The Writing Place Guide to Essay Writing

Everything you ever wanted to know about writing & exams but were afraid to ask

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1. Preparation

This guide will walk you through the best way to approach an essay, especially if you're having trouble working out what you're meant to be doing, or why you keep getting bad grades even after you've put in a lot of work. It deals with the most common student problems, so scan through and look for things that have been bothering you.

The trick to a good essay is to prepare for it properly. If you just sit down and start writing, the essay you produce won't get you the grades you deserve.

1.1 How should I prepare to write my essay? How much time should I leave?

Read the question, and;

- Work out what it wants you to do.
- Work out what you think, whether you think it for a good reason, and what you need to read.
- Do all the **appropriate** reading.
- Work out what roughly you're going to say.
- Write an essay plan.

This whole process will take you around five days or so at a minimum. Look at the topic and start thinking about these steps, even if you don't write anything down, as soon as you get the essay; this will make the whole process easier. Try and be finished with the first draft of the essay at least two days before you hand it in. Most of the work that changes a half decent essay into a well-received piece of work is done in the final editing stages, and editing is very difficult to do that unless you've put it to one side and not looked at it for a day or two; often, you just won't see the forest for the trees.

1.2 General tips

- Since all your essays are typed, there are spelling and grammar checks built into whatever program you're using. **Use them**. Spelling mistakes look extremely bad, since it makes you look like you don't care.
- Nothing beats reading the essay out to yourself for seeing if it sounds right.
- Referencing wrongly will **always** lose you marks, and there's nothing more irritating than losing out on a decent grade because of it.
- Most importantly – if you are having trouble, **ASK FOR HELP**. The lecturers and tutors are there to help you. Waiting for comments is leaving it until it's too late.

2. The Question

2.1 What am I being asked to do? Shouldn't I Just read everything I can and then start?

DO NOT just start reading. Reading everything and not understanding most of it is much worse than reading relatively little, but reading exactly what you're meant to be reading. Extra stuff around the topic will often just confuse you, and won't be relevant to the question itself.

As a general guide, you need to be able to answer the following;

1. What are the parts of the question? How many things is it asking you to do, and what are they?

2. What concepts will you need to define to write the essay? What are the central ideas and terms being used in the question?

3. Identify the difference between the relevant views. Remember, as an academic you are not meant to have an opinion unless you have given evidence for that opinion, and not to take anyone else's opinion unless it has enough evidence behind it.

2.2 What is the difference between a claim and an argument? What counts as evidence?

A claim is something that could be either true or untrue, depending on the evidence. Most of the things you are used to saying are claims. Claims are unacceptable on their own; for example, saying 'democracy is the best system of government', 'the level of poverty in South Africa is lower than it was 20 years ago', 'Macbeth is a tragedy', and 'human societies began in the middle east' are all claims, since they do not give argumetns or evidence for themselves.

An argument is a claim that makes logical sense and leave no room for other interpretations. For example, these are arguments;

- If the government spends money on roads, it will not be able to spend that money on welfare.
- Lady Macbeth is the real villain, since without her Macbeth would not have killed Duncan.
- Although the media is commonly supposed to be biased, it is controlled very tightly by libel laws, and so the situation is not as bad as it often seems.

Evidence is material that supports a claim and helps create an argument. Depending on what discipline you are in, this can be a quote from the text, a statement of historical fact, quantitative evidence from tests you have done, or any other kind of proof. What matters is that evidence is total; you cannot simply use whatever fits your argument at the time. Instead, you must make sure that the evidence you use leads to only one interpretation of the data. If you are not sure, you should ask a tutor or lecturer. In each subject, evidence is the **most important** part of your essay, so make sure that what you are using to support your argujment counts as evidence as far as your tutor is concerned.

2.3 What does the question mean?

Word(s)	What they mean
Account for	Explain and give reasons for. This is more than just describing in detail; you must explain how and why a thing happens, not simply what it is.
Analyse	Break down into parts, then discuss the parts and show how they relate.
Assess	Consider the value or importance of something. Pay attention to positive, negative and uncertain aspects, and use references to back up your claims.
Argue	Make a case for or against some given point of view. This must be based on evidence.
Comment on	Very vague, but it means more than 'describe' or 'summarise' and probably means 'analyse' or 'assess'.
Compare	Identify the characteristics or qualities two or more things have in common (but probably pointing out their differences as well).
Contrast	Point out the differences between two things (but probably point out their similarities as well).
Define	Give the meaning or interpretation of something, in detail and in specific reference to a given context.
Describe	Spell out the main aspects of an idea, topic, or how a series of things happened.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument. Examine key points and possible interpretations, give reasons for and against, and draw a conclusion.
Evaluate	Judge something according to how true it is. Like 'assess'.
Examine	Present in depth and investigate the implications of your presentation.
Explain	Show how things work or how they came to be. Very similar to 'describe' and 'analyse'.
To what extent . . .?	Explore the case for a stated claim, much in the manner of 'assess' and 'criticise', but focusing on how far the idea goes and what it misses out.
How Far	Similar to 'to what extent . . .?'
Identify	Pick out the key features of something, making clear the criteria you use.
Illustrate	Similar to 'explain', but asking for more specific examples or statistics, or possibly the drawing of maps, graphs, sketches, etc.
Interpret	Explain something, showing how the thing relates to a particular topic.
Justify	Give strong reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion, usually also arguing a case.
Outline	Give the main features of a topic or event in a clear structure or framework.
Prove	Demonstrate the truth of something by giving unquestionable evidence and a logical sequence leading from evidence to conclusion.
Review	Survey a topic, with the emphasis on 'assess' rather than 'describe' (see above).
State	Express the main points of an idea or topic.
Summarise	State the main features of an argument, with the minimum of necessary detail.

