

Writing an essay: A Guide¹

1. What is an essay?

An organised collection of YOUR IDEAS about literary texts nicely written and professionally presented.

In other words, the essay must be well structured (i.e. organised) and presented in a way that the reader finds easy to follow and clear: it must look tidy and not present any obstacles to the reader. It must have a clear readable interesting style. But, above all, it must consist of your ideas about literary texts. This is the centre of it: this, and this only, gets the marks. Not quotes from critics, not generalisations at second hand about literary history, not filling and padding; your thoughts, that you have had while in the act of reading specific bits of literary texts, which can be adduced in the form of quotations to back up your arguments.

2. Why write in this way?

Learning how to write professionally

When studying literature you learn how to respond to literary texts. This is an interesting and worthwhile thing to do, but unless you become a teacher of Hebrew literature remarkably few people in later life will be interested in your thoughts about Natan Alterman. What they will be interested in (I am talking about potential employers now, but not only them) is your ability to talk, to think, and to write. This part of the course is where you learn to write: professionally. The guidelines that follow tell you how to do it, or rather how to learn to do it.

These standards may seem higher than usual for an undergraduate, (1) I believe that it is my responsibility to give you the best possible advice, not to tell you how to get by. (2) If you learn what these guidelines teach, you will get better marks in all the essays you do from now on. (3) You will learn a skill, a not-very-hard-to-learn skill, that will last you for the rest of your life.

3. Collecting the material

The first task is to get the material together. The material comes in two kinds: primary and secondary sources. Primary sources in this case are literary texts: the actual material that you work on. Secondary sources are works of criticism. Here is your Second Important Message:

It is always better to read an original text and refer to it than to read and refer to a critic. The more literary texts you read and can refer to the better. You cannot possibly read too many. Remember, the key to your essay is the number and quality of your ideas about literary texts. If you casually refer, from at least an apparent position of familiarity, to some obscure literary text, you will win the admiration of your marker. If you refer to a critic, particularly an obscure one, the chances are his or her eye will glaze over. There are exceptions to this rule, which I will mention later, but the basic principle is extremely important: original texts are better than critics, and you can not know too many.

¹ My thanks to Tom Davis and the department of English at Birmingham University for the original source of much of this material, which I have adapted.

3.1 What are critics for?

The short answer: to be disagreed with. A longer answer: reading critics can give you an idea of what the state of critical opinion is about a literary text, and to tell you about other related ideas or material because – and this is the important part - they can stimulate YOUR ideas. But, the thing to remember is: only your ideas obtain merit. Therefore, never, ever, quote a critic just to agree with him or her. Always, under all circumstances, quote a critic in the following form: Leavis says x, but I disagree as follows. Or: Leavis says x, and this is very true, but I would develop his thought. Never use a quote that announces information that is not evaluated or discussed in some way and is left then hanging in the air. This is very common in undergraduate essays, and it is simply a waste of space.

3.2 Books and articles

A secondary point about critics. They publish in two forms, books and articles. You should be familiar with the library electronic catalogue and the ways of searching it, in order to find books: it is not difficult, and if you do not know how to do it by now go immediately and find out. If you have a problem, ask librarians, they will be happy to help. Just spend half an hour simply playing with the library computer, finding out what it can do.

Articles in academic journals are not normally read by undergraduates unless they are assigned, even though they are full of interesting, original, and up-to-date ideas about literary texts. I have given you a reading list that is divided into categories. There are many articles on this list. **You should certainly look at the articles that I have considered useful and have made required reading.** These can be found in your course reader.

3.3 Using the World Wide Web

The Web has now become a fantastic resource: easily available, full of material, and with an answer to every question. However, there are problems, and you should **use the Web carefully.**

4. Reading, making notes, having ideas

When you have found the books and articles you are going to read, you will need to read them.

