Essay writing – some tips!

- Time management

- Research and reading

- Essay writing tips

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- **Time management**
- Research and reading
- Essay writing

Example: Work out your time budget

- Module with 2 essays of 2000 words each

- Full time students – assume 40 hours/week

- One module is one third of load of semester:
  - 13.3 hours/weeks in total for module
  - 2 hours of lectures + 1 hour tutorial

- What to do for the remaining 10.3 hours/week?
  - Research and essay writing
  - Revising for the exam
  - So, spend ~35 hours on each coursework essay

What to do with 35 hours?

- Some combination of the following, as suits ...

- Lots of **research** and **reading**

- A moderate amount of **note taking**

- A reasonable amount of **planning**

- Some **discussion** with class mates

- Some **writing**

- A little **re-writing**

Plan your time

- Look at the blank slots in your time table

- Split up your work

- Work backwards from your deadline

- Think about what to do **today** and **tomorrow**:
    - e.g. do some research, reading and notes **today**, then do some planning writing and re-writing tomorrow

Time management resources

- See:
  http://saleem.host.cs.st-andrews.ac.uk/links.html
  Find a method that suits you:
  - e.g. I use a "to-do" list with deadlines for tasks, then work backwards from the deadline allocating my time
- You do not absolutely need to have an electronic diary: paper can work just as well, but you do need to exercise self-discipline!
- Planning is essential, a routine is helpful.

- Time management

- **Research and reading**

- Essay writing

Researching an Essay

- From a grading view-point:
  - Repeat facts from lecture gets bare pass perhaps
  - Decent grades: make sense of material from reading list and present and informed discussion
  - Top grades: go beyond the reading list, investigate what you think the key issues are, argue your case backed with facts from your research
- Your research will move you along this scale.

Dealing with research material

- Not enough to look up a source and stare at it!

- Develop understanding:
  - Thoroughly: you will know more than the final words in your essay
  - In context: do not forget to address the essay title! Do not just do a brain dump of facts!
  - Fairly: if you are asked to "discuss" it means you have to present both sides of the argument.
  - Accurately: make sure you get your facts right!

- Watch out for the dates of some (online) sources!

How to read

- ## Read widely:
  - A diverse set of sources on the same topic, different viewpoints, discover correct context, negate bias

- ## Take notes sensibly:
  http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/reading-and-researching/notes-from-research

- ## Keep a record of your sources:
  - Will need to cite references
  - May need to revisit if notes unclear
  - Tools, e.g. Mendeley http://www.mendeley.com

- ## Review your notes

Good sources

- Journals and conferences:
  - Peer-reviewed, i.e. refereed:
    ACM digital library
    IEEE digital library
  - Quality checked by other experts
  - These have references which you could use yourself
- Text books, e.g. written for study
- "Serious" magazines, e.g. Science, Nature
- Government WWW sites

Watch out ... care needed

- "Non-study" books, e.g. "popular" science

- Online FAQs, magazines

- News agencies and journalism sources:
  - BBC, CNN, Sky etc

- Newspaper articles

- Some technical/corporate WWW sites

- Trade press

- Pressure/lobby groups, political sites, etc.

Unacceptable sources

- Wikipedia:
  - Unless the essay is about Wikipedia! ☺
  - However, it may be worth following the list of references on the Wikipedia page …

- Personal web pages

- Blogs

- Email

- Twitter, Facebook, etc.

Some sources to get you started

- http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/resources/electronic/
  - ACM Digital Library http://www.acm.org/dl
  - IEEE Xplore http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/Xplore/

- Google Scholar http://scholar.google.co.uk/

- Computing reviews http://www.reviews.com/

- Web of Knowledge http://wok.mimas.ac.uk/

- Books 24x7 ITPro (via SAULCAT) (11,000+ IT ebooks)

- See also some links on my links page:
  - http://saleem.host.cs.st-andrews.ac.uk/links.html

Library!

- http://library.st-andrews.ac.uk/
- http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/contact/openingtimes/
- Library is also a place to read and make notes!
  - It can be good to spend time away from the keyboard.
- University of Dundee Library
- Some books may have limited numbers of copies:
  - Plan ahead
  - Make your reservations

- Time management

- Research and reading

- **Essay writing**

General structure

- Abstract

- Introduction

- Body of Essay

  - possibly subdivided: do not be afraid to use sections and sub-headings!

- Conclusion

- References/Bibliography

- (Numbers in slides assume essay of 2000 words)

Abstract

- 50-100 words

- "The essay in miniature"

- "The title writ large"

- Purpose is to let a researcher decide whether they need to read the essay!

- Might be the last thing to write …

Why did my Satellite Navigation System tell me to go that way?

Abstract This report describes how Satellite Navigation Systems help a user to navigate across a road network. The report discuses how GPS is used to track the user's location; how a map database is used to represent the road network and the shortest path algorithms that are used to find the best route. It also looks at methods of improving the efficiency of these algorithms.

A Reasonably Good Abstract

More Abstracts

The essay aims to give an overview of the functionality of a Satellite Navigation System. An overview of the structuring of such a system into a publicly shared space-based part and a private user segment is given ...