2.4 What does critically analyse mean?

'Critical' means look at without prejudice, and 'analyse' means break down into parts. To critically analyse a given topic, you must look at both sides of the question, not just investigate the one you think is correct. Many students fail or underperform because they do not consider the other side of the question, so be careful about this.

You must also and show that you've gone through all the important material, without missing any major areas of the topic. This doesn't mean you have to have read everything in detail, but you must show that you are at least aware of what's in the readings.

2.5 What's the difference between objective and subjective? Why does it matter?

Objective means trying to take all the facts and perspectives into consideration. Subjective is looking at something from one point of view. You are used to giving a subjective description, based on your reaction to the text. This is no longer acceptable; to really investigate a question, you must distance yourself from it as much as possible. Remember, **your personal opinion is unacceptable**; the only opinions that are acceptable are ones that are the result of looking carefully at the claims, arguments and evidence that you have found in your research.

2.6 What resources will I need?

Before you jump into the essay, you should take a few minutes to work out what resources you need and what subjects you should cover. This is true even in exams – when you see the question, you should spend a few minutes writing down all the important ideas, events and entities involved – that way, you won't accidentally miss any because you get too carried away. It is far more important to cover everything you're meant to cover than to cover a part of it extremely well; if a topic has three parts, and you answer one in incredible detail, no matter how good the essay is, you will still fail for not answering the question.

2.7 Why is it important to define my terms, and how should I do it?

If you can't explain something simply, then you probably don't understand it. More importantly, there are lots of ways of defining major terms, and just using the word doesn't show that you understand what it means. You need to give specific definitions of the major ideas and subjects in the essay. This DOES NOT mean giving someone else's definition, or quoting from somewhere; you must be able to write out what a word means IN YOUR OWN WORDS.

More importantly, lots of important words mean very different thing depending on who's saying them; for example, what democracy, justice, or poetic mean depends largely on what the person is trying to say about them. You need to show what interpretation of these words you're using.

3. Structure

3.1 How do I structure my essay?

Overall: Any essay must have the following four sections;

- An introduction (where you say what your argument is, and how you'll be proving it),
- A body (broken into at least three distinct paragraphs, each of which explains one point, giving reason and evidence),
- A summary (where you briefly state the arguments you've used)
- A conclusion (in which you make a final argument based on your summaries)

Remember to consider both sides of the argument. Whatever conclusion you reach, you will need clear, direct evidence for your point of view. Also, EVERY section of the essay must relate obviously to both the question and the introduction. If you find yourself saying something that is not obviously directly relevant to the question, you need to either change it or remove it.

Each paragraph: For each paragraph, you should be able to do the following;

- Summarise the point in a single sentence.
- say what evidence you will be using to make your point (reference/argument).
- show how it leads from the last point and into the next one.

3.2 How long should paragraphs be?

A paragraph should be between five lines and half a page long. Any shorter, and it should probably be a part of the paragraph before or after; much longer, and you're probably making more than one point in the paragraph, in which case you need to separate it out.

3.3 What is a topic sentence?

A topic sentence is a summary of the point you are making. You should be able to describe each paragraph with one of these sentences; a list of these sentences forms the body of your conclusion. Each paragraph should then be an investigation of one of these sentences, giving proof for the claim that you are making – see 2.4 for what counts as evidence.

For example, these are topic sentences, each of which is acceptable as a main point:

- South Africa's world role has suffered economic and political decline.
- The South African constitution is under threat.
- The influence of human behaviour makes planning difficult.
- Given the relative advantages and disadvantages of the different operating systems, Windows 7 is better than the Macintosh OSX.

The following sentences are unacceptable, because they are too vague, and do not make a clear point (and therefore cannot be the basis for a paragraph):

- This paragraph is about South Africa's economic and political decline.
- South Africa's constitution.
- The influence of human behaviour on planning.
- The different operating systems.

3.4 What makes a good introduction?

Your introduction should be a roadmap for your essay, showing what the major topic you will be covering is, and how they relate to the question. It tells the marker how you're reading the question – that is, what you think they want you to do. Each section of the body is one point – that is, make a claim, give evidence for it (either a reference, an argument or ideally both) and then a counterclaim – that is, a reason why what you've said might be wrong. This last step, and the ability to show your point is correct even though you've considered other options, is the key to a good essay; you need to show that even though you might be wrong, you have good reason for thinking your analysis is correct.

A good introduction will show your readers that you know what you're talking about and that you're going to complete the task in question. It will also make them want to carry on reading. A bad introduction will have the opposite effect and might even put the reader off the rest of the writing, even if it does improve. If you're written a terrible introduction, even if the rest of your essay is superb, it will significantly affects your mark; this goes for your conclusion too.

