

University of Kent

Brussels Style Guide for Essays

*A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.*

~ *An Essay on Criticism* (Alexander Pope)

Why write essays?

Since the essay forms part, or all, of the final grade for each module, and they are practice exercises for the final exams and dissertation, it is useful to spend some time discussing the purpose of the essay:

- 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.
- 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.
- Essay writing develops your powers 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. 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 services, business and media professions.

This guide should be read in conjunction with the Style Guides issued by the different academic schools of the University. Guidance on how to obtain the relevant guide will normally be found in either the module outline or syllabus.

Allow Time to Think and Plan

Allow yourself plenty of time to **think**. Start working on the essay from the moment that you receive the essay topic and start to gather information. **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 supervisor's time and effort.

The Essay 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 **focusing 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: Reading, Researching and Note Taking

Reading

Normally your supervisor 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** which 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 wonder 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.

Researching

You have an essay topic, have done some basic reading, but now want to look for additional resources. The best place to do this is through the library's online resources. The following is a step-by-step guide to help you to conduct your literature search:

- Go to <http://www.kent.ac.uk/library/online/index.html> and click on 'indexes and abstracts', which will take you here: <http://www.kent.ac.uk/library/online/indexing/index.html>.
- The most useful search engine for us in the social sciences is called '**Web of Science**'. Scroll down the page and click on the link for 'Web of Science'. This will take you to a page where you will need to enter your Kent login and password.

- If, for example, you want to write an essay about humanitarian intervention in Somalia, then you could enter the search words 'humanitarian intervention and Somalia' in the topic line of the search engine and then press 'search'. This leads to 28 articles on this topic. Click on any interesting titles to read the abstracts and if the article will be of use to you, you can click on the 'article linker' button which will take you back to the University's library and let you know whether the University subscribes to that journal. If so, click on the link to the journal and start reading! If your search leads to 10,000 articles, you can further narrow your search by limiting it to subject specific journals, or by searching for further words in the listed articles.
- As mentioned above, the Library subscribes to thousands of online journals. These are a valuable resource for your study and research and you should become familiar with the journal titles related to your coursework or degree programme. To browse a journal, or to search for particular journal titles, begin at the library's online resources page, which can be found at <http://www.kent.ac.uk/library/online/index.html>.
- Click on 'online journals' and if you know the title, then search using the search box, or look for journals related to a discipline or topic area using one word, such as 'conflict' (which, in this case, will lead to 36 journals). If, for example, you wanted to look at the '*Journal of Conflict Resolution*', just click on the link to recent issues (post-1999) and you will be asked for your Kent login and password, and then be taken to the journal. Search regularly for new articles in the journals related to your study.

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/library/students/brussels.html>

<https://www.kent.ac.uk/library/templeman/contacts/subject.html>

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.** It may, however, be a useful guide to some source information). 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.co.uk/>, which can be more productive than a broad search on the internet.

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. Do what suits you: develop your own system. Whatever system you choose, remember to take down in full the information about author, title, place of publication, publisher and 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.

In reading you should compile at least two sorts of notes:

- Striking phrases, sentences and paragraphs that you will want to copy out exactly in order to use them as quotations. The sources of these "quotations" must be identified precisely as to author, title, publisher, publication date and page number(s);
- Notes in your own words as you jot down what seem to be the most important points and arguments. Always try to summarise the important points and arguments in your own words and

with your comments on them. Even so, remember that the ideas of others must be properly referenced even though you do not use their words. But in general by using your own words you will avoid plagiarism (see below).

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.

For some modules the essay titles will be given to you while for others you will be allowed to choose your own topic and will then define the question in agreement with your module convenor. Either way, the function of an essay is to give you the opportunity to demonstrate that you have a firm grasp of a particular issue. Unless you are specifically asked to do so you should not write a report on the literature on a particular question. You should, instead, use this literature to help you to formulate your own views on the topic. You are not expected to be "original", but you are expected to formulate your own position, albeit using the work of others. Use the literature; do not let it use you.

Presenting Your Essay

General Essay Format

When you come to the writing stage, you may adopt various strategies. You may decide to argue a case - i.e. you pose the question and present evidence for one possible answer to that question, although in doing so you cannot simply write a polemic and you must take on possible criticisms of your position. Alternatively, you may prefer to give both sides of the argument, and confine yourself to a few concluding remarks which summarise the debate. Neither approach is "better" than the other. The choice depends on your personal inclination, and the confidence you feel in expressing your point of view. On the whole, though, it is better to be bold than unduly modest.

