

Hints For Effective Essay Writing

Essays form an integral part of your history programme and your success in all history modules will depend on your ability to express yourself effectively in writing. To do this, precise thinking and careful organisation are essential. This means that attention must be given not only to content, but also to presentation, notably spelling, grammar and style. There is useful information on good essay writing practice at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/keyskills>

Before You Start To Write

Make sure you understand the essay title before starting to collect material. If you are uncertain, consult either your tutor or classmates. Think carefully about the question before you even start your reading. Underline key words, and add your own initial comments. Get it into your head. What is it getting at? Then, when you read, you will have a better idea of what you are looking for.

Reading

First read one of the recommended textbooks to get an overview. Then turn to more specialised works, taking the module reading lists and other bibliographies as starting points. However, researching an essay does not simply mean hunting for books and reading them. It means exploiting them with definite questions in mind. This requires you to be selective and to develop the ability to absorb key chapters or sections of a book.

Note taking

Essays should not be written from open books, but from notes made while reading. There are various methods of note taking: small cards or pieces of paper with one point to each card is one method. Continuous notes on a sheet of A4 as you read is another. But whatever your preferred method, always take notes that are full enough to provide you with the evidence you need, but concise and selective enough to be manageable for the purposes of reference and revision.

Planning

Having read as much of your prescribed reading as possible, organise your thoughts. Identify the important factors as they occur to you, continuously defining and refining your perception of the topic so that you develop a coherent thesis. Look again at the question after you've taken your notes. Has your understanding of it changed as a result of all that reading? You now need to begin planning: allow the question itself to suggest a broad overall essay structure to you. Then construct an essay plan outlining your thesis in a logical manner. Is your plan strong, systematic and interesting? If not, you may need to adjust it. Can you summarise your main line of argument in a few sentences (a good test of a clear mind)?

Writing the Essay

The essay should have three (unequal) parts: an introduction, main text, and conclusion.

Introduction

The essay should begin with an introductory paragraph that sets out the problem that the essay is to discuss, or the question that it is going to try to answer. In addition, make sure the introduction is clear, indicating the historical and (where appropriate) historiographical context of the question.

Main text

This should explain in a logical way the reasons why you hold your particular thesis. Each paragraph devoted to one particular point should have an obvious link to the question, and developing sentences that expand on the idea with which you opened the paragraph, and supporting sentences that reinforce your view, including your factual/historiographical evidence.

Conclusion

A final paragraph should summarise and unify your arguments. It should remind the reader of the validity of your argument and why your particular interpretation is accepted.

Language and Presentation

Good academic writing is precise. Your essay will be marked on the basis of your interpretation/argument, including its coherence, balance, relevance and originality, your depth of knowledge and use of detail, and (except in the case of students with dyslexia) your presentation—language, fluency, clarity, grammar and spelling, and bibliography (including method of citation). Try to use words that express your intention exactly, keeping your language clear and to the point. Try to avoid generalisations such as ‘the people’ or ‘society’ unless you are certain that they are appropriate.

Length

The length of tutorial essays will be stipulated by individual tutors. Unless otherwise stated, assessed work at Level I is expected to be 1,500-2,000 words. Assessed essays at Level II should normally be 2,500 words long. At Level 3, 3,000 words is the length. Remember that length is not a virtue in itself, and that your essay may be marked down for excessive length.

Documentation

Many of the ideas presented in your essay will derive from other sources—from class readings or other materials you have found in the library, on the Internet, etc. It is necessary that the sources for these ideas be acknowledged. All quoted material should be acknowledged as outlined below in the section on references. Quotations from sources can be effective if they are short, highly relevant, and when they do not interrupt the flow of the argument you are trying to make; long block quotations strung together by a few of your own sentences do not make an effective essay. In general, quoted material should be used sparingly, since it is best to train yourself to write what you think in your own words. All quoted material must be inside quotation marks, otherwise you are committing the offence of **Plagiarism** (see 6.10 below), for which you will be penalised.

Endnotes and Footnotes

Notes may be placed either at the bottom of the page, or at the end of the essay. The order is author’s initials and surname, title of the work, place and date of publication. In subsequent references, a shorter version may be used. Follow the School’s *Guide for Bibliography and References*, Appendix 9.1 at the back of this Handbook.

Presentation

Essays must be typed or word-processed. There are computers available in the Seamus Heaney Library and other locations in the University.

Revision

If time permits, put your essay away and read it again the next day. Ask yourself if you have effectively answered the question. Is your argument clear and logical? Be sure to proof-read for spelling and punctuation. It might be helpful to show the essay to a friend or family member who knows nothing about the subject to indicate what s/he does not understand and therefore requires clarification.

Bibliography

All works consulted should be indicated in the bibliography, including electronic sources. Follow the *School's Guide for Bibliography and References, Appendix 9.1* at the back of this Handbook.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism can be described broadly as copying the work of another and passing it off as one's own. You are deemed guilty of plagiarism if you submit written work for assessment that has been copied either directly or with only minor changes of working from books, articles, the Internet, or another student's work without acknowledgement and reference. This is both unethical and equivalent to cheating at examinations and illegal under copyright laws. Plagiarism also reveals an unwillingness to think for oneself, being therefore diametrically opposed to the spirit of university studies. Direct copying from a book, an article, or a site on the Internet without adequate acknowledgement and references will therefore be penalised. See our advice on using internet sources in Section 6.3.

Submitted written work must be the result of your own efforts. The Assessed Coursework/Essay work form requires you to sign a declaration declaring that the work is your own.

Plagiarism is viewed as a serious breach of the University's examination regulations. The University's General Regulations define plagiarism as 'passages from other works (or a paraphrase of such) incorporated without acknowledgement and with the intention of it being taken to be the candidate's own work' (see University Calendar, Book I, *General Regulations*) and stipulates strict penalties for violations.

The School of History is committed to upholding the highest standards of scholarship and will not tolerate violations of this fundamental rule.

Useful Study Guides, Writing Manuals, and Introductions to History

Arnold, J. H., *History: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2000)

Black, J. and D. M. MacRaild, *Studying history* (2nd edn, London, 2000)

Carr, E. H., *What is history?* with new introduction by R. Evans (London, 2001)

Elton, G. R., *The practice of history* (London, 1987)

Evans, R. J., *In defence of history* (London, 1997)

Jordanova, L., *History in practice* (London, 2000)

Marwick, A., *The new nature of history: knowledge, evidence, language* (London, 2001)

Tosh, J., *The pursuit of history* (3rd edn, London, 2000)