

# GUIDE TO ESSAY WRITING

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# 1. ADVICE ON ESSAY WRITING

## Reading Material

Start to read for your essay early. There is a large number of students wanting to use the books and photocopies in the library. You are likely to run into difficulties if you delay readings until the week when the essay is due.

If you cannot find the readings listed in the Subject Guide, search the library for other readings. Obviously not *all* relevant readings have been listed in the Subject Guide. However, when you search for additional readings, pay attention to when something was written. If you use “old” material for your essay you might be accused of presenting outdated evidence or outdated explanations.

Look at what authors are mentioned in articles and books you read. Use the list of references at the end of an article to locate additional reading material.

Do not assume that what you read is necessarily the “truth” just because it has been put in print. Take a sceptical attitude to what you read and do not be too easily convinced. A complex reference may need to be read several times: once for a general understanding, a second time for a detailed analysis, and again to synthesise and check one’s analysis. Write down in your own words what the main questions or problems that the author examines are. What are the key concepts and how are they defined? Are they used ambiguously? Is the author speculating about what might be the case or does the author provide some sort of evidence to support his or her arguments? Is the evidence from the author's own research or from research carried out by others? What sort of evidence is it? This does not mean that you should be super-critical. It does mean that you should be cautious about accepting what you read. Remember that your tutor will evaluate your essay in the same terms: Is it a reasoned argument grounded in empirical evidence?

## Note taking

Take notes in moderation. Do not copy large chunks. This is usually unnecessary for your essay and is time-consuming. Note down the general points that the author makes and do not record detailed data unless it is crucial to the preparation of your essay. So long as you indicate in your notes the type of data presented in a reference, you can always go back to the sources.

When note-taking always note full bibliographic details. It is easiest to do this at the top of the first page. It is sometimes helpful to jot down what you sought from the reading at the top of the page (e.g. a view of ‘culture’ or on the ‘concept of class’), and what the author sought to deal with (‘Australia’s multicultural policy’ or ‘Gender relations in Malaysia’).

Make sure that you distinguish between the views of the author and comments or thoughts that occur to you whilst note-taking that may be useful when it comes to planning your essay. Distinguish such comments by using different coloured ink, indenting or enclosing your comments in square brackets.

Always record the page number next to each point that you note from the reference - the left-hand margin is a good place. This will help you to find passages again if you need to check them and helps you to cite your source of information accurately in your essay.

## Organisation of Your Essay

Use headings to organise your essay. Look at your readings and note how authors use headings and sub-headings to signal what issues they will discuss. Also note how authors use “introduction” and “conclusion” paragraphs to help their readers understand what it is all about. In the introductory paragraphs of your essay, tell your reader how you are going to approach the essay topic and define the concepts you are going to use. In the conclusion to your essay, pull together the strands of your argument into a synopsis. What is your answer to the essay question, expressed in a few words? Provide a summary of the different points you have discussed in your essay. Also mention if there are any areas which need more evidence before it is possible to reach any firm conclusion. Do not, however, introduce new empirical material into the conclusion.

## Referencing

It is very important that you reference your sources of information. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, your reader might want to follow up some issue you have mentioned and wants to know where you read about it. Secondly, if you do not acknowledge that you got an idea from somebody else you are in fact plagiarising. You are claiming that it is *your* idea when that is not true.

We prefer you to use the “in text” (or “Harvard”) system of referencing rather than the footnote system because it is easier for both readers and writers. The reader sees immediately what your source of information is, and you are saved the trouble of fitting footnotes at the bottom of each page. You will find minor variations in the style of referencing. Find a style you are comfortable with, provided it resembles these examples, and use it *consistently*.

Here are some examples of how to reference:

**i)** Brown (1971) suggests that it is important to recognise the influence of social class upon attitudes to appropriate behaviours for boys and girls.

This example demonstrates how to acknowledge an “idea” you have read about in the literature ... you use the word “suggests”.

**ii)** Brown (1971) shows that middle class parents have different attitudes to sex-appropriate behaviours than working class parents.

This example demonstrates how to acknowledge “evidence” ... you use the word “shows”. It is important that you note whether an author suggests that something *might* be the case, as compared to when the author actually provides some research *evidence* to support the suggestion that there is a relationship between social class and attitudes to sex roles.

**iii)** Several studies have found that middle class parents have different sex role expectations than working class parents (Brown, 1971; Jones, 1975; Oliver, 1979).

**OR**

Middle class parents tend to have different sex role expectations than working class parents (Brown, 1971; Jones, 1975; Oliver, 1979).

