HAUTE ECOLE DE LA PROVINCE DE LIEGE
CATEGORIE TECHNIQUE

A Guide to Essay Writing

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Introduction

The purpose of this resource is to help you improve the skills you need to write an effective essay.

In this little guide we will try to give you some advice on the different steps involved in the process of writing a paper – from analyzing the question to the final editing. We will also focus on the structure and style of your writing assignment, giving you some useful language tips.

Citing your sources is also an important aspect of essay writing that will be dealt with in this work. Using other people's ideas or words without attributing them is a serious offence, called plagiarism. You should therefore always attribute anything you have taken from another source. There exist several citation styles in English but we have decided to use the Harvard Referencing System.

I. Before Starting to Write

1. Understanding the assignment

Once you've been given the title of the assignment, the first thing to do is to read it carefully to make sure you understand precisely what is expected from you. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is it asking?
- What is the purpose of the task?
- What is the target audience (e.g. the lecturer, the members of a jury, etc.)?

Some parameters will usually be defined for you, such as the length of the essay or the format of the title page. In any case, if you are given directions, you should always follow them.

2. Before starting the research

Before starting the research construct a rough plan. What do I know about the topic? What are the main points? How can I divide the topic into sub-topics? You will have to refine this outline but it will help you narrow your topic and have a clearer idea of what you are looking for.

Example of preliminary outline:

The Pros and Cons of Cloud Computing

Introduction:
- definition of cloud
- definition of cloud computing

Pros:
- low cost?
- ?
- ?

Cons:
- security
- ?
- ?

Conclusion

3. Researching the topic

In order to discover worthwhile information you will have to do some patient reading to familiarize yourself with the topic but also with the language. You may know something about the subject but you don't necessarily know how to say it in English. So it's a good idea to immerse yourself in the assigned topic in <u>English</u>.

4. Using the Internet

The Internet is a wonderful resource but it must be used carefully and critically. Anyone can put anything they want on the Web, so you really need to be cautious with the information you find online.

Here are some guidelines:

1. Evaluate the web page:

   • Who wrote the page? Is the author qualified? Can I verify his/her legitimacy? Be careful with blogs!

   • Why was the site created? Is it objective? Always check the domain. Some sites will promote the ideas of political or religious groups or will simply advertise for a product.

   • When was the page produced? Is the info up-to-date?

2. Keep your topic in mind and focus your research on relevant information <u>only</u>.

3. Keep track of your sources : when you find useful information, write it down, type it or cut and paste it but remember to mention where you found it so that you can cite it properly later. By doing so, you will avoid plagiarism (see Chapter on Plagiarism)

4. Do not limit yourself to the Internet!

As you research the topic, revise and polish your preliminary plan.

5. Taking notes

The best technique is probably to summarize key ideas and information in **your own words,** paraphrasing them. It will help you understand the topic much better.

But if you decide to cut-and-paste relevant information you want to use in your paper, make sure you write down the <u>full</u> source and be also careful to transcribe quotations <u>accurately</u>.

<u>A very good tip:</u>

Kimberly Chapman advises university students to keep a separate sheet or computer document for each source and write out the full bibliographic information at the top. Once they're done with the compiling, the students then categorize their notes by color-coding them, using highlighters for example, following their plan (Chapman 2005).

Example:
Assign a colour to the different parts of your plan:

e.g.: pros: <mark>green</mark>
     cons: <mark>pink</mark>
     definitions: <mark>yellow</mark>

The Pros and Cons of Cloud Computing
Karen E Klein
Bloomberg Businessweek, Oct 2009
accessed 11 Oct 2010
http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/oct2009/sb20091026_937390.htm

<mark>In a survey conducted by Peer I Network Enterprises 23% of the IT managers surveyed " pointed to perceive lack of security as a reason they don't use it"</mark>

<mark>Cloud computing means storing and accessing your data and software on the Internet (ex: Gmail, Google Docs)</mark>

<mark>You can have access to your data whenever you want provided there's an Internet connection.</mark>

<mark>"Sofware provided online is upgraded and maintained by the provider"</mark>

<mark>Cloud computing is sometimes referred to as cloud integration.</mark>

<u>One last piece of advice</u>: it takes time to research a topic, so DO NOT start the day before the due date. Some students believe they work better under pressure, it's a MYTH!

