

DIVISION OF SOCIETY, CULTURE, MEDIA AND PHILOSOPHY

ESSAY WRITING GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

In writing an essay you are being asked to do three things:

- demonstrate your understanding of unit material;
- respond to the issues and themes that define an academic discipline; and
- produce a clearly written and analytic argument in response to a specific issue.

Writing an essay thus provides you with the chance to analyse a social or cultural practice in the light of what you have learnt, or to work out what you think about an important question or text. Working on the essay will provide you with the opportunity to reflect on and clarify your thinking, and to develop, strengthen and express your own opinions. It also provides you with the opportunity to learn about and critique the views of thinkers and writers who have become influential in specific academic disciplines.

Thus, writing an essay provides you with the opportunity to present your views in a form appropriate for public discussion. It requires you to provide reasons why others should accept your views; it also means that your views are subject to critical scrutiny. Lectures provide you with examples of the critical concepts and methods that are used in a specific academic discipline. Your essay should draw on this methodology to present an argument which will convince your reader of the logic of your views.

You will soon discover that much work in the humanities and social sciences consists of arguments about how things are to be defined and interpreted. Understanding often advances through disagreement between contrary viewpoints. This structured argument gives academic work much of its vitality and interest. Few issues in the humanities and social sciences have been resolved in any simple sense. You won't find many generally accepted 'answers', and there are no single authorities who can tell you all you need to know. This means that we expect your essays to demonstrate not just factual knowledge but also some ability to present and assess arguments and counter-arguments about particular problems.

RESEARCH

Here are some useful hints to help you with your research:

- *Read the question carefully:* Before you start reading, you should think carefully about the topic. Make sure you know what you are being asked. A dictionary definition of key terms is usually not enough. You must *interpret* the question as a whole. If the question uses terms that have been introduced in the lectures (or even a familiar word used in a new or specific way) go back over lecture material and make sure you know what a word means in the discipline you are studying.
- *Work out the reading you will have to do:* For 100 and 200 level units, the major research required is reading—carefully and critically—the books, articles, etc., on the reading lists provided. You may, if you wish, seek other relevant material in the library, but use it very cautiously. If in doubt about its relevance, consult your tutor. In later undergraduate units, you will be encouraged to undertake independent research and will be given advice as to how to go about it.
- *Read closely and carefully:* It is very important to read with care and attention. Try to work out what the author is saying and what his/her reasons are. Take special care to read and consider authors with whom you disagree. Think about how you might criticise their arguments, and how they might respond to your criticisms. But also ask yourself whether an author's arguments give you reason to reconsider your own position. Think of reading as a way of entering into a dialogue with the author.
- *Make notes:* Always make notes on your reading. Even scrappy and inadequate notes are useful reminders when you want to recall what you have read. If you are going to quote passages in your essay, make sure you make an exact copy. Also keep accurate details of *exactly* where a particular quote is found, as you will need to put this in your essay (see "Referencing").

WRITING

- *Always plan your writing:* Before you start writing, draw up a plan of your projected essay, covering all the relevant issues, and working out how the parts of your essay will fit together. The easiest way to confuse a reader is to be confused yourself. A plan makes sure you always know what you are trying to say, and when you are going to say it.

- *Organize your essay clearly:* Remember that paragraphs are the organisational 'building blocks' of an essay and that each paragraph should have a main idea or theme. Good organisation can only be achieved by careful planning and frequent re-reading and revision of your writing as you proceed. Authors who haven't taken the trouble to review and revise their essays before submitting seldom succeed.
- (a) Begin with an introduction that foreshadows your argument.
 - (b) Develop your discussion progressively and coherently. Ensure that sentences and paragraphs follow logically from one another.
 - (c) Your conclusion should draw together the threads of your argument and present a final answer to or assessment of the problem.
- *Leave time to change your mind, and change your plan:* As you write, you will find that issues which seemed easy are more difficult than you had thought, and sometimes you will find that you want to change direction, or even your mind, as you write. It is not uncommon to discover that you need to do more reading. So it is very important to leave yourself enough time to do this.
 - *Always write more than one draft:* When you have completed a draft of your essay, you need to make sure that you have covered all the issues, and that it develops in a coherent fashion from beginning to end. Often you will find that you have changed course half way through and that the early material is no longer relevant to your conclusion. It is important to give yourself enough time to spend a day or two thinking about your first draft, and then to rewrite it for submission. It is very clear to a reader which essays have been drafted and re-drafted: the improvement in quality is very noticeable, and is reflected in improved marks.
 - *Make sure your writing is clear:* Your final aim must be to present your views in a way that makes them comprehensible and plausible to your reader. By and large, your marker will be less concerned about the positions you adopt than with your ability to provide reasons for them, although there are some views and positions which are more difficult to support than others. So, whatever view you argue for, make sure that you have provided reasons why your reader should take it seriously and that you have taken into account possible objections to it (especially those canvassed in the reading list). That *you* believe it is not a reason for your *reader* to believe it. Use argument rather than assertion, and reason rather than rhetoric.