It is generally best to write on the assumption that the reader of your essay has no prior knowledge of the subject, but is interested and wants to find out about it. In other words, essays are not written for the benefit of the marker (who presumably knows a lot about the question already). Essays should serve the purpose of informing you about the subject, both when you compose it and when you come to revise the material some weeks or months later.

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.

Critical Opinion

In some essays you are asked to give your views, but 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. Examples are always useful, but don't make the mistake of stuffing your essay with masses of examples and too little argument. Do not make sweeping generalisations!

Judgements and Justification

Your essay should contain your own judgements and assessments. What can cause problems is the expression of a personal judgement that is not clearly supported by direct evidence or by evidence from the authorities you have consulted. However, 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 say so. Where an authority is used remember to say whose opinion it is and where you found it.

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.

Bibliography

See below.

Now let your essay mature. Good essays, like good wine, are better for a period of maturation. Allow at least 24 hours for maturation, preferably a few days. This requires planning in advance.

Copies

It is foolish not to keep at least one copy of all of your essays. Essays can be mislaid or go astray - much anxiety and extra work may be avoided by getting into the habit of making a copy of each piece of submitted work. Make sure you print and/or save a copy of each essay you write and then keep another back-up!

Academic feedback

When you get your essay back, do not just take note of the mark, read your supervisor's comments carefully. If you want further clarification on anything relating to the essay, arrange to see your supervisor; take the essay with you.

The mark that you receive for an essay has of necessity to be a composite judgement, taking into account both the content of the essay and its structure and presentation. Thus, a mark of 56 might be given for a neatly structured essay based on rather little information, or for a well-researched essay that was badly put together or written unclearly. The reasons for the mark/grade should be clear from the marker's comments, but if you are in any doubt ask directly. Do not be afraid to ask your supervisor "How well structured did you find my essay?" or "How clearly was it written?" as well as "Did you agree with what I said?".

When marking essays your supervisor will be looking for the following things in particular:

- The ability to pursue and develop a consistent argument;
- The ability to use evidence, sometimes from a wide range of sources;
- Logical control and organisation of your material;
- The ability to discriminate between the significant and the trivial;
- A clear structure to your essay;
- The ability to write clearly, fluently and concisely;
- Evidence of independent thought.

Length of Essays

Supervisors will normally offer guidance on essay length. Within the given word limit, the length of the essay should be dictated by the amount of space you need to resolve your problem. Never introduce extraneous material in order to increase the number of words. Essays that exceed or fail to meet the word limit may not be accepted. In all cases, essays must be typewritten, double spaced on a single side of A4 paper. It is as important not to write too long an essay as it is to avoid excessive brevity. (Most long essays are long because they devote too much attention to summarising the literature, which is to be avoided).

Style and Grammar

*True ease in writing comes from art not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.*

ibid

Although essays are not works of art, they should conform to normal literary canons. A good writing style is not something you are born with, but has to be cultivated by repeated and self-critical practice. Approach writing as a skill to be acquired, and an essay as a test of your craft. Good written English depends on the rhythm and balance of sentences, and you need to develop an experienced ear for this; but there are certain elementary hints that can help you avoid the worst mistakes.

It is always best to write in short, simple sentences, in other words without using mounds of jargon and without encumbering your sentences with numbers of subordinate clauses. Social scientists are notoriously bad at observing this rule and the typical social science textbook may be a poor example to follow. Many social scientists should take note of Pope's:

*Words are like leaves; and where they most abound,
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.*

ibid

Correct grammar is simply a question of taking care as you write. Make sure, for instance, that every sentence has a subject and a verb, and conveys a clear meaning. Reading an essay aloud (to yourself, or even to somebody else) is a useful way of testing how well the style works. This exercise can also help you to write in a lively and interesting manner. If English is not your first language, read the essay to an Anglophone friend who writes English well.

The correct use of the apostrophe seems difficult for many students, but is in fact easy if you remember that apostrophes are used for two different main purposes:

- to indicate the omission of letters or sounds - e.g. "it's" (meaning "it is" or "it has" (NB this is not the possessive pronoun)) and "didn't" (for "do not"); and
- to mark possession in nouns - e.g. "Emma's house", "the doll's house" (= one doll's house, "the dolls' house" (= two or more dolls' house), "the boss's house" (if there's only one boss), "the bosses' house", and "the children's house".