A good introduction should:

- Show how you are going to answer the question
- Show that you understand the issues and their implications
- Give the structure of your answer and make clear the main areas you are going to write about.
- Show evidence that you have carried out some research by making references to at least one source
- Only say things that are specific and relevant
- Use words and expressions which clearly show the essay plan (e.g. The essay is divided into four main sections. It will first consider ... It will then go on to describe ... The third part compares ... Finally, some conclusions will be drawn as to ...)
- Use similar wording to the question, to show you understand it well enough to say in your own terms.

The most common mistakes made by students are:

- Not to include an introduction at all.
- To include an introduction, but one which is unrecognizable as such
- To include too much background/historical information in the introduction
- To make the introduction too long
- Making the introduction just a restatement of the question.

3.5 How do I write my conclusion?

There are two ways of writing a conclusion; summary and synthesis. Which of these you should do depends on the course and the lecturer; as always, ask for help if you're not sure.

Summary: This is essentially a list of topic sentences. It should basically give all of the conclusions you've reached from the considerations in each paragraph; the only real difference between your introduction and a summary is that in the summary you also include the results of looking at each of the topics. It should also be concise; a sentence per paragraph of the essay at most.

Synthesis: The conclusion is more than a summary of what you've said; it's a new idea based on the conclusions you've reached so far. You'll still have to summarise beforehand, but doing this well is probably the most important part of your essay, since it shows that not only have you understood the material, but you have done so well enough that you can come to your own (substantiated) ideas about it. This does not mean you can make something up; anything you say has to be a logical consequence of what you've said in your essay.

3.6 What does a completed essay structure look like?

The next two pages give examples of essay structures. Remember, breaking it down into distinct stages makes it a lot easier to write, and a lot easier to see what you're missing. In brackets are the places in the text that support the arguments. Notice that the arguments link together; it is necessary that your arguments flow from each other naturally. Remember, since you're typing this up, you can always move sections around so they make more sense, so end each paragraph with a logical introduction to the next one.

Question: Homosexuality was once deemed to be criminal. Today, in most liberal democracies, homosexuality is legal, but is still viewed as deviant. Why is this the case? What makes a behaviour deviant or criminal?

Introduction: what argument am I going to make?	**What areas of study will I cover in the essay?**
Homosexuality is viewed as deviant because of the continued influence of old social and cultural practices that do not accord with the legal/social framework we now inhabit.	What is homosexuality, why did people believe it to be deviant, what is it to be deviant, why do they still believe this.
Body paragraph 1: what is the claim? Definitions of important terms	**What is the evidence?** Evidence from dictionaries, lectures
Body paragraph 2: what is the claim? Homosexuality has been historically viewed as deviant; deviant is that which is not normal.	**What is the evidence?** Old laws, cultural and religious beliefs.
Body paragraph 3: what is the claim? Legal and illegal have superceded 'deviant' and 'normal' in a pluralist society.	**What is the evidence?** Legal is a precise term, deviant is not.
Body paragraph 4: what is the claim? Homosexuality has not been properly integrated into society, leading to people still seeing them as 'other'.	**What is the evidence?** It is clear that many homosexuals do not state that they are gay because of negative repercussions (sportsmen, musicians, etc.)
Summary: in short, what have I said so far? Culture has not caught up to law – people still have beliefs set by their background rather than their legal superstructure.	
References: List at least four sources of information you will read or refer to in the essay. Dictionary, course text, lecture notes, South African constitution.	

Question: Critically discuss the Nineteenth Century theory of Evolutionism in relation to the social development of cultures.

NOTE: since the question requires you to discuss the theory in relation to the social development of cultures, each paragraph should include some mention of how that part of Evolutionism affects.

Introduction: what overall argument am I going to make?	**What areas of study will I cover in the essay?**
Body paragraph 1: what is the topic? What is evolutionism?	**What is the evidence?** Give a succinct definition of what YOU think evolution to be (not a long quote). Also, brief definitions of culture, etc.
Body paragraph 3: what is the topic? What benefits of evolutionism are there?	**What is the evidence?** Assumes no biological distinction between human cultures Started quantification of cultural elements Simple – gives linear path
Body paragraph 4: what is the topic? What disadvantages of evolutionism are there?	**What is the evidence?** Assumes linearity of cultures Assumes unity of events (i.e. similar causes for similar effects)
Body paragraph 4: what is the topic? What can we learn about social development of cultures from the above?	**What is the evidence?** Cultures do seem to develop along general paths; cultures miss steps, or revert, which means it can't be linear; cultural change can be enacted without significant harm.
Summary: in short, what have I said so far?	
References: List at least four sources of information you will read or refer to in the essay.	

4. Language & Style

4.1 How do I sound academic? Just using the words and phrases without understanding them is getting me in trouble…

Keep your writing clear and simple. Your marker cannot read your mind, and therefore does not know what you mean unless you explain it in detail. Clear expression that shows you understand what you're saying will impress your tutor, not a string of long words from your dictionary. A wide vocabulary is important, but you must use the right word, not the fanciest one, and shorter words are often better than longer ones.