You should now have a clear idea of the final outline of your essay and of how you are going to articulate the different ideas.

6. Plagiarism

Plagiarism comes from a Latin verb which means 'to kidnap'. In order to avoid plagiarism you must always cite your source(s) when you use another person's ideas, theories, opinions, drawings, music, etc.

Please remember that plagiarism is not just when you directly copy words from another person's work. Plagiarism also occurs when you paraphrase someone else's ideas in your own work and you don't attribute them.

In general you don't have to attribute <u>basic and widely available facts</u> but in doubt, give a citation.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I know the information before reading this source?

- Is this idea my own?

If the answer is 'no', cite your source.

Don't be tempted to cut-and-paste texts you find on the Internet into your paper, the lecturer will inevitably notice the shift in style and tone.

7. Harvard Referencing System
The Harvard Referencing System is the most commonly used citation style in British universities.

<u>In-text quotations:</u>

In your text refer to a particular document by using the <u>author's surname and year of publication.</u>

Remember you need to cite a source even if you put all direct quotes (word for word) in quotation marks (")

Examples:

"Despite superficial similarities, networking and outsourcing are not the same"(Miller 2010).

Miller says that "Despite superficial similarities, networking and outsourcing are not the same"(2010).

You also need to cite a source even if you changed the words, the sentence structure and completely paraphrased the ideas to which you referred.

Example:

Although they are apparently similar, outsourcing and networking are two different things (Miller 2010).

All of the sources you refer to in the main body of your assignment need to be listed at the end of the assignment in a reference list.

8. Bibliography (reference list)

This is a list of all your quoted and paraphrased sources as well as your influential sources (background reading).

When creating a reference list, the sources should be listed <u>alphabetically</u> by author's surname.

All sources should be listed together; there should not be separate lists for books, journal articles or electronic sources. The reference list should be on a separate page from the rest of the assignment and should be simply titled 'References' or 'Bibliography' and the title should be in the same font and size as the other headings in your assignment.

Examples of referencing:

- books:

Miller, M. (2010). *Cloud Computing: Web-Based Applications that Change the Way you Work,* Que Publishing.

- web pages:

Gruman, G. and Knorr, E. (2008). *What Cloud Computing Really Means.* [online]. Available from: http://www.infoworld.com/d/What-cloud-computing-really-means-031 [Accessed 9 Oct 2010].

If you are in doubt about referencing a source, consult:
http://www.staffs.ac.uk/uniservices/infoservices/library/find/references/harvard/index.php

II. Rules of Writing

How you say what you say is as important as what you are saying!

Before starting to write, you should know that formal writing implies respecting some rules. We don't mean grammar rules (they are supposed to be known and you have been trained!), but rules of writing commonly applied in scientific literature. Here are the most important ones. Even when writing your first draft, apply them. You will save time!

1. In Titles and Headings :

- capitalise the first and last word.
> Example: *Secrets and Lies,* a film by Mike Leigh

- capitalise all nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs and subordinate conjunctions (that, when, where, how,…).
> Examples: *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (by Ernest Hemingway)
> *All's Well That Ends Well* (by William Shakespeare)

- don't capitalise articles (a, an, the), co-ordinate conjunctions (but, or, and, so, nor, for) and prepositions (at, to, on, in, into, out, under, above, between, …) except if they are the first or the last words of the title.
> Examples: *The Pillars of the Earth* (by Ken Follett)
> *Out of Africa,* a film by Sidney Pollack