I do not want to know what it aims to do, I want to know what it does. Second sentence too convoluted.

Satellite navigation systems are electronic devices used to assist the user in finding his way from his current location to a destination. This assistance is given in the form of directions, which the device may show on a map and read aloud to the user as they are required, e.g. when driving.

All **true**, but where does the essay fit in and how does this answer the question?

Introduction

- Maximum 1/3 to 1/2 of a page.

- State your position / thesis:
  - The (short) answer to the question
  - What your essay will show / prove

- Demonstrate you understand the question:
  - Intelligently, not just by setting out definitions

- Road map for the whole essay:
  - Provide a guide to the structure

- (You are convincing the marker that they will be marking a good, well-thought out essay!)

A good introduction is …

- Concise:
  - Gets straight to the point
  - Short sentences
  - Unpretentious

- Confident:
  - State your claim: do not say "I will try to show pigs can fly", say, "This essay will show pigs can fly", or better still, "Pigs fly".

- Decisive:
  - Have an opinion and state it.
  - Save the arguments against (discussion) for later.

Example: A bad introduction …

Bill Gates, God or the Devil?

This is a very difficult question to answer, and indeed, a definitive answer may not ultimately be possible. There are some who say that Bill Gates is God and some who say that he is the Devil. In this essay I will do my best to show that he could be either of these. In the first section of the essay, I will discuss the meanings of "God" and "Devil". In the following section, I will give some information about Bill Gates and his career, especially the founding of Microsoft Inc. ………

- By this point the reader has lost the will to live.

Example: A good introduction

Bill Gates – God or the Devil?

Bill Gates is God. Many commentators would disagree with this (see for example ….). However, this essay will focus on his meteoric rise, his empowerment of the masses through software and his charitable work to conclusively demonstrate his divinity.

Or

Bill Gates is the Devil. Many misguided Microsoft enthusiasts disagree with this (see for example ….). However, this essay will focus on numerous aspects of Microsoft's unhealthy dominance of the software market, to prove its conclusion.

The Conclusion

- Again keep it concise
- Do not
  - Introduce new ideas or arguments
  - come to the opposite conclusion to the one you started your introduction with
    - See "rewriting" later
- Just a little but more than:

"In summary, this, that and the other, which justifies the main assertion of this essay, that ….".

The Middle

- The meat of the essay!

- This is what you have to **plan:**

  - Collect the points that you wish to make (each backed up by appropriate evidence – your reserach)

  - Organize them into headings or topics

    - Might take a few goes

    - Might realise you need more material on some point

  - Try to link the headings into a logical order

- You should be able to show your plan to your tutor a week or two before the essay is due.

Overall style

- Avoid the first person singular:
  - Don't say "I will show X".
  - If you need to, say, "This essay will show X".
  - But better still, just show it!
- Avoid slang and informality:
- Be confident, but not arrogant:
  - Claim things definitely, but back them up with evidence.
- Use a spellchecker, proper sentences and punctuation.

Citation and Bibliography: when.

See APA Guide http://www.apastyle.org

1) When you directly quote material (in ""):

- Only when it is a particularly striking/important phrase, or a quote from the actual subject of discussion.

2) When you paraphrase ideas or writing:

- Which you should do with restraint.

3) When you attribute a statement or view to someone:

- Source should demonstrate that they said/held it.

4) When you state a fact that is not "well known".

Citation and Bibliography: how.

- See APA Guide, pages 1 and 2
- Rules are very exact:
  - Punctuation
  - What has to be in italics
  - What to include under different circumstances
- In text have something like:

Twelve-button mice proved hard to use (Smith & Jones, 2003).

Write-only memory was proposed by Brown (1997).

Formatting

- APA Guide, pages 3 onwards:
  - Note punctuation, italics, quotes
- There is software to help you do this:
  - BiBTeX if you use LaTeX for word-processing
  - EndNote if you use MS Word
  - RefWorks on the University library Web pages
  - You will need to make sure they are set up for the right format.
- Entries in alphabetical order.

Re-reading and Re-writing

- Final, but essential stage
- Read through your essay and improve it.
  - Remove unneeded words (perhaps making room for another idea)
  - Make sure sentences are coherent
    - If in doubt, try reading it out loud
  - Make sure logical flow of ideas is reasonable

Final thoughts

- Lectures are to inform you a about subject matter.

- The essays are a "deliverable" at the end of this process – the lectures may not cover everything.

- You become "expert" in the area and then write a considered, properly-referenced answer to the essay question asked.

- The word count is normally an **upper limit** and not a **target** to aim for!

- If you **just read** to try and get enough material for your essay, it will be weak.

Further information

- Good general advice:
  http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/general/general-advice
- "The Elements of Style", Strunk and White
  - Small, handy, cheap! (~£6)
- "Writers Inc: A Student Handbook for Writing and Learning", Patrick Sebranek
  - Covers many types of writing, and provides various tips on learning techniques also! (~£20)
  - http://thewritesource.com/books/handbooks/writers_inc/