Things to bear in mind:

- Make sure that you have covered all the required aspects of the essay topic. If there are specific questions asked, make sure that you have answered them all.
- Avoid pretentiousness. Try to write as simply as is compatible with what you are trying to say. Do not try to impress your reader with inflated language and terminology.
- Most academic disciplines have their own technical terms ('jargon'). Before you use these terms, make sure that you understand them.
- If possible, do not sit on the fence. Try to argue for a position, though taking into account its problems and the criticisms that have been made of it.
- Do not assume that your reader already knows what you are talking about. If you are talking about an author or an example, provide enough detail for someone who does not know your source to understand what you are talking about (and incidentally, to show that *you* know what you are talking about).
- Quote sparingly. Use quotation to illustrate your argument, not to replace it.
- Do not simply reproduce your lecture notes. Where you make use of lecture notes, provide a reference. If you use lecture material without acknowledgment, you will be guilty of **Plagiarism** (see below).

- Make sure that you footnote and reference your work correctly (see 'Referencing' below); this is a professional academic exercise
- Make sure that every essay has a Bibliography which lists the references you used, even if they include only the readings and texts set for the unit
- If you read materials outside the prescribed unit readings, keep detailed bibliographical notes so that you don't have to find them again later
- If you use materials from the internet, be very aware that much of the material published there is unedited and self-published—and so may be of little intellectual value

The Criteria by which we Assess are:

1. **Relevance:** The content of your essay should be relevant to the question or problem you've selected. Don't include material not directly related to it.
2. **Well-informed:** Your essay should be well-informed. Different tasks and different disciplines require different amounts of reading. Make sure you know how much and what type is required, and that the reading you do is thorough and careful.
3. **Your own thinking and your own words:** Familiarity with the literature is essential but not sufficient. Your essay must be based on your own thinking. We don't expect you to come up with original insights at this stage of your studies, but we do expect a serious effort to evaluate how the readings bear on the problem. Think for yourself and say what you think. By this we don't mean to encourage rash, unconsidered statements.
4. **Organisation:** Your essay should be constructed in a way that shows the logical steps in your argument, with data from various sources being brought in as appropriate.
5. **Expression:** Take special care to express your ideas as clearly and concisely as possible. Write complete sentences and keep them as short and succinct as possible.

The best way to find out whether your essay is well-written is to have someone read it. An alternative is to read it aloud to yourself. This can help you to recognise the syntactically awkward bits, and it may help you to see the mis-spellings and other errors.

The Vice-Chancellor has asked that writing skills be taken into account in the overall assessment of work, and particularly that 'Markers should insist that ideas and facts should be expressed accurately and adequately, and should penalise the sort of writing which calls on them to provide a charitable interpretation of notions which have been vaguely or misleadingly expressed'.

SETTING OUT YOUR ESSAY:

The presentation of your essay is an important part of the writing exercise. Although **we expect essays to be word-processed or typed**, we will accept hand-written essays if they are legible. Every aspect of spelling, punctuation, grammar and formatting should be checked for correctness and the essay as a physical production should be as neat as possible.

Paper: Use standard A4 paper.

Margins: All margins should be at least 2.5cm wide. The left margin is often wider, to allow space for binding and/or marker's comments.