2. Use Capital Letters

Remember to use a capital letter :
- at the beginning of a sentence, after a full stop (.), a question mark (?) and exclamation mark (!) . Remember to use a lowercase after commas (,), colons (:), semi colons (;) and hyphens (-)

- to refer to the structure of your work (divided into chapters, parts and steps etc.)
> Example: *Chapter I, Figure 2, Step 1, 2, 3…*
> *Refer to the instructions in Chapter 2.*

> but :   *Refer to the instructions in <u>the</u> previous <u>chapter</u>.*

- for proper nouns, countries and adjectives referring to nationality and languages
> Examples: *Barak Obama - the Netherlands - a Belgian company –*
> *to speak Dutch*

- to refer to function keys
> Examples: *the RETURN key, the ALT key …*

3. Avoid Sexist Language

In French the male gender wins the lot when using pronouns: when a user, a student, a player, or a developer is referred to, French speakers will use the male pronoun 'il'. In English, using 'he', 'him' or 'his' is not acceptable!
There are several possibilities to avoid gender limitations. You can use either 'he/she', 'him/her' and 'his/her' or pluralize the subject and use 'they', 'them' and 'their'. You can also try to rewrite your sentence in order to avoid the use of a pronoun, using the passive voice, for example.

Here is an example of bad writing followed by 2 ways of expressing the same idea correctly.

Bad **:**   *Computer science is a stressful science and a student should think carefully before he dedicates his life to it.*
Good :   *Computer science is a stressful science and students should think carefully before they dedicate their life to it.*
Good **:**   *Computer science is a stressful science and a student should think carefully before becoming dedicated to it.*

Though it may seem awkward or jarring for the reader, scientific literature accepts sentences like :
> *If the user cannot access the database, they have to contact the administrator.*
> *If the user is refused access to the database, it means that their registered number has been cancelled.*

If absolutely you must use pronouns because you have used 'the user' in all your paper and don't want to rewrite it all, use the following:
> *If the user cannot access the database, he/she has to contact the administrator.*

4. Spelling

Spelling mistakes are not acceptable in a paper. Since you will be using a computer to write your work, use the tools it provides and **run a spell checker.**. Even if your work is relevant, to the point, well structured and promising, spelling errors like 'poeple', 'realy' or 'matematics' give a bad impression. Your work will look sloppy and unfinished!

However, there are mistakes that a spell checker cannot detect: 'form' instead of 'from', 'is' instead of 'its' are some examples of errors that can make your sentences look confusing or clumsy. And I won't even mention errors like 'pear' instead of 'peer'!!!

The best way to avoid such errors is to **read each paragraph or each page over to yourself** after writing it. That means you should actually **READ** it, **NOT SKIM** it.

You can choose either British or American spelling but once you have made your choice, keep to it!

Remember that in the top ten mistakes we find apostrophes, the spelling of 'cannot', words ending with 'y'' and the plural. In order to avoid them, you can read the chapter dedicated to them in 'The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing' (http://nutsandbolts.washcoll.edu/topten.html).

Moreover, some examples of bad writing (picked up in your fellow students' papers) have been gathered here.

Bad: The following graph describe …
Good: The following graph describes ... (-s in the 3rd person singular, present simple)

Bad: *You can find others examples below.*
Good: *You can find other examples below.* (never pluralize adjectives!)

Bad: *This function is not appropriate because she does not …*
Good: *This function is not appropriate because it does not…* (objects are neutral)

Bad: The programmation language I used are C and C++ because…
Good: The programming languages I used are C and C++ because… (Use a spell checker and be consistent)

5. Style

Here are some tips about style. Keep in mind that your work will be read by specialists but also by non-specialists. It should then be clear AND pleasant to read.

- Be clear and direct (avoid French structures, use active verbs when possible)
- Be concise (avoid wordiness, repetition, empty words, avoid using 'etc.')
- Avoid colloquial writing (words like 'stuff' must be banned in a formal paper)
- Vary your language (use a thesaurus to find synonyms)

Now that you have learnt the basics about formal writing, you should be ready to start writing.

