' should I write in?**

- It used to be the case that academic writing was almost always in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person (i.e. 'this essay will examine...' or 'one could argue that..' etc). Today though, and certainly in this department, it is considered perfectly acceptable to use the 1<sup>st</sup> PERSON ('I') if you prefer. Whichever you choose, there are some points to bear in mind:
  - The 1<sup>st</sup> person inevitably lends itself to a more personal tone, so if you do choose to use it, you need to be careful you don't slip into a style of writing that sounds casual, familiar or 'opinionated'.
  - On the other hand, heavy use of the impersonal 'one' throughout an essay can sound a little old-fashioned or even pompous, so if you write in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person try and vary your expression to avoid this.
  - Avoid speech-type expressions and never 'chat' to your audience e.g. by identifying or addressing them as 'you'
  - Avoid sweeping generalisations, unsubstantiated opinions, imprecise language that fails to make clear 'who says?'

### **When (not) to reference**

- Many students struggle with this one ("if everything I know on a subject comes from other people - books, lectures etc – doesn't this mean I also have to reference everything?")
- It's necessary and acceptable practice (though not always easy at first) to make a distinction between 'common knowledge' type info (i.e. well-established, generally accepted knowledge, shared across sources) which can be included in your writing without the need to seek a particular reference to support it, and the specific words, ideas, theories, arguments put forward by individual writers, which must always be referenced.

**Do I have to include page numbers whenever I reference?**

- When citing, quoting or paraphrasing material (ideas etc) found in a specific location in a text, referencing should always include the relevant page number/s. However, if you are simply summarizing the general theme of a book, the author/year is sufficient

**Do I have to take a stand? Should I develop a strong 'for or against' type argument in relation to the question?**

- Not necessarily, no. Some questions invite a stronger response than others, and some issues will inevitably provoke a stronger reaction in you. You may also feel that arguments on both sides of a debate have validity and strength
- You DO however need to demonstrate that you have considered the question from a broad perspective, and you DO need to present the different sides to the debate where these exist
- You should also 'position' yourself in relation to the different perspectives presented i.e. it should be clear to your reader where you stand in relation to the question/ debate, even if it is on the middle ground

**Can I (should I?) express personal opinions though?**

- Well yes and no! The difficulty here is the term itself. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'opinion' as 'a view or judgement not necessarily based on fact or knowledge'. And of course it's a short step from here to 'opinionated' i.e. 'assertively dogmatic in one's views' (ibid). The point is, while some opinions will no doubt have better credentials than others, none of them are actually required by definition to be evidenced or well-argued.
- Better then to talk of perspectives, viewpoints or arguments, all of which demand or at least imply a more considered thought process, a process of reasoning
- It's fine to put forward your own argument or point of view, providing...
  - It's framed in academic language
  - The thinking behind it is explicit and contextualised i.e. it's clear to your reader how you reached this point (generally within the framework of evidence of your reading)
  - You provide examples where appropriate and possible
  - You are not offering it as a statement of fact - personal opinions expressed casually have no place in an academic essay
  - You recognize the difference between a viewpoint that has been researched, that can be supported by evidence, and which relates to the issues at hand, and an everyday opinion driven by personal taste
- Having a strong viewpoint in your work is not compulsory; much depends on the format of the question and subject matter. But where they are relevant and well-argued, you are encouraged to do so. This could take the form of agreeing with an argument you have presented and which has been backed up with reputable academic source(s); it might also take the form of bringing in an everyday example to illustrate a point

- Where there is a 'for and against' position to be taken, you should attempt to present both sides to the issue/debate. It's ok to come down heavily in favour of one argument, but such a strong position can only be defended following a sustained critique of the opposing view

### **What does it mean to be 'original'?**

- An essay that competently reviews the well-known arguments in a subject and reaches a balanced conclusion will achieve a good (sometimes a very good) mark. A really excellent essay however, typically demonstrates something extra. Sometimes you will hear this being referred to as demonstrating 'originality'
- It's not a requirement to be 'original'. But what do we really mean by this term anyway? It's unlikely after all, in your undergraduate years at least, that you'll be coming up with ideas that could be considered truly original (in the sense that nobody thought of them before...)
- Generally speaking, we use the word to refer to the sort of independent or 'abstract' thinking that comes about when, in the process of reflecting on a subject area or essay question that you've researched well and understood, you begin to generate other ideas (ideas that weren't necessarily a part of your reading but which were stimulated by it) and to make connections of your own. Such connections are not necessarily limited to the piece of work at hand and its source material; they may equally draw upon other areas of your learning and wider experience.
- 'Demonstrating originality' then doesn't necessitate startling new insights, and it certainly doesn't mean making unsupported grand claims or pontificating! It is still necessary to show the reader where your idea/s came from i.e. the material generating them and thought processes from which they evolved

### **Why do I need to explain/expand on the question (key terms etc) when I know the person marking it knows it all already?**

- The purpose of your essay is to demonstrate that *you* understand your material and the specific question you're answering. So although it's important to keep your audience in mind, don't assume that you can omit aspects of your argument/explanation because your reader will already be familiar with it
- Likewise, in answering the question, you should avoid simply plunging straight into your response as if the question itself and its key terms were unproblematic. You should always explain key terms (unfamiliar terms, or terms that have a specific sociological meaning), and give any relevant background to the issue/s to be discussed
- A useful tip is to write your essay as if it's intended for the benefit of an educated audience but one not necessarily well-informed on the specific subject. Include whatever information is necessary for such an audience to make sense of the question and your response to it.

### **Developing own style and voice**

- Academic writing (essays, reports etc) generally requires you to adopt a more formal tone than you would typically use in your everyday writing (notes, letters, emails, diaries etc).
- It can be difficult at first to find the right level at which to pitch your academic writing. Over time however, with practice and feedback, you will gradually find you become more comfortable in your written expression
- Developing your 'voice' as an academic writer is an expression used to describe the cumulative process by which you come to develop:
  - Confidence and ease in your writing
  - A 'feel' for the appropriate balance between protocol and preference
  - Clarity and fluidity in your style
  - An increasing sense of your own 'position' in relation to your subject material
  - A command of your material and ability to use it effectively in balanced but persuasive argumentation