ESSAY WRITING - STYLE AND CLARITY

The material included in this guide has been gathered and adapted from the following publications:

*The Study Skills Handbook* – Stella Cottrell
*The Mature Student’s Guide to Writing* – Jean Rose
*How to Write Better Essays* – Bryan Greetham
*Reading, Writing and Reasoning* – Gavin Fairbairn and Christopher Winch
*Writing at University* – Phyllis Crème and Mary R. Lea

The guide concentrates on issues of style and clarity. For guidance on structure and organisation see the separate guide in the section Structuring your Writing.

**ACADEMIC STYLE**

There are three main styles used in academic writing: descriptive, argumentative and evaluative. Many writing tasks will involve some combination of the three and the use of critical, analytical skills – see the example given below. Some courses will require a degree of more personal, reflective writing. Some guidelines are provided here, but see the separate guide on Reflective Writing in the section Writing for Different Types of Assignment for further guidance if this type of writing is required on your course.

**Descriptive writing**

**Different purposes:**

- To describe what happened
  
  e.g. main events
  methods and results

- To describe the main features or functions
  
  e.g. of an illness or treatment method

- To summarise the main points
  
  e.g. of a theory or article

**Guidelines:**

- Identify relevant themes to include
- Be clear, precise and accurate
- Use a logical order
- Keep to the point
- Indicate the significance of what you describe
N.B. Descriptive style varies between subjects – get used to what your subject expects.
**Argumentative Writing**

**Purpose:**
- to argue a case/point of view
- to influence the reader's thoughts/actions

**Guidelines:**
- State your position clearly and concisely
- Use a clear line of reasoning to support your position
- Give reliable, relevant, valid and convincing evidence/examples to support your reasons
- Consider and respond to the possible arguments against
- Don't sit on the fence – show there are different arguments but make clear which you find most convincing

**Evaluative Writing**

**Involves:**
- Comparing - finding points of similarity
- Contrasting - finding points of difference
- Evaluating significance of similarities and differences
- Do they matter? Do they have important implications for which model should be used? How did you decide what was significant?
- Making a judgement
- Give reasons for your opinion, based on the evidence.
- Showing your criteria
  - Show what criteria you used to arrive at your opinion – e.g. data, research evidence.

**NB:**
- Get the balance right – compare like with like and give equal information and evidence to both.

The example below shows how a mixture of styles may be involved.
“Parents have ultimate responsibility for their children’s delinquent behaviour.” Discuss.

Descriptive element:
Historical account of different attitudes to young offenders.
Case study – recount what happened in a particular case of a young offender.

Evaluative/analytical element:
Compare/contrast what the two writers say:
(Also involves description in summarising what each says)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer A</th>
<th>Writer B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believes family set-up is important factor in juvenile delinquency.</td>
<td>Believes factors in society are more important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes young children can be taught right and wrong at home and school.</td>
<td>Believes young children cannot be responsible for their actions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analyse (break down, ask questions about) different positions that have been taken on juvenile delinquency and weigh them up.

Make a judgement.

(Example taken from Writing at University by Phyllis Crème and Mary R. Lea.)

Using Personal Experience

- Only use if your course requires it.
- Don’t use as your main evidence unless you’re specifically asked to do so.
- Points to consider when including personal experience:
  - How typical is your experience?
  - (Any research done? Any relevant reports or articles?)
  - How does your experience compare with other people’s?
  - How relevant is it?
  - How does it link to theories you have studied?
  - How does it support or contradict theories and views you have studied?
  - Can any lessons be drawn from it?
  - Can any valid generalisations be drawn from it?
• Personal writing uses different language:
  “I found that” rather than “It was found that”
  (More emotional, subjective, intuitive and anecdotal.)

CONVENTIONS OF STYLE IN ESSAYS

• Use formal, Standard English - avoid colloquial terms and dialect.

• Avoid abbreviations and contractions

• (use “for example” not “e.g.”; use “did not” instead of “didn’t”).

• Proper Nouns (e.g. the National Health Service) can be abbreviated provided you give the full name as well as the abbreviation on the first use.

• Numbers below TEN are written out in full, except in statistical and scientific work.

• Be impersonal (unless your course requires otherwise) – avoid using “I”, “we” and “you”. Instead use “It can be seen that”, “There are a number of”, “It has been found that” etc.

• Be cautious – use words and phrases such as “appears to”, “seems to”, “may”, “probably”, “apparently”, “generally”, “the evidence suggests that…”, “in some cases this…”

• Be objective – avoid personal, subjective words such as “wonderful”, “worthwhile”

• Be concise – avoid unnecessary words (e.g. “In a book called How to Improve Your Memory by a psychologist called Tony Buzan”)

• Use continuous prose – lists and headings are for reports and projects.

• Don’t address the reader directly by asking them a question or telling them what to think.

• Use rational argument rather than emotive language.

EXPRESSING YOUR IDEAS CLEARLY IN ESSAYS

• Be clear in your own mind what you want to say.

• Express ideas clearly – the reader can’t ask questions to clarify.

