

ON GOOD ESSAY WRITING

Of all aspects of studying and learning, perhaps the most challenging is writing. There are various kinds of writing, such as diaries, reports, essays and so on. We are going to concentrate on the essay¹, since that is the most common form of writing in the social sciences and humanities. Being able to write clearly and persuasively is a very valuable “skill”. It puts you on a much better footing with other people, if you can represent your point of view forcefully in writing.

Writing essays is a very important part of studying for three reasons:

1. it enables assessment of your progress
2. it deepens your learning of the subject you’re studying
3. it strengthens your general powers of self-expression.

I don’t think that my point on essay writing is to tell you something new to you. It is to bring into a sharper focus what you already know and to provide a set of working concepts so that you can apply your “native” intuitions more effectively as you work on your own writing.

Writing essays is always a challenging and demanding activity. It should make clear at the outset that there is no single approach to writing (essays) which suits every writer, or every kind of writing task. It would take too much time if I tried to cover all these options. Instead, I shall follow a particular line of thinking and present a basic writing strategy, which I assume you will modify to suit your own purposes and own studying style.

A tutor faces a demanding job assessing and commenting upon your essay. The job is made possible by setting it up in a defined way, so that it is clear what has to be done in order to show a certain level of mastery. This is the purpose of and the reason you have to work to it all times.

Unless you are taking a course in creative writing, essays are generally intended to help you consolidate what you have been studying. You are expected to take the essay as an opportunity to scan back over what you have been reading and extract relevant material. To show the tutor your grasp of ideas you have been studying, you have to express them for yourself in your own words. The tutor has to be able to see your own thought-process at work. What you must

avoid doing is to copy directly from the texts, because that suggests you are incapable of using the ideas for yourself.

When a tutor reads an essay he or she will be asking the following things:

- Have you answered the question in the title?
- Have you drawn on the relevant parts of the course for the main content of your essay?
- Do you show a good grasp of the ideas you have been studying in the course?
- Have you presented a coherent argument?
- Is the essay written in an objective analytical style?
- Is the essay well written (i.e. is it easy to read)?

An essay can be good in almost every other way and yet be judged to be poor because it ignores the question posed in the title. Your task is to argue a case in relation to the question posed in the title. Everything you say in the essay should be relevant to that task. It isn't enough that a point you make is interesting to you. You have to convince your reader that the point is worth his or her attention. That is why it is a good rule always to write the title of the essay across the top of your opening page. And you must always stick exactly to the title you are given – not devise a modified version of your own.

The point of the essay is to show that you understand now the arguments in the course work, and that you can apply the ideas to examples of your own. What you must avoid doing is to copy directly from the texts, because that suggests you are incapable of using the ideas for yourself. An essay should argue by force of reason. In every day life we often prefer to rely on emotional force. If you want to dispute a claim made by someone else, you are expected to use argument and evidence. You should write on the assumption that your reader will be interested in your reasons for holding the ideas you do.

A final point which emerged from our analysis of sample essays was that a good essay is easy to read. Grand sounding phrases and elaborate sentences do not make an essay impressive. Your language should be direct, always go for short and simple sentences where you can.

Another valuable aid to developing your essay-writing ability is to have the opportunity to see how other students have responded the same task, not because

you want to copy someone else's style, but to broaden your vision of what is possible when you are answering an essay question.

It is a way of gaining insight into the strengths and weaknesses of your own writing, by comparing your approach with that of your colleagues.

Take this notion by looking at some short essays written by adult students.

1. As you read the essay, write only questions or other points that come to you, in the margins.

2. When you get to the end of the essay take a sheet of paper and write two headings: Strengths and Weaknesses. Note down the good things about the essay and the weak points.

3. Imagine that you are his/her tutor. Try writing a few sentences about the essay so as to help your colleagues with his future writing.

Let me highlight a few key messages to take from this discussion. As you saw, it isn't easy to read other people's writing and make sense of it. Nor is it easy to pinpoint what the strengths and weaknesses are and to work out how to give appropriate advice. This carries two lessons:

1. Don't be too upset if your tutor or colleague misses your point or if he or she offers advice you don't think is appropriate or fair.

2. Take note that you don't have to worry about getting your writing "perfect" before submitting it.

Note: ¹ The word "essay" originally meant "a first attempt", but now it has the more general meaning of a "short piece of writing on a specific subject."

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2. Richard Arends, Learning to Teach. Mc Graw – Hill Higher Education., 2001.

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