Finally, using academic terms when you don't need to doesn't make you sound clever, it just makes the marker think that you're covering up for not understanding what you're talking about. It's always better to use simpler terms that have a clear meaning than use longer words that are appropriate but which you don't really understand, since it becomes obvious very quickly that you don't know what you're talking about.

The most important thing to remember is generally to try to avoid everyday, informal language, especially colloquial expressions and slang. The way you write is different to the way you would speak, in terms of both the words you use and the way you use them. Spoken language is naturally full of hesitations, repetitions, grammatical errors and unfinished ideas. In your writing, structure is much more important: sentences should be complete and ideas arranged into paragraphs or sections, and you should be using the right kind of words (see below).

Especially if English is not your first language, don't become too obsessed with this, to the point perhaps of copying word for word from your sources. What's important is that you clearly show your understanding of the subject and your ability to understand and express information to answer a specific question, and as long as any grammar errors you make don't get in the way of this, then it shouldn't be a problem.

4.2 How do I avoid using or showing my opinion?

In order to put some distance between what you're writing and yourself as writer, to be cautious rather than assertive, you should use hedging language. These words allow you to hint at your attitude to something without using personal language.

Examples include:

- Avoid overuse of first person pronouns (I, we, my, our)
- Use impersonal subjects instead (It is believed that ..., it can be argued that ...)
- Use verbs such as imagine, suggest, claim, suppose
- Use 'attitudinal signals' such as apparently, arguably, ideally, strangely, unexpectedly
- Verbs such as would, could, may, might which 'soften' what you're saying.
- Qualifying adverbs such as some, several, a minority of, a few, many to avoid making overgeneralisations.

4.3 What language can't I use?

- Don't (do not!) Use contractions (e.g. it's, he'll, it'd etc.): always use the full form (it is/has, he will, it would/had).
- Don't use colloquial language or slang (eg kid, a lot of/lots of, cool)
- Always write as concisely as you can, with no irrelevant material or "waffle".
- Avoid common but vague words and phrases such as get, nice, thing. Your writing needs to be more precise.
- Avoid overuse of brackets; don't use exclamation marks or dashes; avoid direct questions; don't use "etc".
- Always use capital letters appropriately and never use SMS language.

4.4 How do I make my writing formal and impersonal?

- Avoid personal language (I, my, we etc)
- Never use emotional language; be objective rather than subjective
- Never use vague or imprecise language
- Try to make sure whatever you say cannot be misinterpreted
- Avoid being too dogmatic and making sweeping generalisations.
- Use some sort of "hedging" language (see below) and to qualify statements that you make
- Consistently use evidence to back up what you are saying, and reference correctly.
- Refer to people by their proper names, usually by their surname. This goes for characters as well; you almost never refer to people by their first names.
- In general, the writing you read will be dense, with long, complex sentences. You should not sound like this; remember that your main aim is clearly expressing your ideas, so don't be too ambitious, particularly when you're starting to write.

4.5 How do I link paragraphs together?

Your paragraphs should all flow together; remember, since your marker cannot read your mind, the only way to show them the overall structure of what you're thinking is to make it very clear. You should use words or short phrases to link sentences, paragraphs and sections.
Doing this well will make your writing easy to follow; doing it badly or not at all will make your style is disjointed, probably with too many short sentences, and difficult to follow. Your mark will be affected either way.
The best way to "get a feel" for how to use these words is by reading. Most textbooks and articles are well-written and will include a lot of these terms. Try and use the same kinds of words and link your ideas together in the same kind of way. Make sure that you fully understand the words you use: incorrect use could change what you're trying to say completely. Try to use a variety of expressions, particularly in longer pieces of writing.

These are the basic kinds of linkage for paragraphs and ideas;

- **Reinforcement:** Desktop computers are cheaper and more reliable than laptops; furthermore, they are more flexible.
- **Result/consequence:** Prices fell by more than 20% last year. As a result, sales increased by 15%.
- **Generalising:** On the whole, his speech was well received, despite some complaints from new members.
- **Contrast:** The South East of the UK often has the coldest weather in the winter. Conversely, the North West of Scotland frequently has the mildest temperatures.
- **Concession:** It was a very expensive holiday, the weather was bad and the people weren't very friendly. Nevertheless, we would probably go back to the same place.

There follows a list of some of the words and phrases that can be used. BE CAREFUL: although grouped together, there always exists a slight, but significant, difference between two apparently similar words.

Listing	**Giving examples**	**Generalising**
first, second, third	for example	in general
first, furthermore, finally	for instance	generally
to begin, to conclude	as follows:	on the whole
next	that is	as a rule
Reinforcement	in this case	for the most part
also	namely	in most cases
furthermore	in other words	usually
moreover	**Result/consequence**	**Highlighting**
what is more	so	in particular
in addition	therefore	particularly
besides	as a result/consequence	especially
above all	accordingly	mainly
as well (as)	consequently	**Reformulation**
in the same way	because of this/that	in other words
not only ... but also	thus	rather
Similarity	hence	to put it more simply
equally	for this/that reason	**Expressing an alternative**
likewise	so that	alternatively
similarly	in that case	rather
correspondingly	under these circumstances	on the other hand
In the same way		The alternative is
Transition to new point	**Deduction**	**Contrast**
now,	then	instead
as far as *x* is concerned	in other words	conversely
with regard/reference to	in that case	on the contrary
as for ...	otherwise	in contrast
it follows that	this implies that ...	in comparison
turning to	if so/not	**Concession (sth unexpected)**
Summary	**Stating the obvious**	however
in conclusion	obviously	even though
to conclude	clearly	however much
in brief	naturally	nevertheless
to summarise	of course	still
overall	as can be expected	yet
therefore	surely	
	after all	

5. Reading

5.1 How should I read? I don't understand what these people are saying…

That sounds like a stupid question; after all, if you couldn't read, you wouldn't be here, right? At university, however, the way you are meant to read is very specific, and very different to the kinds of reading you will have learned in other places.