• Get to the point – avoid “filler” phrases. (See “Fillers and Unnecessary Extras” below.)

• Be precise – avoid generalisations and vagueness.
  (Specify who, what, where, when and how.)

• Use short, straightforward sentences. (See “Reader loses way in long-winded sentence” below.)
Use plain English and familiar words. (See “What do you mean?” below.)

Avoid clichés. (See below.)

Use the correct words – beware of commonly misused words. (See below.)

Avoid ambiguous words and sentences. (See “Is that really what you mean?” below.)

Make every word and sentence count - avoid repetition and unnecessary words. (See “Fillers and Unnecessary Extras” below.)

Check your punctuation – it should help, not confuse, the reader.

Check your spelling. Make a point of learning to spell words used commonly in your subject and in academic writing generally.

**Reader loses way in long-winded sentence!**

The respondents, however, in spite of their doubts about the single currency, foresaw many benefits, including the elimination of the risks involved with currency exchange, the equalization of currencies, the reduced administrative costs (e.g. in billing) and the psychological benefits attached because of a strengthening of the bonds between countries and it being evidence of a united European economic power.

**Break the sentence up into its different parts:**

The correspondents had doubts about the single currency but they foresaw many benefits. The risks taken in exchanging currencies would be removed, currencies would be equalized and administrative costs would be reduced. Moreover, psychologically, bonds between countries would be strengthened by the existence of a united European economic power.

**Fillers and Unnecessary Extras**

- According as to whether
- For the reason that
- From the --- point of view
- In the event of
- With a view to

- As far as --- is concerned
- At the present time
- In spite of the fact that
- Owing to the fact that

**Initially, originally, first conceived or created**

- Past history
- Future plans
- The general consensus
- The reason why
- No other alternative

- The end result
- Advance planning
- May possibly
- Temporary respite
- Rather unique
**Habitual custom**  A new innovation  Assembled together

**As to whether**  An annual income of £20,000 per annum

**What do you mean?**

In the absence of the feline predator the rodent scavenger can engage in recreational activity.

A repair implemented at this point in time will yield a net saving of human resources of the order of 88.899%.

Indicate the direction to my abode – I’m fatigued and have a desire to retire.

In so far as they can be projected, the adverse economic factors in the immediately foreseeable future are likely to be of the order presently pertaining.

Negative patient care outcome.

A terminological inexactitude.

We do not contemplate the possibility that such a thing will eventuate.

The assessments were all successfully undertaken. The anticipated learning outcomes of each group were substantially exceeded and are currently being expressed as part of the outcome profile for each of them.

**Is that really what you mean?**

Brian kept his pigeons at the bottom of the garden with his brother Sid.

Glancing to the right, the church spire is visible above the rooftops.

Touching the greasy surface, her face bore an expression of disgust.

As well as being cheap and easily available, she claims that the product is of a very good quality.

Although over sixty, her waist is as small as it was when she was twenty-one.

Water is available below the ground surface and most of the country’s crops are grown there.

**Check your punctuation gives the meaning you intend**

- She is a pretty energetic girl.

  She is a pretty, energetic girl.
• However you feel, you must treat her with respect.

However, you feel you must treat her with respect.

• Call him Charles and see if he answers.

Call him, Charles, and see if he answers.

• The busker who played the clarinet entertained the crowd.

The busker, who played the clarinet, entertained the crowd.

• Normally spoken English is less formal than written English.

Normally, spoken English is less formal than written English.

• He did not behave as expected.

He did not behave, as expected.

• The picture was bought for £1,000 more than it was worth.

The picture was bought for £1,000, more than it was worth.

### Clichés

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In this day and age</th>
<th>At this moment in time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The burden of proof</td>
<td>To all intents and purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A blessing in disguise</td>
<td>In any shape or form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At grass roots level</td>
<td>Leave no stone unturned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the sharp end</td>
<td>The bottom line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The long and short of it</td>
<td>Much of a muchness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It goes without saying</td>
<td>Be that as it may</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the end of the day</td>
<td>In no uncertain terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From time immemorial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Commonly Confused Words

*(For more examples of commonly confused words and spellings, with explanations, visit this website: [http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html](http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html).)*

- Adverse - **hostile**
- Averse - **disinclined**
- Affect - **the action**
- Effect - **the result**

- Allay - **put to rest, pacify**
Alleviate - ease, give temporary relief
Alternative - another
Alternate - by turns
Appraise - assess, evaluate
Apprise - inform
Biannual - twice a year
Biennial - every two years
Comprise - be made up of e.g. The US comprises 50 states
Compose - make up e.g. 50 states compose the US
Disinterested - impartial
Uninterested - showing no interest
Explicit - clearly and precisely expressed
Implicit - implied
Fewer - number
Less - quantity
Forego - precede
Forgo - do without
Historic - make history
Historical - based on history
Its - belonging to it
It's - it is
Imply - suggest
Infer - deduce
Oral - spoken
Verbal - in words (spoken or written)
Principle - fundamental truth/belief
Principal - chief, main