4.1 Making notes

The best time to have ideas is when you are reading, either a literary text or a work of criticism. This is where note-taking comes in. Do not make notes in the form of summaries, unless you need it to help you remember a plot (lecture notes are an exception to this): it is normally best to read the thing again (and get more ideas the second time round). But always, always, read with a pen and notebook to hand: read interactively. Think about what you are reading and write down your thoughts. Always. When a thought occurs under these circumstances, it will be in reaction to a piece of the text at hand: a quotation. Copy out the quote, and a page reference so you can find it

again to check it if necessary, and then put your idea underneath it. If you tie the idea in with the quote in this way, then your ideas will always be text-based!

4.2 Bibliography

For this you need a booklist, either computer-based, or in the form of a card index. A bibliography. Every book you read should have its details listed in your master book-list, your card index or computer file. Author/s, title, date, publisher, shelf mark, place of publication. I repeat: every single book and article you read should be in this list. **A section on creating a bibliography follows.**

5. Planning and structuring

So: you have gathered the material, read it, made notes, had ideas, written them down on separate slips, headed and filed them. How do you write the essay?

Like this. You gather together all of the slips you have on the topic of the essay. You read through, writing new ones and rewriting old ones if more or different ideas come to you, and making sure each of them is headed. You put the headings together in a logical order (headings, sub-headings, sub-sub-headings) on a sheet of paper in the form of an outline of the essay. You arrange the slips in order of the outline. You assemble the pile of slips, the outline, and blank paper (or a blank word-processor screen) in front of you. You write the essay, going from heading to heading and slip to slip. The essay writes itself, painlessly, because you have done most of the thinking already. On the way, you observe the following rules and wise bits of advice.

5.1 The outline

The plan you construct should be in the form of an indented outline. This is a series of headings and subheadings, indented, like this:

Main heading
subheading 1
notes on subheading 1
subheading 2
notes on subheading 2

and so on...

Behind every essay there must be a plan of that sort. This essay on essays is built from such a plan, as you can see. If you remember any lectures that use outlines, you will (I hope) remember how useful it was to have that written out in front of you so that you knew where you were in it. Now think of an examiner, having to read up to a hundred student essays. A decent level of concentration is hard to maintain. They get lost, and lose the thread, just as you do in lectures. It is essential therefore, that an outline like that must be obvious to him or her, clearly perceptible in the way the essay is written. In order to achieve this effect the easiest way is to have one, written out for your own benefit beforehand.

5.2 The paragraph

The second thing, in order to maintain and make obvious a clear structure, is to be aware of the nature of the paragraph as the basic structuring unit in the essay. Basically, every paragraph should represent and flesh out a heading or sub-heading in the outline. The paragraph is the building block of the essay. Therefore:

- It should be at least a third to half a page in length, but not too long or the reader will get lost. No one-sentence paragraphs! They give the impression that you do not read a lot. It is not good to give that impression.
- It should have what is known as a topic sentence, near the beginning, that announces the theme of the paragraph. The paragraph should not deviate from this theme or introduce any new themes.
- The first sentence should somehow be linked to, or contrast with, the last sentence of the previous paragraph.
- The first paragraph should announce clearly the theme of the essay. Explain what you are going to do in the essay, it will help keep you the writer and me the marker on track! I can measure if you have in fact managed to complete the task that you have set out for yourself.
- The last paragraph is not so important. You can proudly announce that you have fulfilled the aims of the first paragraph, if you like, or you can just end: it is up to you.

But the main thing is to make each paragraph a solid unit that develops a clearly announced sub-theme of the essay. This way the indented outline that is behind it will be obvious (not too obvious: do not write subheadings before every paragraph) and the marker will not have that terrible lost feeling that immediately precedes giving the essay a low mark in disgust.

6. Presentation

Behind everything I have said so far there are two themes. One, just to repeat it yet one more time, in case you might have formed the idea that I do not think it is important, is: your ideas about literary texts are what matters. The other is this: Always put the reader first.

Up to now, most of the writing you have done has been for people who are paid to read what you have written. They have no choice: they have to do it. After you leave here, most of the writing you will do (in the course of your working lives) will be writing you are paid to do for other people. They will not, on the whole, have to read it: if they do not follow it or feel offended by its scruffy presentation or even are having an off-day and are not instantly seduced by its beauty and clarity, they will just throw it away and do something else instead.

