

Writing, Presenting and Submitting Politics essays

Writing your Politics essay

WHY WRITE ESSAYS?

Since a considerable proportion of your working life at University is spent in producing essays, it is worthwhile exploring the rationale for essay writing. It has *three* main purposes:

1. Essay writing is a way of **mastering** a body of facts or ideas. You accumulate information on a particular topic by reading the **relevant** literature, and then present what you have found out in your own terms and in your own way. You thereby **retain** the material more effectively than by merely reading on its own, where it is only too easy to forget what you have read the week before.

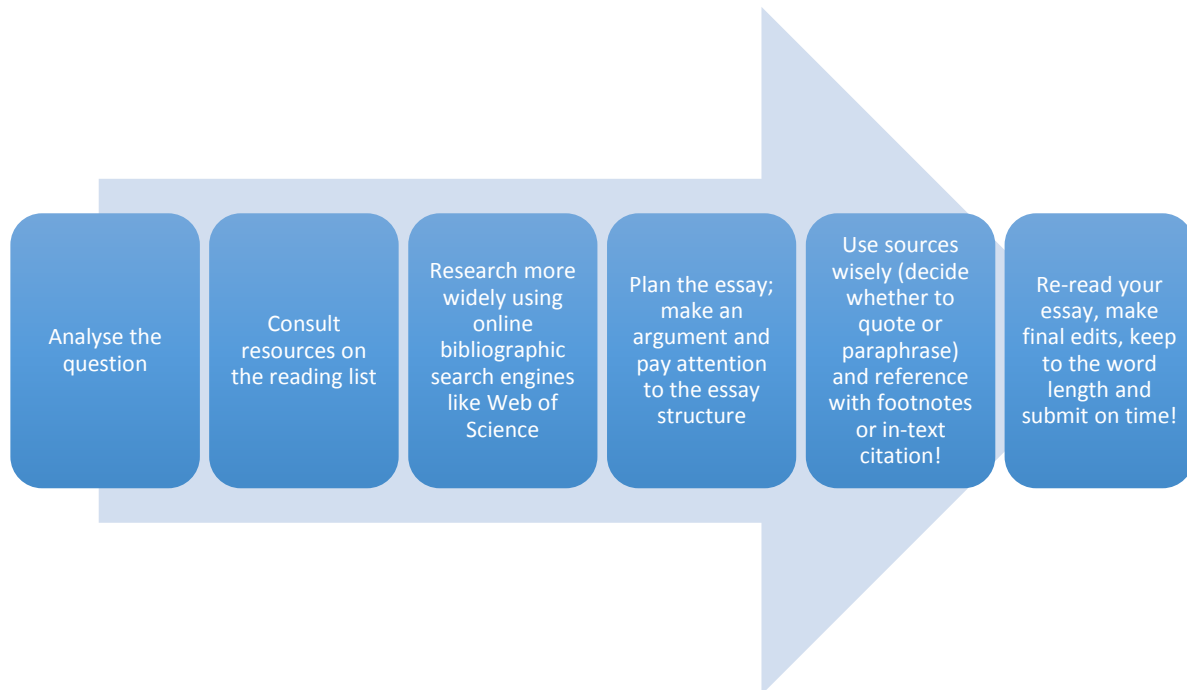
2. Essay writing develops skills of **selection, analysis** and **condensation**. Out of the mass of information available, you have to decide what to include and what to leave out, you have to be alert to contradictory arguments and points of view presented by different authors, and you have to present your findings in a **succinct form** without oversimplifying.

3. Essay writing further develops your skills of **expression** and **communication**. You have to express yourself clearly, develop a coherent argument throughout the essay, and as far as possible write in a fluent and attractive manner.

What makes an **essay good or bad** follows from the above three points. The worst essays are those that defeat the purposes of the activity: essays that are merely rehashes of other people's books (**no independent mastering of material**), essays that are overburdened with irrelevant information (**no selection**), essays that run together opposite points of view (**no analysis**), essays that are unclear, incoherent or boring, and essays that don't fully answer the question. The notes that follow are intended to help you avoid these pitfalls.

Essay writing also helps you to acquire skills that are vital to most of the careers you may wish to follow. You should learn to write clearly and concisely, to report accurately, and to structure and communicate arguments effectively. These skills are vital to, for example, public service, business and media professions.

WRITING ESSAYS AT A GLANCE:



WRITING THE ESSAY: ALLOW TIME TO THINK AND PLAN

Allow yourself plenty of time to **think**. Start working on the essay at least a couple of weeks before it is due in. **Think ahead!** Plan your essay writing strategically. If you are intending to write an essay on a particular topic on your reading list, remember that other students may be after the same books and that delaying your research will increase the risk that the recommended books are unavailable when you want them. Managing time is crucial to good essay writing; a hurried, unthinking and under-researched essay is of little value to you and wastes your teacher's time and effort.

UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION

It is useful to regard essay writing as a **problem-solving activity**. You begin with a problem that requires a solution, collect the evidence that you need to reach it, then present problem, evidence and solution in the form of an essay. It often helps to have an essay title that is stated in the form of a question. But even if the title is not in question form, you ought to turn the title into a question before you begin. In essays, as in examinations, it is vital that you **answer the question**.

Read the essay title/question **carefully**. Misreading the question is one of the commonest forms of student mistake. Many questions contain significant words: e.g. **describe, discuss, explain, compare, contrast, assess**. These words are there for a purpose: they are never shorthand ways of asking you to write all you know on the subject, but ways of **focussing and guiding** your attention. Make sure you understand what they mean in the context of the question, and if you don't, **ASK!** If the essay question has several aspects, make sure you have spotted them all. Note any restrictions - e.g. **dates** or **type of literature**.

Remember you have been asked to answer a **specific question** or to discuss a **particular problem**; do not adopt a vague or imprecise approach, ignore the title or change it to suit yourself. Your essay should never descend to the level of being a **general** commentary - should never just rehearse everything you know or whatever you can think of to say. You should show an ability to select the important information and arguments.

Preparation: Researching, reading and note taking

Researching and Reading

Normally your teacher will have provided you with some guidance on reading, but also get in the habit of consulting bibliographies and the library to find further relevant material. Read books, journals, newspapers, past lecture notes etc. for **appropriate material** that will directly help you to answer the question.

Read purposefully; if you don't, your research will take far too long and you'll end up with a lot of **irrelevant material**. Learn how to **use** a book. This does not necessarily mean 'reading' it in the ordinary sense. Study the Contents page carefully and also the Index. Consult the Preface and the Introduction. Try and get a clear sense of the book's structure and content. You will be looking to **select** relevant material from the books you consult and **skilful 'trawling'** is essential.

Always have the question you have chosen in the front of your mind, and constantly ask yourself, **Does this material fit the essay topic?** Does it wander off too far on to side issues? (Side issues are often interesting, and in another context may be important, but not in planning **this essay**.) A common error is trying to cram every idea in, with no particular development of a theme or argument. You will need to be ruthless at this stage in rejecting ideas and information, rather than later attempting to string together unconnected arguments just because they **seem** related in some undefined way to the question.

Sources

Not all sources are of equal weight. There may be particular articles or books that should be included in your essay, depending on the topic chosen. Academic articles published in respected journals, or academic books, are of greater value than other sources such as online blogs, online encyclopaedias, etc. (**Wikipedia, for example, is not an acceptable source for an essay unless you have been specifically directed to this source by your module convenor. You should also avoid referencing lecture slides in your essays—speak to your convenor about the sources used in writing the lectures and consult these sources yourself**). Choose your sources with great care when writing your essay and consult your module convenor if you are unsure about the value of a source that you have consulted. If searching the internet, try GOOGLE Scholar, at <http://scholar.google.com>, which can be more productive than a broad search on the internet. Part of your essay mark will be based on the range of sources employed in your essay, so be sure to search widely and try to use both cutting edge scholars as well as key works relating to the subject of your essay. Your essay mark will further be affected by your effective use of these sources. For further information, see the next section on analysis and argument.

Note Taking

When reading, get into the habit of taking notes. People take down notes in different ways. Some use sheets of paper, others record notes electronically in a word document. Whatever system you choose remember to **take down in full the information about author, title, place of publication, publisher, date and page number(s)**. Make sure that your notes clearly indicate which information has been paraphrased by you, and which information has been copied directly from the text so that you avoid plagiarism when writing the essay.

Planning your essay

Plan the essay before writing it: think of the plan as a map showing the route your argument will follow. Of course, in the writing the route may be slightly different from the one you had planned; but the point of planning is to formally organise your materials in a rationally purposeful manner, and even if your original plan undergoes considerable change the sense of careful structure and rational ordering should remain.

The first thing to remember is that your essay should have a **structure**: a well thought out structure is like a skeleton - it gives your essay rational shape and ensures that it will stand up to rational scrutiny rather than wobble like a structureless jelly. Ask yourself what **argument** you are pursuing and to what **purpose**. Whatever your guiding principle is, it will affect the structure of the essay; a **comparison**, for example, requires setting out the framework within which the comparison will be made, and then a sustained consideration of the things that are to be compared, **not** two successive mini-essays with little attempt at connection.

Presenting your essay

THE GENERAL FORMAT OF AN ESSAY

Introduction

Take great care with your introduction. You can simply state what you are going to say, but perhaps the best introductions offer one or two scene-setting sentences which give an idea of what you consider to be the most important aspects of the question.