At varsity, you are expected to process lots of complicated text quickly, and it's much more important that you understand what you're reading than that you can quote it. This is because you get marks for analysis, which is using information in relevant and interesting ways, not repetition, which is stating what other people have said without considering how correct they are. A lot of students don't understand this, and so end up losing a lot of marks because they think the lecturer just wants them to repeat what it says in the textbook; doing this will get you a maximum grade of 60%, no matter how good your work is, since any higher grade is reserved for essays that include analysis. There are three basic tricks to reading properly:

1) Don't jump in at the deep end.
Prepare for your reading by looking at summaries, dictionaries, Wikipedia articles, and other background material, so that you know what's going on around the text. You wouldn't drive somewhere you haven't been before without checking a map first, and the same applies to reading a text.

2) Always ask questions while you're reading.
You should treat all readings as comprehension exercises. Whatever you read, you should always be constantly asking the following questions:

General questions to ask when reading:

- What is the main point being made? Does it sound reasonable and meaningful?
- For each paragraph, what is the point?
- Does the point of the paragraph relate directly and clearly to the overall topic?
- How convincing is the argument?
- Is the evidence appropriate?
- Is there enough evidence?
- Does it consider all appropriate evidence [argument], or is it avoiding talking about something important?

Specific questions:

- Does it confirm something else you know or have been told?
- Does it contradict something else you know or have been told?
- Does it give support for one of the positions you need to consider in your essay?
- Does it give you further detail in an area you need to know more about, or does it just confuse the issue?

3) Read the important bits first, and leave the confusing bits 'til later.
There is a very simple technique that can help your reading a great deal. Because virtually all academic text is written in the same way, this method works at all levels from paragraphs to books, so keep it in mind.

Read the first, middle, and last sentences of each paragraph. The first sentence will tell you the claim the author will prove in the paragraph; the middle one will include the proof; and the last will give you the conclusion of the claim balanced against the proof.
Pay close attention to the beginning, middle, and end, but don't worry about any other information. This will help you get an outline of the reading in your head that the rest fits into, like having instructions to go with all the bits of the model you're building. This is much less confusing than picking up the pieces one by one and trying to fit them together in the order they come out of the box.

5.2 Why shouldn't I read every word?

The reason the technique above works is that virtually all academic writing has the same structure. Every paragraph, every chapter, every book, every course, the overall pattern is the same. Reports are written differently because they serve as a summary and index of other work, rather than trying to convey arguments or ideas. This basic method has been so effective that every single academic discipline uses the same structure, adapting it for their own purposes. It goes like this;

- (Thesis) The basic claim the author is making, and tells you what the author wants you to think about the text, and how they are going to approach the question they set themselves.
- (Antithesis) The meat of any paper. The antithesis balances the arguments and evidence for and against a claim.
- (Synthesis) The conclusion, in which all the questions and conflicts that have guided the discussion have been resolved.

Although this is obvious in academic texts, it is the same elsewhere. Considers a novel, in which the situation is set up, a conflict is introduced, there's a period of resultant tension, and a climax which leaves you with a particular impression of the book and the characters, tying together all the ideas that have been considered.

Your own writing should also follow this structure at all levels; it is how each paragraph, section, and essay should be written. Done properly, it links together your essay so that it all hangs together.

5.3 What kinds of reading are there?

Skimming– this is to get the overall idea of a text. In almost all cases, you should be doing this first, to make sure you have an overall idea of what the text says and where it's going. ALWAYS SKIM FIRST.

Scanning – when you're looking for a specific piece of information, like looking up a number in a phone book or reading a timetable. This is what you should be doing when you're doing your references and secondary reading. If you have an essay topic in mind, then you only need to read the bits that are relevant to that topic. Doing this will also help you pick up the words that you need to look up, since you'll see repetition of the important terms.

Comprehension – the slowest kind of reading, this is where you are reading to understand. It's best done by first skimming the text to get the general idea and arguments, and then going back over it looking for the topic sentences and checking particular arguments. If you try and jump straight in to this level, you will almost certainly not understand what you are reading; however, this is the level you're meant to be at, and it's much easier to achieve by going over the text quickly several times than banging your head against it until your brain stops working.

5.4 How and why should I take notes?

People don't take notes because they want to come back to them later, they take them because writing notes – whatever the notes say – activates a different part of your brain to just reading, which means that you'll process and remember the information much better, even if you never look at those notes again.