Line spacing: Word-processed and typed essays should have double-spaced lines, for clarity and to provide space for marker's comments. If you are using a small type face, 1.5 line spacing is OK.

Justification: Left justification only is usually preferable to full justification (i.e. left and right but not centred), because the latter can introduce large spaces between words that interfere with readability.

Page numbers: should be on all pages but the first, where the number is optional

Submission: Corner staple your essay together with your completed cover sheet for the appropriate discipline, and put it in the appropriate essay box at SCMP headquarters (W6A 7th level foyer). Please don't use paper clips that can get unstuck or folders/binders that make it impossible for the marker to write comments in the left margin. Likewise, plastic document sleeves are a nuisance for markers and are only liable to get separated from your essay.

Essays may be mailed to:

The Enquiry Office
Division of Society, Culture, Media and Philosophy
Macquarie University
NSW 2109

The date of submission is taken to be the day of the postmark. If you want to submit by post, you must still include a signed cover sheet.

It is also possible to submit essays electronically, **but only if the unit convenor agrees**. If you submit this way, you must still submit a hard copy, with a signed cover sheet as soon as possible.

You cannot submit essays by fax.

Always keep a copy of every piece of written work that you submit! It is very rare for assignments to be lost, and it is your responsibility to make sure your essay is received. If it does go astray, the only recourse is quick re-submission of a backup copy. If you do not have a reserve copy, you will have to re-write your essay.

PLAGIARISM

If in writing an essay, you present material taken—either directly or indirectly—from the work of someone else and do not acknowledge this, you will be guilty of plagiarism. This means that you should not use either the words or the ideas of another writer without clearly showing whose they are, and exactly where they come from.

Deliberate plagiarism is dishonest. It is a form of cheating and will be heavily penalised. Where plagiarism is suspected, the Heads of Department and Division convene a meeting where the student is asked for an explanation. If the plagiarism is found to be deliberate, the normal penalty will be automatic failure in the unit, which could delay your academic progress by a year or more, if the unit is a prerequisite for those you intend to take at higher levels. The university may also choose to pursue further action.

Inadvertent plagiarism is more common. Often students do not realise that they have to acknowledge material they have taken from others or do not know how to do so. However, even inadvertent plagiarism allows the plagiarist an advantage over fellow students. It also shows that a student does not know how to go about writing academic essays. It will always be heavily penalised.

Any quotation from a source—even two or three words—must be enclosed in inverted commas, with the proper referencing immediately following. If you are reproducing an idea you have got from an author, you should give appropriate acknowledgement in the sentence in which you refer to it.

For example, Gil Loescher has written:

"International organizations need to adopt programmes and policies to strengthen civil society and local institutions. With the growth and strengthening of institutions, citizens and citizens' groups will be able to influence the behaviour of their leaders through pressure group activities, elections and other democratic mechanisms." (Gil Loescher, "Refugees: A Global Human Rights and Security Crisis" in *Human Rights in Global Politics*, eds. Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.253.)

If you write:

“Something needs to be done for refugees. Organizations should adopt policies to strengthen civil society and local institutions as a useful start,” you are passing off both Loescher’s ideas and words as your own.

Instead you should write, either:

“Something needs to be done for refugees. Loescher has argued that “organizations need to adopt programmes and policies to strengthen civil society” (Loescher 1999: 253), or, “the situation of refugees could be helped by strengthening social and political institutions (Loescher 1999: 253).”

Responding to and adapting the ideas of others is a central part of academic discussion, but it should always be absolutely clear whose words and ideas are whose!

Discussing and comparing your work with that of other students is an excellent idea. However, the warning against plagiarism operates here as well. Do not copy the work of other students, or present their ideas as your own.

The Division’s policies on plagiarism are clear, and penalties can be severe. It is your responsibility to know what plagiarism is, and how to avoid it. The Division’s policy is to be found at: www.scmp.mq.edu.au/plagiarism.html, and is also printed on the back of all essay cover-sheets.

REFERENCING

The main point of referencing is to satisfy the requirement of academic honesty and courtesy to the author of the ideas you are using, and to avoid plagiarism. It is also necessary to make it easy for your reader to locate and check your sources.