This example demonstrates how to acknowledge several authors at the same time. When several authors are referenced, your argument is made “stronger”, because you show that many studies have provided relevant evidence.

**iv)** There are several factors which seem to affect parents’ attitudes to sex-appropriate behaviour: the social class of the parents (Brown, 1971), the age of the child (Lyn, 1976), the birth order of the child (Rosensmith, 1980), and the mother's workforce participation (Jones, 1982).

This example demonstrates how to reference several studies which cover different issues.

**v)** Brown (1971: 93) found that two-thirds of middle class parents expect their daughters to acquire tertiary qualifications.

**OR**

Two-thirds of middle class parents expect their daughters to acquire tertiary qualifications (Brown, 1971: 93).

When you refer to a particular research finding you must give the page number so that the reader can check the accuracy of your statement.

**vi)** According to Brown (1971: 37), parents expect higher achievements of sons than daughters.

When a specific statement is being used it would be difficult for your reader to find exactly where in a book or article Brown made the statement. It is therefore important to provide the page number.

**vii)** According to Brown, when parents talk about their children “daughters are spoken of in more passive terms than are sons” (1971: 63).

**OR**

When parents talk about their children “daughters are spoken of in more passive terms than are sons” (Brown, 1971: 63).

When you give a verbatim quote you must give the page number and use quotation marks.

**viii)** According to Brown,

Middle class parents generally express views that they treat their children in the same way, regardless of sex. However, an analysis of the words used by parents when talking about their children shows that daughters are spoken of in more passive terms than are sons (1971: 63).

When quotes are longer than three lines you should indent the quote, not use quotation marks.

**ix)** According to Goldthorpe et al. (1964), there has not been an embourgeoisement of the working class.

When there are more than two authors you can refer to them by using the first author + et al.

x) According to Brown (1971: 33), Connell found in his study of working class parents that ...

**OR**

Connell found that working class parents tend to have lower aspirations for their children than middle class parents (cited in Brown, 1971: 33).

When you do not consult the original source you may use this type of referencing. It is of course best to trace the original source but if you have not done so, make this clear.

xi) Surveys indicate that about 90 per cent of married women holding part-time jobs do not want to work more hours (ABS, *The Labour Force*, August 1982), and among married women not in the workforce but wanting a job, over 80 per cent would prefer part-time work (ABS, *Persons Not in the Labour Force*, September 1982).

This is an example of referencing to official statistics. ABS stands for the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

**The use of quotations:** Students often feel that other writers have expressed ideas and arguments so much better than they themselves could possibly do. So they select lots of good quotations from their readings and the whole essay ends up being a string of quotations. As a result, your tutor finds it difficult to assess whether you have in fact understood the readings. So, as a rule, only use verbatim quotes when they are really spot on. For the rest, re-phrase the ideas in your own words and provide references to your sources of information.

**The use of lecture notes:** Do not refer to your lecture notes. They may be wrong because somehow you misunderstood what was said. Go to the sources the lecturers mentioned and refer to these directly.

### List of References

At the end of your essay you should attach an alphabetically ordered list of the references you have used, headed "References". Do **not** include books and articles you have not referred to in the text. The examples here show you how to provide full bibliographical details for different kinds of publications.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (1982), *The Labour Force, August 1982*, Cat. No. 6201.2.

Edwards, Anne (1983), "Sex Roles: A Problem for Sociology and for Women", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 19, 3, pp. 385-412.

Goudsblom, Johan, E.L. Jones and Stephen Mennell (1989), *Human History and Social Process*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Hiller, Peter (1973a), "Social Reality and Social Stratification", *Sociological Review* 21, 1, pp. 77-99.

Hiller, Peter (1973b), "The Subjective Dimension of Social Stratification: The Case of the Self-Identification Question", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 9, 1, pp. 14-21.

Mennell, Stephen (1990), "The Sociological Study of History: Institutions and Social Development" in C.G.A. Bryant and H.A. Becker (eds), *What Has Sociology Achieved?* London: Macmillan, pp. 54-68.

Office of the Status of Women (1985), *Equality for Women at Work; A Survey of 10 OECD Countries*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Probert, Belinda (1978), *Beyond Orange and Green: The Political Economy of the Northern Ireland Crisis*, London: Zed Press.

Svensson, Ulla (1985), "The Social Wage: Restructuring of Family Relationships" in National Status of Women Committee, United Nations Association of Australia (eds), *Women and the Year 2000*.

When you use a chapter in an edited book, do **not** refer to the editors of the book. Refer to the author of that particular chapter. Note the example of Mennell above.