The simplest way to train yourself to do this is to get into the habit of writing response notes – simple comments based on your first reaction to a claim, even if those comments are simply question marks, exclamation marks, underlining, random words or references, &c.

6. Referencing

6.1 Why can't I use just anything I find on the internet? How do I know what's okay?

There is a great deal of useful information on the web, but most of the stuff you can find easily is, simply, crap. This doesn't mean you shouldn't use it as a source; it means that, when you are using it, you should be extra careful to make sure you've properly assessed its academic merit by checking the list below. If it doesn't fit this profile, the person writing is probably just spouting gibberish, and you're in academia now, where people should at the very least be experts in their field before doing such things.

You must always ask "is this person an expert?" Writing something in your essay because someone in the pub told you or because "some people" or "they" think something is unacceptable, unless the **specific** person you are mentioning clearly a specialist in whatever you are writing about. In general, expert writing (the kind that is acceptable for you to use as a source) has the following traits:

- They using academic language and terminology, but making clear statements.
- There is no personal opinion; all arguments are based on evidence.
- The writing has no contractions, abbreviations, spelling mistakes, or grammatical mistakes.
- Names do not have capital letters.
- It gives a real name, and ideally a description, of the person writing; anyone that uses a nickname, account name, or gamertag, like CandyGirl2000 or mercykiller19, is clearly not an expert on academic matters.
- The references are complete, and it references specific sources in detail.
- The introduction is clear and reasonable.
- Every point that is made is backed up properly.
- It is not a forum or message board.

If you stick with sources that you find in Google Scholar rather than Google (when you search, it's one of the options on the top left of the page) and you should be okay; everything on Scholar is an acceptable source. Wikipedia is acceptable as a starting point; although you shouldn't quote it, most Wikipedia articles have a reasonable reference list, and at least some of those will be academically acceptable.

6.2 Why do I keep losing marks for referencing?

This is almost always for one of three reasons;

- You're not including enough references
- Your references are from unacceptable sources, like Wikipedia or online forums
- Your references are in the wrong format (see the next section for examples)

Remember, the name and year are a shortcut to your main list of references at the end, not an actual reference. The idea is that the marker can quickly find all the details they need to get a copy of whatever you're referencing. In the Harvard style, most references are of the form "Name (19??)", or "(Name, 19??)"

You can reference anything you use to research the essay, aside from Sparknotes and Wikipedia (although this is not to say you can't read them – just don't reference, and NEVER, EVER copy from them, or anywhere else; doing this anywhere – even a sentence or two - is an automatic fail).

6.3 How do I reference?

A reference within your text should look like one of the below:
Paraphrase Delpit (1995: 47) claims that teaching methodologies that are supposed to be empowering can in fact be disempowering.

Direct quote As Delpit asks: "Will black teachers and parents continue to be silenced by the very forces that claim to 'give voice' to our children?" (Delpit 1995: 47)
In the first reference, the person's name is mentioned, and so only the year is needed. In the second, there is a much more general reference to the paper, so all details are in brackets.
Books: Include the name of the author, the date of publication of the book, the name of the book, the city of publication and the name of the publisher.

- Delpit, Lisa. 1995. Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom. New York: The New Press.

Articles in books: Include the name of the author, the date, the name of the chapter or article in the book, the name of the book (in italics), the name of the editor/s of the book, the city of publication and the name of the publisher.

- Leibowitz, Brenda. 2000. The importance of writing and teaching writing in the academy. In *Routes to Writing in Southern Africa*, Brenda Leibowitz and Yasien Mohamed, Eds. Cape Town: Silk Road Publishers.

Articles in journals: Include the name of the author, the date, the name of the journal article, the name of the journal (in italics), the volume and issue numbers of the journal, and the page numbers of the article. Some journals do not have an issue number, in which case you just write the volume number.

- Lillard, A. 1998. Wanting to be it: children's understanding of intentions underlying pretense. *Child Development.* 69(3): 981-993.

Internet sites: Include the name of the author, the date of publication, the name of the website, the URL address and the date on which you visited the site.

- McKiernan, G. 1996. *Project Aristotle(sm): automated categorization of Web resources*. [Online]. Available: http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/Aristotle.htm [4 September 1996]

6.4 How do I avoid accidental plagiarism, or being accused of plagiarism?

Plagiarism is using someone else's ideas or words without showing it's theirs. It's easy to make simple mistakes and get accused of this, so take these steps to make sure it doesn't happen to you;

- Simply putting something in your own words is fine, so long as you say whose idea it was in the first place; indeed, you should always try and put ideas into words of your own, since it shows you understand them properly.

- If you need a long quote to introduce an idea, then you probably don't understand it well enough. Try to only include short quotes in your work, or simply good references.

- If you want to put a long quote in, try and write it in your own words. This does not mean change a word or two around; it means think about it and come up with a completely new description.

- Put all quotes in quotation marks, and try not to use wording that is too similar to the way someone else has said something. Even for dictionary definitions, you need a quote; show that you are using someone else's terms by putting inverted commas around it if you are not sure.

7. Exams

7.1 How should I prepare before the exam?

There is a very simple checklist to make sure you perform as well as you can on the day of the exam.

