A GUIDE TO GOOD ESSAY WRITING
This booklet is designed to guide you to better essay writing, an essential skill which takes time to develop. It is very important that you learn what constitutes good quality academic work and that you also learn how to present that work in the appropriate format, making use of standard scholarly conventions. We set out here the guidelines that you should follow in the work that you submit while you are studying with us.

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You should read this booklet in its entirety before you submit your first piece of written work. You should also retain this booklet for future reference throughout your time studying with us.
What is an Essay?

Many students find written work the single most challenging element of their study, but with application and effort all students can improve their writing style over the progress of their degree. It is important to remember that we are not expecting you to become professional-standard writers, rather, we aim to enable you to use language in the clearest manner to articulate your ideas in written work.

Before you start a piece of written work, ask yourself what is required of the assessment. An academic essay at university level is very different from the sort of written work expected at school or college. Much of the work submitted to us, although it may be intelligent and contain correct, well-organised information, lacks the levels of forethought, critical insight and interrogation which characterise a university-level essay.

A good essay should map out a single coherent argument, using supporting evidence and analysis to back up each point. Too often, essays consist of a set of loosely related observations or insights – very often perfectly valid individually in themselves, but not pulling together to form a coherent whole. To gain a good idea how to go about your essay, imagine how a lawyer would argue a case in a court of law. He or she would have one central argument to prove (for example, person A is guilty of fraud, or person B is innocent of all charges), and would use supporting evidence to back up their claim. The evidence must come from a variety of reputable sources to form a watertight case (police reports, witness statements, close questioning of the parties involved, etc). Your essay should ideally follow this pattern: decide on your central argument, and use the most convincing evidence to back up your point. Using a wide variety of sources (books, journals, reputable internet sites, combined with appropriate musical examples) will make your argument more convincing.
Ten Steps Towards a Good Essay

1. Read the coursework brief carefully and make sure you understand the assessment criteria. It is in your best interests to understand what you tutor expects from each piece of work: coursework which veers away from the brief may not meet some of the assessment criteria and may score badly as a result.

2. When what is required is fully understood, spend time on the research and preparation of materials. Read books, journals, articles from a variety of sources, and listen to relevant music.

3. Plan out in a sentence or two what your main argument will be. Also, make a note of each subsidiary point you wish to make, as well as any important references and musical examples.

4. The next step in the procedure is to map out a plan for the essay - how will the argument develop? How will you move coherently from one point to the next?

5. Now, with all your research organised and the information planned, write an initial draft of the essay.

6. Read through your essay to check the fluency of your work. Often, reading the essay out loud will pick up certain errors, awkward expressions or unnecessary repetitions – these are aspects of our writing that we often miss when we read our work silently to ourselves.

7. Make corrections and play around with the draft, checking whether the paragraph-scheme develops effectively, the main research is brought to bear, and the wording is clear.

8. You may find it useful at this point to give your essay to a friend to read. Ask them whether it makes sense to them, whether they can spot any mistakes in the text. It may also be helpful to you if you ask them to tell you in their own words what argument you are making in the essay. Ask them also if they can give an account of how the argument develops point by point. Can they clearly outline what you have in mind? If not, you probably need to redraft the piece.

9. Once you have arrived at a final version of the essay, spellcheck it and proofread it carefully, then hand it in.

10. When your essay has been marked, learn from your tutor’s comments how to improve your next piece of work.
Plagiarism

Plagiarism is presenting the work, ideas or words of someone else as though they were your own. The most common examples of plagiarism we encounter are direct copies from internet sites which are submitted as original coursework. Clearly, this would be gross dishonesty, as you would be seeking to receive credit for work that you had not done. But there are other forms of plagiarism too. If, for example, you submit an essay which has largely been written by yourself, but which contains a section that has been taken from someone else, without being clearly indicated as a quotation (and appropriately referenced), this still constitutes plagiarism.

At the University of Kent, as at all other universities, the issue of plagiarism is taken very seriously indeed. If we suspect that even a small section of your work has been plagiarised, we are very likely to assign you a mark of 0% for that assignment. For more guidance on this matter, refer to the following online resource: http://www.kent.ac.uk/registry/quality/guidance/plagiarism.htm

Remember, your tutor will assume that all the words, diagrams, ideas and arguments in your essay are your own. Therefore if you have used anything from books, journals, articles, or another external source (including the Internet), you must credit it with a reference.