University professors are somewhat in between these two classes. On the one hand, they are in fact paid to read your essays. On the other, if you can imagine the sheer labour of having to read a large number of long assessed essays on the same topic, you can imagine that no-one really likes doing it. It is extremely hard work, and they would normally

rather be doing something else. Therefore, if they are not immediately seduced by the clarity and beauty of the thing they are reading, they may get irritated. If this happens, they can not throw it away and do something else, so they will get even more irritated. The end product of this will be: a lousy mark. Or, at least a worse mark than you would otherwise get, even if the ideas are good. This is a good thing, in fact, because you can use it to train you to ALWAYS PUT THE READER FIRST. Therefore, make your essay as beautiful, compelling, and as professionally presented as possible, is my advice. Here are some guidelines.

6.1. The list of works consulted

Every essay without exception should end with a list of books and articles used. Often a marker will look at this first, to see what kind of work you have done: where, as it were, you are coming from. On the whole and within reason, the longer this is, the better. As long, that is, as you can reasonably show that you have indeed used the works on the list.

6.2. Styling references

This list should be set out in a particular and consistent way. More information is available on this in the **bibliography** section of this guide.

A *Style Guide* will help you to make decisions about full stops, hyphens, abbreviations, spelling, capitalisations, footnotes, endnotes, bibliographies, the use of slang and other stylistic aspects of presentation. There are a number of different ones, but select a text designed for style questions in the humanities.

6.3. Type the work

Take some time to get the layout right. Double space, with an extra space between paragraphs. **Number the pages** and put in a header with the short title of the essay and your name in it. Write in a 12 point font, and usually Times New Roman, **And: make sure you use the spelling checker, before you print it.**

A note on safe computing. While you are actually working on a document, it is held in RAM. All that you need to know about this is that RAM is volatile. This means that if a passing friend trips over the power cable, pulling it out of the wall, the computer will go down, and everything in RAM will vanish utterly for ever. What you will lose is everything you created since you last saved to disk. Moral: save to disk frequently. At least every ten minutes. Secondly, you should develop the feeling that whenever you switch the computer off, you are doing a dangerous thing. Dangerous to your data, that is. When you switch it on again, there is no guarantee whatsoever that it will come up and present you with your work. It might crash. It probably will be alright, it is quite unlikely that anything bad will happen, but nonetheless this is the time of maximum danger for your essay. Computers break! They get stolen! **Everything gone for ever!**

As a result, do not switch off the computer without making sure that all the data on it that you need is backed up! Never. Ever. Copy onto floppy disks or zip disks or cds or the internet. Make two or even three copies. If I feel really nervous about losing something, I print the file out on to paper, as a final security. I really advise you to do the same.

6.4. Print on one side of the paper only

6.5. Spelling and punctuation

Spelling: Why you should do it correctly!

There is a simple but unpleasant rule about this.

If you produce work that is mis-spelt and/or badly punctuated and/or ungrammatical, however good the ideas are, people will tend to think that you are stupid.

They will be wrong; it will just mean that you cannot spell, or cannot punctuate, or do not know some of the grammar rules. Nonetheless, that is what they will think. Since it will usually be in your best interests to show that you are intelligent, rather than stupid, if you have a problem in any of these areas you should do something about it. If you have a word processor, get a spelling checker. Persuade someone you know who can spell, punctuate, etc. to read over your work first and check it: go to the writing centre in Humanities, learn the sort of mistakes you make, and do not make them again!

6.6 Handing it in.

Remember your name, the question you are answering, page numbers and clip the pages together.

7. How to write

Style is not something I can prescribe in a set of notes like this. Write well: if you have any problems in this direction, it is for your professor to tell you about them. But here are a few random points instead.

Register

This is what linguists call a style appropriate to the occasion. Be aware: a certain scholarly gravity is called for. Not too heavy so that it is uninteresting. But avoid colloquial abbreviations: should not, not shouldn't. Jokes are hazardous: if they do not work, they can cost you a lot. Avoid them on the whole. 4 U 2 Rite in TXT or IM is NEVER APPROPRIATE. Do not for goodness sake imitate the way I am writing here, either the rather flippant colloquial style or the somewhat overbearing tone, or the numbered subheadings. This is an essay on how to write a literary essay, not a literary essay.