When you use a journal article it is important to state the volume number, the issue number and page numbers. In the example of Edwards above, 19 refers to the volume number and 3 means that the article was published in the third issue published that year. A bound volume of a journal may have a thousand pages so it is important to give clear directions on how to find the relevant article.

## Non-Sexist Language

Try to avoid sex-specific terms when what you say actually refers to both sexes. For example, you can put sentences into the plural, using “they” instead of “he”.

A worker faced by new technology may feel that his skills are being devalued.

Workers faced by new technology may feel that their skills are being devalued.

A worker faced by new technology may feel that his or her skills are being devalued.

And do not assume that all authors are male! The readings listed in this Subject Guide spell out the full names of the authors so you can easily find out the sex of each author.

Further advice can be obtained from the *Style Manual* issued by the Australian Government Publishing Service, copies of which are available in the library. The Fourth Edition (1988) contains a chapter specially devoted to sexism in the English language, and how to avoid it (Chapter 8, pp. 111-127).

## Use of Tables and Graphs

It is sometimes a good idea to insert tables in your essay to show that there is empirical evidence to support your arguments. However, do not merely put in the tables. Also discuss in the text what the tables show and mention some of the figures. It is not the reader’s task to interpret the tables; the writer should tell the reader what to “see” in the table. For instance, you might write:

As the figures in Table 1 show, women constituted a larger section of the workforce in 1982 than in 1966, 37 per cent compared to 30 per cent.

Instead of duplicating a table you could make a photocopy of it and that would take up less space in your essay. Underneath the table you must tell where you obtained it, for instance:

Source: Eccles, 1984: 23

## Readability of the Essay

Type your essay (double spaced) or write very clearly.

Provide a title page which states: your name, your tutor’s name, the day and hour of your tutorial, the essay topic.

Write on one side of the paper only. Leave space between paragraphs. Number the pages.

Leave a left hand margin of at least 4cm to provide space for your tutor’s comments.

If you make mistakes, use correction fluid instead of crossing out the mistakes. Always proof read your essay.

It is increasingly common that students submit essays typed on a word processor. Although such an essay looks tidy and neat it is difficult to read and mark if single-spacing is used or each page is crammed with text. Please be considerate of your tutor and hand in work that follows the rules stated above.

Keep a copy of your essay for your own records.

## Help with Essay Writing

There is a Language and Learning Unit in the Faculty of Arts which runs *short courses on essay writing* throughout the year. Each course consists of two one-hour classes a week for four weeks. Students may register for these courses in Room 127, Menzies Building (Ext.52263). The courses are advertised in the Daily News.

Two very helpful books about essay writing are:

Betts, Katharine and Anne Seitz (1986), *Writing Essays in the Social Sciences*, Melbourne: Thomas Nelson.  
U808.042 B565W

Clanchy, J. and B. Ballard (1981), *Essay Writing for Students: A Guide for Arts and Social Science Students*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.  
U808.042 C587E

Copies are available in both the library and the bookshop.

## 2. DEPARTMENTAL POLICY ON PLAGIARISM

Essay writing is an essential part of the learning process and a vital medium through which we can assess your understanding of the subject. The essay must therefore be ***your own work***. This does not mean that you should not make extensive use of the work of others. However, when you quote or paraphrase the explanations of material from others sources, ***you must acknowledge your sources in full***. You may seek the help of your tutor in preparing the essay and might enlist the help of fellow students in sorting out your ideas but ***the final essay must be written by you in your own words***.

***Plagiarism*** occurs when students fail to acknowledge that ideas have been borrowed. Specifically, it occurs when:

- a. phrases and passages are used verbatim without quotation marks and without a reference to the author;
- b. an author's work is paraphrased and presented without a reference;
- c. other students' essays are copied;
- d. essays are written in conjunction with other students (without prior permission);
- e. an essay has already been submitted for assessment in another Subject.

Plagiarism is an attempt to obtain academic advantage. Students suspected of plagiarism will be given the opportunity to explain their plagiarism in the company of their tutor and the Subject coordinator.

The following hints will help you avoid plagiarism:

1. Take accurate notes. Distinguish in your notes between your own ideas and the ideas of other writers.
2. In your notes, as well as essays, place quotation marks around all material that is copied out directly and note the source.
3. Footnote any idea that is not yours even if it is paraphrased or summarised and does not appear in quotation marks.
4. Even when receiving advice from fellow students, formulate the final product by yourself.

Students reported to the Dean might in turn be reported to the University Discipline Committee.

University policy on plagiarism and other forms of cheating is outlined in Part II of Statute 4.1 of the Statutes of the University (*Monash University Calendar 1990*, Vol. II, pp. 5/24-50). If you are at all uncertain about what is required consult your tutor.