Copying

Never copy anything directly without acknowledging the source (this includes text, music or audio, media files, computer or programming code, the work of other students and even earlier pieces of work by yourself).

Quoting

A quotation must be referenced properly and set out as detailed in the guidelines in this booklet. Appropriate quotations are desirable: they give your work academic credibility and show the reader you know your subject. Sources must be identified, and must also be included in a bibliography at the end of each piece of work.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing means putting someone else’s ideas into your own words. This is acceptable provided that it is acknowledged (for example, ‘Smith goes on to argue that…’ or ‘Smith provides further proof that…’). Remember to include a reference to the source within the text and also in your bibliography.
Basic Essay Rules

Choose a suitable font, based upon legibility and clarity. Do not change font during the course of your essay. Text should be double or one-and-a-half spaced. Allow one blank line between paragraphs, and at least two blank lines after a main heading. This allows enough room for any comments and corrections your tutor wishes to make. Indent the first line of new paragraphs if you wish, but remember that the first paragraph under any heading is not indented (usually this will only be the first paragraph of your essay, unless you have divided your essay into chapters or sections).

You may use italics to emphasise words (but do not over-use them!). Also use italics for foreign terms (\textit{tabula rasa}, \textit{poco stringendo}), book titles (\textit{The Raw and the Cooked}, by Lévi-Strauss) and names of pieces (\textit{The Rite of Spring}). Use single inverted commas for the name of articles, essays and songs (this applies to anything that is part of a larger work). For example, you should write:

In his article, ‘How music matters’, Scott Burnham (1999) discusses the problems of reductive criticism; ‘When I am laid in earth’, from Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas uses a descending ground bass. Works such as symphonies or string quartets, which are identified by their form and number are not written in italics or given inverted commas. Thus, Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 in A is the correct format.

References

There are two recognised academic standards for the referencing of texts. The first is the Author / Date method, and the second is the footnote method. You should never mix the two. You may see slight variants of each system in many of the books you read, but please try and follow the guidelines as they are given here. This will give your essays the consistency that is required for academic work of this kind. \textbf{We strongly recommend that you use the Author / Date method, as it is simpler and contains less margin for error.}

At the end of your essay you should provide a bibliography, which should be presented on a new page after the main body of your text. You should list items in alphabetical order, according to the author’s surname. If you have used CD’s, DVD’s, liner notes to recordings, artworks, performances or internet sites, these should also be listed (these are usually placed in a separate section after books and articles).
Author / Date Referencing Method

In this method, footnotes are not used. Reference information is given in a concise form within the text. The full detail of each item should be given in full in the bibliography.

If you are summarising an argument that is explored throughout a text, give only the author’s name and the year of publication. You may give the title of the work if you wish:

Rowell (1979) explores the concept of musical time and its link to the subconscious.

In Repeated Takes, Michael Chanan (1995) addresses the effect that recorded sound has had on listening.

If you are referring to a particular point an author makes, give the page numbers after the date:

Sloboda highlights some useful comparisons between language and music (1985: 13-26).

You can place the date and page numbers at the end of the sentence to avoid breaking the flow of the text if you wish. You may wish to show how other writers have agreed or disagreed with an author:

Certain authors have come to support this view (Smith 1988; Jones 1990; Brown 1992b).

Jung (1958: 78) rejects this reductive approach to psychoanalysis.

[Note: when you use two books published in the same year by one author, use ‘a’, ‘b’, ‘c’, etc, after the year to distinguish between them.]