Quotations

Firstly, quote sufficiently but not too copiously. Not more than a third of any page at the very outside, and usually just a few lines at a time. It is your thought, not the quotation that is the point. On the other hand, never forget that **your ideas should be tied firmly into the text**, and that you should demonstrate this by quotation. Secondly, **always** give page numbers for your quotations: you will need to know where to find them again. **A short quotation of just a few words should be marked with inverted commas “ ”. A longer quotation, of two lines or more should be indented. This means that it should**

be marked separately from the text. It does not have “” unless they are part of the original text.

Footnotes/ Endnotes

References for the material which you have cited as evidence are indicated where the material appears but will either follow at the bottom of the page, (footnotes) or at the end of the entire paper (endnotes). Only one form needs to be used. Other material that may appear here is additional information that does not directly follow the argument in the paragraph but indicates relevance to the aspect you are citing. Each separate citation has a different number. These numbers go in sequence, ie. 1, 2, 3 etc. **To add footnotes to a text, if you are using Microsoft Word: Insert – Reference – Footnote – Insert.** This will automatically add a new reference for you each time. These will be in sequence. Here is an example:

Q. I am still trying to grasp the whole idea of footnotes using *CMOS*. Do I put a footnote after everything that I use out of a book even if it's not a quote? For example, I am writing a paper on Thomas Jefferson and in one of the books, I'm using it states that he had six sisters and a younger brother. Do I need to cite that in a footnote?

A. Not necessarily, if you believe that the information about Jefferson's siblings is generally known and mentioned in many sources. You should footnote information that you borrow from someone else that isn't common knowledge, whether you quote it or not; and if any of the information is disputed (for instance, if some sources say that Jefferson had seven sisters), it's a good idea to footnote the version that supports your statement. Even if you don't footnote general information about Jefferson in your text, you should list the source you learned it from in your bibliography.

The idea of footnotes is to acknowledge where you got your information, both in order to give credit to the researchers who did the work and in order to tell your readers where they can find the information. Everyone knows that George Washington was the first president, so even if you read it somewhere, there are so many sources that say so that it doesn't make sense to give credit to a particular one.

It's not always clear whether something should be cited or not, so until you develop some confidence, be generous in your citations, without being silly.¹

1 From the *Chicago Manual of Style Online* Q & A December/January 2006/7

<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

This style guide advises the correct way of writing in terms of punctuation, grammar etc. It is not concerned with content. There is a special section of Questions and Answers (Q &A) that is posted each month to answer tricky enquiries not covered by the book.

Length

Every assignment will always have a length guide in words or pages. As you will have kept to the correct font size and spacing, this means that there is an amount of work that you are expected to do, that is the same for every student. Therefore, so not go widely outside these boundaries by writing too much or too little.

Copy it

Always keep a copy of any essay you hand in. Academics are very unreliable and, not uncommonly lose essays.

8. Getting it back

Here is a summary of things to keep in your mind about writing an essay. When I mark an essay, they are the things that I particularly look out for:

- Use of critics
 - Range of reference to literary texts,
 - Clear and perceptible structure
 - Interesting ideas tied in to quotations
 - The paragraph:
1. Length
 2. Topic sentence
 3. First sentence, last sentence
 4. First paragraph (sets out themes)
 - List of works consulted (properly styled)
 - Quotations properly laid out, and references styled properly
 - One side of the paper only
 - Spelling and punctuation
 5. Other paragraphs
 - One idea per paragraph, is it supported and explained
 - Relevance of paragraph for overall argument.
 6. Conclusion

A set of marking criteria is in the course reader.

If you still have questions, problems, want me to see a draft of your essay or to discuss any ideas that you may be having about the texts – before the essay is due – then please come and find me. I have office hours. If you cannot make these times, please email me, I will be happy to set up an appointment at a time convenient to us both.

Good Luck, and enjoy the process of thinking!

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