There are various conventional ways of doing this, and some disciplines show a marked preference for one convention over others. The main thing is to learn one method and stick to it. Do not try to make up your own. The following provides some guidelines you may use:

Quotation

Every word in your essay taken from someone else’s work, must be presented in one of the following two ways:

- When quoting a short passage from another text (up to 50 words), place in quotation marks in the body of the essay
- For longer quotations display the quote in an indented and separate paragraph. Do not use quotation marks when indenting.

Show your sources

If you quote or paraphrase someone else’s words, or are indebted to them for an idea, then you **must** acknowledge them as a source. You can do this either by in-text referencing (also called the Harvard style), or by either endnotes or footnotes (see below).

Every essay submitted in the Division must also include a full bibliography. A bibliography is a complete list of all the sources you have consulted in preparing your essay, whether you have used them directly or not. Your bibliography should list your sources alphabetically by author’s surname, and include full bibliographical details. These are author’s name (as it appears on the title page); full title of work; number of edition (if not first edition); editor or translator (if relevant); publisher’s name, place and date of publication.

Examples

- ***In-text referencing***: acknowledges the source immediately after the quotation, and gives the full reference in the Bibliography at the end of the essay: e.g.

(Laurel and Hardy 1997: 54)

(Holmes 1987:155)

If you have used the in-text method of referencing, you would give the bibliographical details in the following way:

Laurel, Stanley and Oliver Hardy. 1997. *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Holmes, O.W. 1987. "Popularity and Populism" in Klaus Enright (ed.) *Metaphysical Critiques of Cultural Anthropology* Sydney: N.S.W. University Press, 152–97.

- **Footnotes or Endnotes:** Reference to a footnote or endnote is indicated by a small superscript number, at the relevant place in the essay. Footnotes appear at the bottom of the page where the superscript number appears. Endnotes appear together at the end of the essay and before the Bibliography. The first time you refer to a text in a footnote or endnote, you must give a full reference, including page number(s). For example:

Stanley Laurel and Oliver Hardy, *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 54.

O.W. Holmes, "Popularity and Populism" in *Metaphysical Critiques of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Klaus Enright (Sydney: N.S.W. University Press, 1987), pp. 155–7.

In subsequent references, you can abbreviate:

Laurel and Hardy, p. 34.

Holmes, p.166

To make absolutely clear which text you are referring to, you may need to include an abbreviated title between the author's name and page number.

If you have used notes to acknowledge your sources, then you should use the following format in your bibliography:

Laurel, Stanley and Oliver Hardy, *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

O.W. Holmes, "Popularity and Populism". In *Metaphysical Critiques of Cultural Anthropology*. Ed. Klaus Enright. Sydney: N.S.W. University Press, 1987, pp. 152–97.

Special cases

- **Internet referencing:** Web pages should be referenced similarly to books, beginning with the author or organisation responsible for the site, year of posting on the net (if given) and the title of the homepage. The publisher and place of publication is replaced by the URL address of the page. After the URL put in parentheses the date you accessed the page. (The date is sometimes informative if the page version changes or the site disappears.) For example:

Flywheel, Wolf J. 1999. *Marxist Duck Soup*. http://www.harp&row.com/duck_soup.html (29 Feb. 2000).

- **Film and TV:** When referencing a film, video or television program, the following conventions are used:

Name of director, dir., Name of film [in italic], Studio, Date of first screening.

James Cameron, dir., *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Columbia Tristar, 1990.

WHEN YOU GET YOUR ESSAY BACK

The essay will have been given a numerical mark or a grade. The grades will usually be in the following percentage range:

High Distinction:	85–100
Distinction:	75–84
Credit:	65–74
Pass:	50–64
Conceded Pass (PC):	45–49
Fail:	Less than 45

The actual numerical marks you are awarded at this stage are scaled at the end of the unit to produce a Standardized Numerical Grade (SNG) which will appear on your results. If you are given marks during a unit for a particular piece of work, they may be changed in the process of final grade allocation.