If you are quoting from the source directly, give the page number and use single inverted commas:


Double inverted commas are only used within quotations when the original author used either the double or single variety. This helps to distinguish between your markings (which should always be single inverted commas) and the original author’s. Quotations of less than three lines should be embedded in the text using single inverted commas: ‘this is an example of a short quotation’ (Smith 1999: 20). Notice that the reference details and full stop appear after the inverted comma. Quotations that are longer than three lines should be set apart from the main text, and single-spaced, with a minimum indentation of 1cm:
This is an example of a longer quotation. Notice that inverted commas are not necessary. The quotation should also be indented on the left and right. Again, remember to reference the source of the quotation. In this example I am using the Author / Date referencing method (Smith 1999: 21)

Remember to indicate if you omit any text, or if you add any. Three full stops should be used (like this … ) if you decide not to include part of the passage in question. The quotation should still make grammatical sense, however. Square brackets are used to indicate additions or substitutions by yourself. These should only be used to preserve the grammar and meaning of the text if it has suffered from being taken out of context. In the following passage it is not clear what is being discussed:

There is hardly anything in the world that has greater power to bend the morals of men this way or that, as Plato wisely observed. And in fact we find from experience that it has an insidious and well-nigh incredible power to move us whither at will (Atlas 1998: 520-1).

In order to clarify the sentence, you could write:

There is hardly anything in the world that has greater power to bend the morals of men this way or that, as Plato wisely observed. And in fact we find from experience that [music] has an insidious and well-nigh incredible power to move us whither at will (Atlas 1998: 520-1).

Too many of these additions can look clumsy, and usually it is best to avoid them if possible. Paraphrase an argument if the quotation does not fit with your flow of text, remembering to give the appropriate reference. Notice also that the page numbers in the above reference have been elided (that is, shortened from 520-521 to 520-1). Elide page numbers to the shortest pronounceable form: thus 72-3 and 342-9, but 213-16.

For music essays, examples or diagrams should be included wherever possible to clarify or support aspects of your argument. The best results are obtained by using a notation or graphics program to copy out the example yourself. The graphics file can then be incorporated into your essay. Scanning is acceptable provided the example remains clear and is carefully trimmed using an editing program.

Examples should be numbered to help you refer to them within your text. Music is traditionally listed as ‘Musical Example 1’, ‘Musical Example 2’ etc., while diagrams are listed as ‘Figure 1’, ‘Figure 2’, and so on.

Finally, remember to number the pages of your text (page numbers should be centered at the bottom), and include your name and coursework details in either a header or footer.
Bibliography

Your bibliography should be separated from the main text of the essay, and given a separate page or pages. Items should be listed by the author’s surname, in alphabetical order. Below is given the standard layout for books, journal entries and essays that form part of a compilation volume. Take careful note of the punctuation. Do not give first names; use initials. Note the layout of the second name if a book has more than one author or editor. Titles of articles are given in inverted commas. The name of the journal or compilation volume should be given in italics. Learn the differences between journal and compilation entries. If the medium you wish to cite is not listed here, consult the Harvard Referencing Guide for a complete list.


Internet


Note: many internet sites do not have a date of ‘publication’, so give the date of your visit after all the other information. Give the designer or maintainer of the site as the author, if no particular author is credited for the text. Remember, internet sites are not always a reliable source of academic information, and Wikipedia is not considered an acceptable academic reference!

Film & Television


Music Scores


Carole, F (n.d.) Duet Etude. UK: Columbia Music Co.
Artworks

Artist Year (use c. for approximate). Title [Material type] description (held at plus the location of the gallery or museum where the original item is kept).


*For prints or poster copies use: Artist; Year (use c. for approximate); Title [type]. Description (e.g. materials, publisher of poster or print, source of image, or place original exhibited at. Include size of print if available/relevant.

Picasso, P. (1914). Fruit, Dish, Bottle & Violin. [Poster]. Oil on canvas. Original held at the National Gallery, London. 92cm x 73cm.

Concerts

Composer (year of work). Title of concert. [Type of performance – e.g. ‘Concert’]. Who the concert was ‘Performed by’ and ‘conducted by’. Venue for performance, and date of performance.


*For bands: use name of band, date, [Location: Date seen].

Performances

Choreographer/playwright. (Premier date - in brackets). Title of performance/play. [Type of performance – e.g. ‘play’, ‘Ballet’ etc.]. ‘Performed by’ and ‘directed by’. Venue for performance, and date of performance:

Common Errors

Biography

Do not include unnecessary biographical information concerning the composers or artists you may be writing about. On the whole, it is not important for you to detail domestic details unless they have a direct relevance to your main argument. In academic essays you should consider aspects of compositional style, technique, musical influences and try to offer proof and examples for everything that you assert. You are not required to write a composer's life-story.