Try to show as briefly as possible that you understand what the question is asking you to do. The introduction may describe how you are going to tackle the question - 'I propose to concentrate on...because...', or 'I shall argue that...'. You may wish to query anything in the title with which you disagree - 'Marx is not as concerned with predicting the future as the question suggests...'.
Make sure your essay has an introduction that is an introduction to the essay, not necessarily the topic. Outline the points you will make in the essay in the order in which you will make them.

Main Body

This will depend on the subject matter. Order your points so that there is a reasoned argument and the sequence follows smoothly; indicate the move from one point to the next by an appropriate sentence at the end of a paragraph which signposts the direction you will be taking in what follows.

Try to show why each idea is relevant to the question. After each paragraph ask yourself if it is quite clear how the ideas in it are connected to the question. Check that you are **including** everything asked of you *and* **excluding** everything irrelevant.

Analysis, Arguments, Opinions, Evidence, and Justification

Most essays written in the School require that you analyse the topic under discussion. **What is analysis?** At its simplest, analysis refers to taking something complex and breaking it down to its various parts to better understand and explain it. Analysis typically involves providing a brief summary of the issue or argument along with a critical assessment or evaluation; the evaluation may involve assessing the facts, norms, language, discourse, theory, methods, findings, judgments, etc, pertaining to the topic. When conducting an analysis you bring together your own opinions as well as scholarly thought. When offering your views, it is not enough simply to say 'I think...'; you have to **justify your opinion**. To support your arguments include **evidence** from a wide range of original

sources and commentaries from recognised authorities, and explain how this evidence **supports** what you have to say; back up each opinion with relevant facts, etc..

A considerable part of your mark for the essay will be based on the strength of the analysis and argument that you are making. Be sure to examine each of the claims that you are making and ensure that each claim is fully supported by referring to the work of other scholars or other forms of evidence. Please note that the fact that someone else agrees with you does not in itself improve your argument; you still need to **explain why** the authority quoted is **correct** or **useful**. If you disagree with an authority, don't be afraid to make an argument that explains why you disagree. Your mark will further be determined by your use of evidence as well as the relevance of your analysis to the question as a whole.

Paragraphs

Each major point usually requires a paragraph of its own. If it's a major point, it needs not just stating but elaboration, and so requires a paragraph. Because the design of the paragraph reflects the things you want to say about the major point, there is no determined length for a paragraph. But as a rule of thumb, a paragraph is more than a sentence and less than a page.

Signpost the movement from one paragraph to another: indicate continuity or change of topic at the start of each paragraph. For eg, "Another closely related consideration is ..." or "Approaching this question from a totally different perspective enables us to see that ..." This sort of explicit sign posting will force you to think about the ordering of the ideas, and to justify the inclusion of material and thereby avoid padding. It will also force you to think about how the different parts of the essay fit together and how they relate to the topic as a whole.

Using Quotations

Comment on any quotations you use: if you do quote an author, don't leave the quotation to speak for itself; explain its point to the reader, either before or after citing it. This shows that you both understand what you are using and can see its relationship to the larger picture you are building.

Link quotations – don't just string them along one on top of another. Always put a few connecting words in, no matter how minimal. According to X " ". A little later she adds that "..."

Conclusion

A concluding paragraph can sum up the discussion and set out the main results. It is useful to read the first and last paragraphs together and see whether the question you have answered is the one you posed at the beginning. Try not to introduce new ideas at the end of the essay, although you might suggest issues for further consideration.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

All coursework should be typewritten. The **title (cover) page** should state the title and code of the module, your name, the essay title and number (is it your 1st, 2nd etc essay for the module?) and the exact number of words. Your module convenor will advise you on the appropriate length of your essay.

Please ensure that your name appears on the essay, either on the first page or on a header on all pages.

Line spacing for the text in the main body of your essay should be set at 1.5 or 2.0. Footnotes should be single-spaced. **Please do not forget to insert page numbers!**

Quotations

Single inverted commas (‘ ’) are used for a quotation, and **double** inverted commas (“ ”) for a quotation within a quotation. Single inverted commas are also used for slang, technical terms and special uses of words (as in: The American concept of ‘democracy’...).

If you are quoting only a brief phrase or sentence, it should be incorporated in the body of the essay within double quotation marks and with no special rearrangement. In general, **quotations of over five lines are indented**. Always ensure that the quotations fit grammatically into the introductory or surrounding sentence.

Word Limits

The word limits for your coursework are determined by the Module Convenor and will be found on your syllabus. Word limits must be strictly adhered to; essays that are much shorter or that exceed the limit may be subject to a penalty (more or less 10%). Word limits include all footnotes, endnotes, but usually exclude bibliography, and appendices.