- Eat right; don't have any caffeine or alcohol late in the evening before, and eat a proper meal (i.e. not fast food).
- Make sure you have everything you need for the exam packed into a bag the night before.
- Get a decent night's sleep; go to bed at a reasonable hour, and get up early enough to get ready for the day and have breakfast without rushing.
- Don't study in the morning of the exam; the added stress of cramming will remove any advantage it could give you.
- Take short breaks in the middle of the exam to stretch, look around, leaf over the paper again, breathe deep, sit up straight, etc. Breathing exercises and stretching both before and during the exam are very important; if your body is distracted, your mind won't be able to function properly.

7.2 How should I manage my time?

- At the start, work out how much time you have for each section based on the amount of marks the section is worth. You'll probably know this before you go in, so keep in mind how long you expect each section to take.
- Answer the easy stuff first, and come back to the harder, more time-intensive questions.
- Keep the first 15 minutes free for reading over the whole exam paper, so you don't get surprised by a sudden very hard bit appearing,
- Keep the last 15 minutes free for going over and editing what you've written. This editing will significantly improve your mark in most cases.

7.3 What do I do when my mind goes blank?

First of all, breathe.When you get that first flush of panic starting to creep in, sit up straight in your chair, look straight ahead, and take two or three slow, deep breaths with your stomach. Most importantly; DON'T PANIC. You will be okay.

Panic is a physical reaction that strongly affects your mind, but it can be countered and controlled. It makes your breathing shallower and faster, so force yourself to breathe slower; it makes you nervous, so sit back in your chair and have a slow look around. Don't worry about the time; losing five minutes doing nothing but calming yourself down and casually look over the paper will improve the quality of your work.

7.4 How do I prepare for lots of different topics, or questions I can't anticipate?

It's impossible to prepare everything for most exams, and this problem increases the higher up you go. The normal response of panicking and trying to force the entire course into your head, WILL NOT WORK. If you're pushed for time, these are simple techniques you will help prepare in the broadest sense.

- Get familiar with the details of a few different examples. Know enough about these examples to adapt them to a variety of questions; you do this by understanding the examples and their implications.
- Glance over as much of your reading as you can; don't worry about following it too closely, what you're looking for is the argument structure and example/evidence types, which your brain will pick out as you scan.
- Read dictionary, encyclopaedia & Wikipedia definitions of the central terms; words, names, ideas, etc. Get these definitions and ideas clear in your head.
- Read over any marking schemes you have so you know what the markers are looking for.

7.3 How should I approach essay questions?

1. Get your head around the topic. Write out a list of things you will need to say in the essay. Take five minutes to do this. It doesn't matter if this is a random list of words, so long as it focuses you around the topic (this is called priming, and works like warming up the engine on a car; basically, before you do any proper work, you should take a minute to look around, get your bearings, and relax into the subject.)
Also, write down three or four good examples; ideally, you want one example that you can link to each main point that you make. These examples should include one or two that you've found or researched yourself, not just the ones used in lectures.
From this list of examples and terms, work out the most important things you've written and number them; this and the examples will give you a basic structure to work with, and start you thinking of how you'll fit in the other, more random words and examples.

2. In your introduction, first restate the question, trying to put it in different words; this will either show exactly how you have understood the question. If you can't do this, or what you write doesn't sound much like the question, there's a good chance you don't really get it. If so, DON'T PANIC. You can always change topic if you try one and it doesn't work; the lost time will still be better than all the stress of trying to force an answer to come for a question you can't answer.
Try and state all of the topics you will cover, and give an idea of the conclusion you are going to reach. In most essays, you'll want to give four or so main points, and there will be a clear answer that you will be expected to give.

3. When you're writing the individual paragraphs, get your point in early, and make sure that everything you're saying relates directly to the topic. Also, make sure you keep to the time. Writing a smaller amount of good text if far better than pages and pages of drivel.

4. Summarize in your last paragraph. Restate the question, what conclusions you have reached in your essay (the topic sentences of each paragraph) and then give a clear answer based on these conclusions.

7.4 How do I answer multiple choice questions?

If you're not sure of the answer, you can always make an educated guess. This doesn't mean you should guess at random; if you keep the following tips in mind the chance that you'll guess right is significantly increased.

- Be prepared to change your answers; more often than not, going from wrong to right is three times as likely as going right to wrong, so the odds are in your favour; if you think and answer should be changed it's the right thing to do.
- Read the question carefully; it will usually have a clue that eliminates at least a couple of the answers as being in the right area, but not correct.
- Read through quickly, answering the easy questions and leaving the hard questions; this will make sure you get the easy marks first before you spend time trying to figure out the hard questions.
- Eliminate options that you know are false, such as those that contradict something else you know.
- If the question or answers are confusing, try rewording them to see how else you could ask the question.

7.5 Why do I lose marks on multiple choice questions?

The main thing is that the answer is in front of you. Because the answer is in front of you, you gety overconfident, and make easily avoidable mistakes. It's very, very easy to lose a lot of marks in multiple choice questions simply as a result of not reading the question (or the answer you've picked) closely enough.

The other important thing is to check how much the marks are worth. Multiple choice sections tend to be worth the same for every question, which means if the question takes too long it's more worth your time to skip it and come back at the end if you have time than to struggle over the answer. For example, if you have a 45 mark multiple choice exam and 50 minutes, then any amount of time over a minute spent thinking about that question is marks you're losing somewhere else.