Personal Anecdote

Do not present the reader with your subjective impressions or experiences. Your tutor will not want to read about which parts of a piece you found ‘exciting’ or ‘uninteresting’, where you were when you first heard it, nor hear about any other personal reactions. As always, remain objective in your studies. This is not to say that you should refrain from making any value-judgments whatsoever. On the contrary, a good essay will present a variety of critical analyses and discussions in order to persuade the reader of the merits or defects of a particular work.

Confusing Different Contexts

Avoid mixing or confusing things from different eras, cultures or backgrounds. For example, do not commit the following sort of error:

In this study, Schaeffer uses rhythmic loops to achieve a more commercial sound.

Mahler is famous for his film and television music.

The rhythmic loops which Pierre Schaeffer first explored in musique concrète were a result of exploring the limits of early technology and were not an attempt to appeal to a mass market (commercial electronic music hardly existed at this time!). Similarly, television was not around during Mahler's time. His works may be over-used by the contemporary media, but they were originally intended for the concert hall, not the cinema.

Contractions, Slang and Cliché

When we talk, and when we write informally, we tend to use quite a lot of contractions, such as ‘I'll’, ‘won't’, ‘hadn’t’, ‘she’d’ and so forth. When you are writing an essay, you are using a very particular form of language - a formal, academic version of English, different from the language we speak casually every day. Academic English requires that you do not use contractions in your writing, as it also requires that you should, as far as possible, avoid using slang terms and clichés (e.g., ‘this issue has become a political football’; ‘Tarasti really brings this point home in the final chapter’; ‘Beethoven surprises us all with this sudden change of key’).
**Forms of Address**

When you use a writer’s or a composer’s name, give the name in full on the first occasion, but subsequently use only the surname. Do not refer to a writer by the first name alone. Well-known figures are usually referred to by surname only. Do not use formal titles (‘Doctor’, ‘Mr’, ‘Ms’, etc.).

**The Correct Use of the Apostrophe**

The vast majority of students do not know how to use the apostrophe correctly to indicate possession. *Never* use an apostrophe to form a plural. The basic rules are simple:

- when the noun is *singular*, the apostrophe goes *before* the s
- when the noun is *plural*, the apostrophe goes *after* the s

The one exception to this rule is the case of ‘it’. Its does not mean ‘of it’, but is rather a contraction of *it is*.

So, here are some examples of the rules in action:

The tutor is marking the student’s work. The student’s name is John.
The tutor is marking the students’ work. They are waiting for their marks.
The house is derelict. Its roof is falling in. It’s where I used to live.

**Abbreviations**

Contractions and acronyms should have no full stops (Dr, Mr, CD and DAT for example). The plural of CD is CDs (not CD’s!). Similarly if you are talking about a particular decade, do not use an apostrophe: the correct format is ‘the 1950s’ (not ‘the 1950’s’).

Abbreviations and their plurals do retain full stops, however (for example, vol., vols., ed., eds.).

**Tenses**

Conventionally, when we write about something, we do so in the present tense. So we write: ‘In *The Rite of Spring* Stravinsky evokes the primal spirit of pagan Russia’, and ‘In his book, *Music Imagination and Culture*, Nicholas Cook argues that there is a disparity between how music is experienced and how it is described’. It is best to avoid the past tense. Try not to write: ‘In *The Rite of Spring* Stravinsky evoked the primal spirit of pagan Russia’ or ‘In his book, *Music Imagination and Culture*, Nicholas Cook argued that there is a disparity between how music is experienced and how it is described’. Sometimes you will, of course, want to use the past, as, for example, when you want to indicate a change in someone’s thinking: ‘Schnittke began his compositional career as an arch-modernist, but now his compositions explore the postmodern characteristics of transcontextuality and relativism’.

The crucial thing, however, is that you avoid mixing tenses unnecessarily. So, avoid saying things like: ‘Handel went to Dublin and the gathered dignitaries praise him’.

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