The Academic Senate has deemed that the grades refer to the following descriptions of performance:

High Distinction: Denotes performance which meets all unit objectives in such an exceptional way and with such marked excellence that it deserves the highest level of recognition;

Distinction: Denotes performance which clearly deserves a very high level of recognition as an excellent achievement in the unit;

Credit: Denotes performance which is substantially better than would normally be expected of competent students in the unit;

Pass: Denotes performance which satisfies unit objectives;

Conceded Pass (PC): Denotes performance which meets unit objectives only marginally;

Fail: Denotes that a candidate has failed to complete a unit satisfactorily.

With your mark you should receive a final comment along with marginal notes (where applicable). These are intended to guide you to the strengths and weaknesses of your essay. However, you may want to follow this up in discussions with the tutor.

APPEALS

If you feel your essay has been incorrectly assessed, you need to discuss this with your tutor. If you are still unhappy with the mark, you may want to refer the matter to the unit convenor or to the Head of Department, for a second opinion. In most cases, however, you will find that problems can be solved relatively easily by consultation with the tutor—and that this process will be very helpful for you in further writing tasks.

If you feel you have received an incorrect grade for a unit, you should contact the unit convenor as soon as possible. If you are not satisfied, you should approach the relevant Head of Department or the Head of Division in writing.

Information about appeals against grades including deadlines for appeals is contained in the *Handbook of Undergraduate Studies*, in the “Student Information” section.

OTHER ADVICE ON WRITING ESSAYS

Macquarie University also provides a number of excellent services intended to help students with academic writing in general.

For example there are brief **Writing Skills** courses. These are usually held in May/June and August. These are designed for Australian and English speaking students. Enquiries to Sue Spinks, Department of Linguistics, phone 9850 8770, room C5A531.

There are also credit and non-credit courses on **English for Academic Purposes** for students of non-English speaking backgrounds. Enquiries to the Department of Linguistics on 98508740 or to lingadmin@ling.mq.edu.au.

There is also a **Writing Skills Advisory Service** which offers individual help. Appointments can be made through the Centre for Open Education in X5B, phone 9850 7470.

EMERGENCIES AND SPECIAL CONSIDERATION

It is also very much in your own interest to keep the university informed about any events that might adversely affect your essays, or any aspect of your study—either in terms of submission or performance.

You should notify the university of absences due to illness or misadventure, on the Advice of Absence form, available from the Student Centre.

If you are unable to submit an on-course essay by the specified date, always be sure you notify your tutor—either personally or by leaving a message with the Enquiry office. You should also apply for an extension to the submission date; this should be directed to the unit convenor.

If you are unable to complete final assignments or to sit an examination at the specified time, **you should notify the university** by sending supporting documents, an explanatory letter **and a signed “Request for Special Consideration Form”** to the Registrar’s Office. This material is held in the Registrar’s Office and a copy is forwarded to the Department, to be used in your final assessment.

Details of how to do this, and the appropriate forms can be found on the Web through the University's Homepage (www.mq.edu.au), following the links to the Registrar’s Office, and then “Forms”.

Further information about what to do in case of illness or misadventure is to be found in the Handbook of Undergraduate Studies in the “Student Information” section.

ENQUIRY OFFICE

Enquiry Office location: W6A-741
 Telephone: 9850.6783
 email: enqscmp@scmp.mq.edu.au

Enquiry Office hours:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednes-day	Thursday	Friday
9.00 – 4.30	9.00 –4.30	11.00 – 6.00	9.00 – 4.30	9.00 – 2.30
Closed 12.30 to 2pm	Closed 12.30 to 2.00	Closed 12.30 to 2	Closed 12.30 To 2	Closed 12 to 12.30

Please Note: These times are valid during semester and adhered to **as closely as possible**. Please check notice boards for hours during break times.

ALL work from students should be placed into the collection boxes located in the foyer of W6A on Level 7. All work must have a cover sheet attached, and the declaration regarding plagiarism **MUST** be signed. These cover sheets are also found in the foyer of Level 7.

When work has been marked and is ready for return to students it will be returned via tutorials or lectures and the “left-overs” go to the EO for students to collect. Students must bring their ID with

them to collect work as they may be asked for identification. This work is kept for six months and any unclaimed work is then confidential-wasted.

Academic room locations, contact details and consultation hours are displayed outside the Enquiry Office. Students should use this office as their first point of contact for the Division and information which is to be distributed to students will usually be available from the EO.