8. General advice

8.3 What to do if you have absolutely no idea what's going on.

- **ASK FOR HELP!!** Asking questions does not make you look dumb; certainly it makes you look much less stupid than pretending you know what's happening and then messing up your exams and essays. Ask your tutors, ask your lecturers, ask friends in the years above, ask the writing place; the more the better. Get people to look at your essays, and talk about the ideas in them with people to see what other perspectives you can find. You are not meant to be in this alone, and without help it will be a lot harder for you.
- Remember, there are no stupid questions; if you're confused in a tutorial, there's a good chance other people are too, so put your hand up and ask a question.

8.1 Points to remember in writing

- You must have an argument that you are trying to make in your essay. An argument is a claim that makes logical sense and gives evidence for it being true, not simply something that someone has said. See 2.4 for more detail on this.
- You should be able to put across different points of view – both from the various reading materials you are drawing upon and the different theoretical approaches you know about.
- You need to have a clear introduction and a conclusion that summarises everything you've said.
- Never appeal to what "people" think, or what "they" do, without a reference. If your reference is that everybody knows it, then in most cases it's unacceptable. You will never lose marks for referencing too much, and always lose marks for not referencing enough.
- Show that you have read for your essay and that you are trying to apply concepts.
- Try to think about what your lecturer wants from you in the essay; what have they said in class about what to talk about and what to avoid?
- STICK TO THE TOPIC. Do not **at any point** discuss something that is not clearly related to the questions you are being asked. Make sure the paragraph you're writing is obviously connected to the paragraphs before and after it, and to the topic.

8.2 What should I be checking while I'm writing?

Your main goal is to write a well backed-up response to the essay topic. This response must be thorough and able to be clearly understood. While you are writing, you should always try to keep sentences short, each making a single point. If you find that your sentences are very long, you're probably waffling. A simple trick to check this is to read your essay out loud to yourself. If you find you're out of breath mid-way through a sentence or if you can't read it all in a single breath, then that sentence is too long.

At all stages, you should consider the following questions; if you have them in mind from the beginning, it will make the final work of editing your essay much, much easier.

Is the introduction clear?
Does it seem to be missing anything?
Is there anything there that shouldn't be there? Does it engage you with the question?

Do the topic sentences/ paragraph ideas make sense?
Is it obvious what each paragraph is specifically about?
Is there enough evidence for each point?
Is the evidence appropriate to the claim?

Are the paragraphs in a logical order?
Do they flow naturally from the introduction, and from each other?
What other evidence would/could you include to make the point stronger?
For this, you need to understand exactly what the question means. Most essay topics are in fact two or three separate questions, and you need to answer all of the questions. Break them down into sections, work out what each section is asking you to do, and then work out what you need to study to answer each part.

9. About the Writing Place

9.1 Where and what is it?

The Writing Place is located on the first floor of the EG Malherbe library. It provides a free service for students from any discipline in the humanities to come to for one-on-one help with essays.

9.2 What should I bring with me?

If you bring us a draft of your essay (you must have written something, even if you think it's awful), the question, and all your reading material, we will be able to help you.

9.3 Do I need to make an appointment?

If I's just you, then you don't need to make an appointment, just turn up and check the timetable on the door. If it's a group project, then email Chirag at Patelc1@ukzn.ac.za or Jess at 992224736@ukzn.ac.za.

9.4 When should I come?

Try to come and see us as early as possible once you have the essay; the later you leave it, the harder redrafting and improving it will be. Don't wait until you are failing an essay with only a day or two left before hand-in to seek help.

9.5 How will my tutor/lecturer know I've seen you?

If you are asked to come to the Writing Place by a tutor or lecturer, then we will stamp your work to show that you have been to us. However, you will NOT get your work stamped unless we can see that you have made significant revisions to your draft based on our advice in a prior session, so make sure you come as soon as you're told; remember, the earlier the better.

Some useful phone numbers

Service	For…	Location	Phone number All 031260…
Student Fees	Fees, payments, money owing to you	Shepstone level 4	2011/1299
Scholarships office	Bursaries, scholarships, grants	Shepstone level 4	2239/8686
The medical clinic	Medical services; free HIV tests; prescriptions.	Bottom of the stairs and left at Shepstone (in car park)	3285
RMS (Risk Management services)	Thefts, robberies, other crimes, lost items,	Near main gate, ask a guard	2540
Undergraduate Office (HDSS)	Registration, change of course, any general problems	MTB, opposite the coffee shop	3139/3300
Postgraduate Students Office (HDSS)	Registration, change of course, any general problems	MTB, just past classics	1201/2133
ICT (Information & communications Technology)	Your email, premium access, computer	Shepstone level 5	2481
International students office	Registration, visa issues, general help	Shepstone level 4	1092
Cashiers office	Financial queries	Shepstone level 4	2257
Student Counselling	Academic and personal counselling	Past main gate, towards RMS	2668
General enquiries/switchboard			
Howard college			1111
Edgewood			1111
Medical school			4111
Westville			7111
Pietermaritzburg			0332605111

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