

## **KEY SKILLS: HINTS ON WRITING ESSAYS**

**(Revised, October, 2006)**

**N.B.** Please read these notes (1) each time that you start preparing for and (2) each time you start writing any essay.)

1. Writing an essay is an exercise in the handling of ideas. It is not the mere transcript of passages taken from various text-books and joined by brief comments. To gain a pass mark an essay must show originality as well as a serious attempt to relate your subject's theoretical principles and materials to the writer's personal opinion.

2. When a lecturer sets you an essay he is explicitly or implicitly asking you a question. Above all else your aim should be to discern what that question is and how it is required to be answered. You should introduce the essay question and state how you intend to deal with it, i.e. *your plan of attack*. Then in the body of your essay you should give a detailed answer, disposing in turn of all the points that it has raised.

**Keep checking that you are following your stated plan and rereading the question. It is easy to deviate from your chosen course.** Finally, write a conclusion, i.e. a summary of your detailed answer. A conclusion is essential.

A useful rule for writing essays, reports and examination answers is: **ANSWER THE WHOLE QUESTION AND NOTHING BUT THE QUESTION.**

1. Although an essay must show **originality** it must also be based on a sound knowledge of the subject. This means that you must read not just one book but a collection of books and articles. You will have been given a list of books for use in your course and additional references are given in lectures. From time to time in this university important references are placed 'on reserve' in the Main Library. Therefore, you have no excuse for failing to have an adequate factual basis for any essay or report you may be asked to write.
2. **Make brief notes as you read.** Do not waste time copying out long quotations. Go for the ideas and arrange these in diagrams and tables (which are easier to manage than verbal passages). Copy the exact words only if they say something more apt than you could say it yourself. (This should not happen if you are applying what you read to the problem that has been set and to your own experience.)
3. Do not sit down and immediately start writing your essay or report. **Plan it first.** Design it so that it will answer the question. Give it a beginning, a middle and an end. Much of the information you will have collected will have to be rejected because it is not relevant. Do not be tempted to include anything which has not a direct bearing on the problem expressed in the title of the essay or report. Sheer volume of 'facts' that are not linked logically to your particular question does not impress a reader; in fact, **a lack of organization will impress him/her negatively.**
4. When you have completed your preparations and start to write your essay, bear in mind the following points:

2.

- (a) Your text must be executed using a word-processor or computer. It must be free of errors, e.g. corrections made in pen, or additions pasted or sellotaped onto the text; blurring – due to the ink-pack running out, and other ‘computer errors’. Errors on papers produced by means of electronic equipment are not attributed to a fault in the equipment, but are attributed to error/s on the part of the student. A breakdown of e.g. the College computer the night before, or even the morning that the essay is due to be submitted is not looked on kindly. Students should allow for last minute disasters. Leave wide margins and a space at the end for the examiner’s comments.
- (b) In the body of the essay or report, whenever you have reason to make use of material which you have obtained from a book or article **it is essential to acknowledge the source**: otherwise you would be guilty of plagiarism which is a very serious offence, which could invalidate your work and could result in dismissal from the university.

Acknowledgement of sources should be made as follows:

1. When using material where it is not a direct quotation e.g. ‘The Bushmen of the Kalahari were found to employ similar methods when trapping birds (Dobson, 1994), i.e. the author’s surname, and date of publication, in brackets, are placed at the end of the sentence, so the reader knows that you can justify your comment. (The author’s surname, initial/s, date of his work published, book title (in italics), where published: publishers should be placed in your bibliography.) **See separate sheet – Citations & Referencing** (Middleton).
2. When making a direct quotation: e.g. ‘In many parts of Africa – and elsewhere – illness, which naturally may be a great source of anxiety to the patient and his kin, is believed to be due to the anger of a spirit or ghost, perhaps of a living witch or sorcerer’ (Beattie, 1989:207). The quotation is in inverted commas and is followed by the author’s surname, date of publication and relevant page number.

Where the above quotation has had sections omitted, a group of three dots should replace the missing words, e.g. ‘In many parts of Africa – and elsewhere – illness ... is believed to be due to the anger of a spirit or ghost, perhaps a living witch or sorcerer’ ( Beattie, 1989:207).

**Long quotations should be avoided where possible.** If it is felt necessary to quote at length, then they should be placed in the endnotes, with the relevant number at the appropriate place in the text. **Footnotes containing references should be avoided in essays for the Anthropology Department.** Footnotes should only be used for additional information where it is inappropriate for inclusion in the text. (See separate sheet - ‘Quotations’)

### 3.

**ALL ESSAYS MUST HAVE A BIBLIOGRAPHY ATTACHED AT THE END. Essays submitted without a bibliography are unacceptable.** Therefore, when making notes from texts, make sure that you have made a note, at the same time, of the source of your information as, with the shortage of texts, it is often impossible to obtain access, in time, to the text which you returned earlier. Incomplete references are useless.

**Do make sure to download your copy of Citations & Referencing as it gives valuable information, not only on referencing books with single and multiple authors, but also articles, Web sites, lectures, the media and ‘grey material’ (where the author is omitted).**

#### **PARAGRAPHING**

The aim of paragraphing is to break down your essay into manageable units. It also aids the reader, in that it allows clear separation of the various arguments and enables ‘referring back’ to be simplified.

There should be a ‘topic’ sentence at the beginning of each paragraph – often, but not invariably, the first sentence. The topic sentence usually has three functions:

1. to introduce the subject that you intend dealing with in the paragraph;
2. to link the paragraph with what has already been written; and
3. to provide a key to what should be included in the paragraph.

**Everything that cannot be directly related to the ‘topic sentence’ must be rejected or redirected to an appropriate paragraph.**

#### **TABLES, MAPS AND DIAGRAMS**

Wherever possible illustrate your essay or report with neatly drawn Tables, Maps and/or Diagrams. Use Roman or Arabic numerals following Table, e.g. Table IV or Table 4 for the captions of tables (which usually consist of statistics) use Figure, followed by Arabic numerals, for Diagrams and Maps, e.g. Figure 5.

The source of the information must be indicated at the foot of the Table or Figure, e.g. Ministry of Health Report (2001), London: HMSO.

If a diagram is copied (though not necessarily in unmodified form) acknowledge it by writing ‘After’ before the name of the originator.

In short, an essay or report should contain a number of well-supported statements in a linked series of well-constructed paragraphs which tackle, then deal with, and finally dispose of the question implied in the title.

4.

**ALL ESSAYS MUST HAVE A CONCLUSION WHICH SUMS UP YOUR ARGUMENT/S AND PROVIDES A DIRECT ANSWER TO THE POSED QUESTION.**

Do bear in mind when you are writing your conclusion that it is the last thing that the examiner reads. Therefore, **a good conclusion is essential.**

**Before handing in your essay REREAD IT, correct any errors, and securely attach your Bibliography.**

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