The apostrophe is not used to mark possession in pronouns - e.g. "its house (not "it's house") - with the exception of "one's" (and derivatives such as "someone's" and "someone else's"). On this and other matters of grammar and style, consult the Oxford Companion to the English Language.

Technical Details

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. The word limit **MUST** be adhered to.

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!

The use of right justification is optional, although in terms of visual aesthetics, full justification (i.e., applied to right-hand margin) gives an essay or dissertation a more professional look. Leave a margin all round of about 1.5 inches (3.2 cm); this will allow the essay marker to write comments at the point where they will be of the greatest benefit.

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. Always identify the source of a quotation so that your supervisor can look it up with ease. This will normally be done by a footnote.

Layout

Include appropriate illustrations (diagrams, maps, charts etc.). Use the layout and conventions you know will be most welcome to your reader. If you are unclear about any aspect of essay writing ask your supervisor for advice.

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.

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.

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. Whichever system you use, you must use it consistently throughout your paper or essay.

If you are not sure which style to use, you may wish to take a look at the various styles that are in use at the University of Kent and note which ones your academic school or department recommends. <http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/ai/styleguides.html>

The University of Kent provides all students with Reference Management Software that enables you to build a personal database of bibliographic records for each book, book chapter, journal article, or any other type of material that you have read or used as part of your study and research. It then enables you correctly to format citations and the bibliography according to your chosen style. You will note that all the main citation styles in use at the University are available for selection from these software packages.

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/library/online/reference-management/index.html>

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

*Some ne'er advance a Judgement of their own,
But catch the spreading notion of the Town;
They reason and conclude by precedent,
And their own stale nonsense which they ne'er invent.*

ibid

Academic integrity is the attitude of approaching your academic work honestly, by completing your own original work, attributing and acknowledging your sources when necessary and not relying on dishonest means to gain advantage.

Plagiarism and cheating reduces the value of the work you hand in for assessment and the value of your time spent at university.

New regulations now mean that the University must keep records of plagiarism and include this information in employment or academic references.

Academic integrity is all about maintaining standards: of your own work and of your degree. Don't devalue your own achievement and the work of others by acting dishonestly in your studies. Before you write an essay or a paper, you must familiarise yourself fully with the Student Academic Integrity Guide. <http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/ai/students/index.html>

If you have any questions or doubts then you must raise them with your supervisor and the penalty for plagiarism will normally be FAIL! It cannot be stressed too strongly that you must not copy from books, lectures, fellow students or anyone else, without acknowledging the source of what you have copied and clearly indicating "what has been copied". Nor is it permissible to paraphrase, summarise, or rearrange something that is not yours in order to present it, knowingly or unknowingly, as your own.

It is plagiarism to quote another writer without "quotation marks" and a reference to the original source with page numbers. This much is obvious, but it is also plagiarism to summarise the views of another without attribution even if you use your own words. The key thing is never to allow it to be thought that you are claiming that a particular position is original to you when it is not. Remember that in order to defend yourself against a charge of plagiarism it is not sufficient to point to an entry in a bibliography at the end of an essay. There are grey areas when it comes to plagiarism the basic rule is, if in doubt give a reference.

The temptation to plagiarise presumably arises either from laziness or from lack of confidence in your own abilities; it must be firmly resisted. We are all prone to laziness in our working lives but to add intellectual theft to a minor sin is intolerable. We are all prone to attacks of under-confidence but to add deception simply increases one's insecurity. Plagiarism is detested by all teachers and scholars. Being detected in the act is shameful; being investigated and punished is humiliating.

Don't plagiarise!!!

Conclusion

A final point:

*Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see,
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.
In every work regard the writer's End,
Since none can compass more than they intend;
And if the means be just, the conduct true,
Applause, inspite of trivial faults is due...*

~ *ibid*

Essays can never be perfect, but they should be finished and handed in on time. In eternity the Divine Supervisor will be awarding you wings or directions to the other place; but this university is not Heaven, though we are hoping you produce 'The Good' Essay.

We hope these notes are of some help. Remember though that they are just a guide, and we do not guarantee that following the guide will ensure high marks. If you want to pursue these issues farther, a good place to start is George Orwell's essay on "Politics and the English Language" in *Collected Essays...*, (Penguin 1970) Vol 4, pp156-70; also in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Penguin 1962) pp143-57. Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, published in 1729, is a witty, elegant and instructive poem that can be read with profit and pleasure.