References and bibliographies

Good research is never self-contained; it always builds upon and plays against the insights and results gained by other researchers. Whenever you use someone else’s material – e.g. ideas, concepts, data, words, sentences, paragraphs etc. – you must acknowledge this in the form of a reference. The reference refers the readers to the bibliographical details of the source you have used. Acknowledging your sources is an obligation, a service, and an advantage. It is an obligation because it would be dishonest to present someone else’s research and writing as your own – see also the section below on plagiarism. It is a service because your readers may wish to read more from the source you cited and therefore they need to be able to locate your source; and it is an advantage because the more honest you are in your use of sources, the more readers will be able to trust you as a scholar and to follow your argument. The open and honest use of sources is part of your credibility as an author.

What is referencing and what needs to be referenced?

Referencing means acknowledging the original author / source of the material (whether quoted written or spoken text, paraphrased text, data, images, ideas, opinions, etc) in your text and your reference list.

Please also note that any verbatim quote does not just have to be referenced but also indicated as a quote by the use of quotation marks.

Many different referencing systems are used in the academic literature. A referencing system is a set of rules which specify in detail how a particular type of source should be referred, e.g. what information should be included in a bibliographical reference and how that information should be presented. These rules differ according to whether the source is a single-authored monograph, an article published in a journal, a TV documentary, or a chapter in an edited volume. There are hundreds of different types of sources and each referencing system explains how to refer to each source.

In your essay you are required to use one of the standard and well-established referencing systems. BSIS does not recommend or endorse any particular style; it is important, however, that in any one essay you use one style consistently throughout. If you do not use the same style consistently throughout your essay, your mark for that essay may suffer! Because the essay word limits in our School normally include footnotes and endnotes, students sometimes find in-text citation styles (“Harvard method”) more economical than footnote or endnote styles. You are free, however, to choose the style you are most comfortable with – but you have to apply it consistently.

There are many widely used referencing styles, and you can find information about them online and in published referencing guides. For example, the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) system (which includes footnote styles and in-text citation styles) is explained here:

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html .

Below we list some typical references (for books, chapters etc.) using the CMS system. Each example is given first as a foot/endnote (N), followed by a bibliographic entry (B), and then in author-date style (T) as used in an in-text citation, and finally as a reference-list entry (R).

Book

N: 1. Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 65.

B: Doniger, Wendy. *Splitting the Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

T: (Doniger 1999, 65)

R: Doniger, Wendy. 1999. *Splitting the Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chapter or other part of a book

N: 5. Andrew Wiese, “The House I Live In’: Race, Class, and African American Suburban Dreams in the Postwar United States,” in *The New Suburban History*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 101–2.

B: Wiese, Andrew. “The House I Live In’: Race, Class, and African American Suburban Dreams in the Postwar United States.” In *The New Suburban History*, edited by Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, 99–119. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

T: (Wiese 2006, 101–2)

R: Wiese, Andrew. 2006. “The house I live in’’: Race, class, and African American suburban dreams in the postwar United States. In *The New Suburban History*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, 99–119. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Journal article

Article in a print journal

N: 8. John Maynard Smith, “The Origin of Altruism,” *Nature* 393, no. 3 (1998): 639.

B: Smith, John Maynard. “The Origin of Altruism.” *Nature* 393, no. 3 (1998): 639–40.

T: (Smith 1998, 639)

R: Smith, John Maynard. 1998. The Origin of Altruism. *Nature* 393, no. 3: 639–40.

Website (You must give the author, title of the page, date published if available, etc, as well as the URL)

N: 9. National Library of Medicine, "Cervical Cancer," Medline Plus, 2005,
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/cervicalcancer.html> (accessed October 15, 2009).

B: National Library of Medicine. "Cervical Cancer." Medline Plus, 2005.
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/cervicalcancer.html> (accessed October 15, 2009).

T: (National Library of Medicine 2005)

R: National Library of Medicine. 2005. "Cervical Cancer," Medline Plus
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/cervicalcancer.html> (accessed October 15, 2009).

UN Documents

N: 12. U.N. Economic and Social Council, Commission on the Status of Women, 42nd Session, *Report on the Forty-second Session (2-13 March 1998)* Supp. No.7 (E/1998/27). Official Record. New York, 1998.

B: U.N. Economic and Social Council. Commission on the Status of Women, 42nd Session. *Report on the Forty-second Session (2-13 March 1998)* Supp. No.7 (E/1998/27). Official Record. New York, 1998.

T: (U.N. Economic and Social Council 1998)

R: U.N. Economic and Social Council. Commission on the Status of Women, 42nd Session. *Report on the Forty-second Session (2-13 March)* Supp. No.7 (E/1998/27). Official Record. New York.