III. Structure of a Written Paper

Any report, end-of-study work, essay or thesis (whatever you call it) must include
an introduction
a main body
a conclusion

a table of contents
a bibliography
appendices when necessary
but the order you will follow when writing the report is different, of course.

Logically, you will start writing the body, then the introduction and finally the conclusion. The bibliography will be the list of your PREVIOUS research (it means you should have it ready before starting to write- See Chapter 1, page 4) and the table of contents will be made at the very end, once you have typed it all and know the page numbers.

In this chapter we will see what each part should comprise.

1. The Introduction

The goal of the introduction is to enable the reader – who does not know anything about the subject/project/research - to get an overall view of what had to be done (What was the assignment? What were the requirements?) AND what has been done.

So, it describes the subject of the report briefly without elaborating on how exciting you find the entire thing or on generalities such as 'Nowadays, we cannot do without computers.'

Simply introduce the topic and explain what you're going to write about, without using 'I' at all! You should also mention briefly the context and the environment in which the project took place.

In the introduction, don't mention the results of your research, don't tell the reader that your application runs smoothly or that the project you organized was a success. Leave this for the conclusion! Moreover, you have to keep in mind that an introduction must attract the readers and encourage them to read your paper through.

Important to remember: If the project you dealt with was shared between several people, say clearly what your work consisted in so that the reader can assess/evaluate **YOUR** contribution to it.

2. The Main Body

Assuming you're working on a computer, keep your <u>outline</u> document in an open window and begin a new document for the writing.

Word processors provide tools to essay writing: the 'title' function will help you organize the structure of the body and it will automatically generate the table of contents.
You can use it providing you have trained a little bit to see how it works.

In this part, you have to explain the important points of the project or research.
1. Describe the method, the division of the problem into sub-problems and how the tasks were shared in the team.
2. Give an account of the difficulties you had, the various possible solutions, the solution you chose and why.
3. Use flowcharts, tables and graphs to illustrate or explain the problem but don't forget to comment them.
4. Add a glossary if necessary. In this case refer the reader to an appendix named 'glossary'' with an asterisk (*) after the word. (Bodlet)

Be clear, accurate and simple and try to make your work easy to read.
5. Skip a line when you express a new idea;
6. Try to relate the next paragraph to the previous one using links such as 'however', 'on the one hand…on the other hand', 'on the contrary', 'nevertheless', 'moreover'…
7. Summarize in one or two sentences the content of a long chapter before starting a new one;
8. Don't hesitate to announce in a few words the content of the next chapter like in the following example: *Now that the different methods have been explained, the next chapter will allow the user to handle them practically*.

Writing an essay is like driving along a road: you are following your road, you know where you are and where you are going to but the reader doesn't!!! Therefore, use indicators and don't forget to tell him/her about it.

3. The Conclusion

Conclusions like ' This was a great project and I enjoyed developing it' must definitely be banned. You should know that the introduction and the conclusion enable the reader to get an overall picture of the project you developed, the methods you used and the results you can show. Therefore, the conclusion refers and responds to the elements mentioned in the introduction.

Therefore, follow the same rules as in the introduction : stay away from generalities, don't use 'I' and avoid self-satisfaction like in '*I'm sure you have enjoyed reading this work'.*

Since it is the essential part of your report, it can have several paragraphs in which you should
- emphasize and rephrase the most important points of the project;
- explain its weak and strong points (be critical!) and why, when necessary, you derived from the project;
- mention the possible follow-ups.

4. The Table of Contents

It includes the titles of the parts, chapters and sections **along with the page numbers.**
If you use the title function, the table of contents is automatically generated. It will automatically be updated for any change you would make in the structure of your work.
If you don't use this function, remember to check the table and the page numbers together with the text before printing out your work.

The Bibliography

See Chapter I, page 4

5. Appendices

The appendices include everything that can help to understand the report or that is part of the result but that does not fit into the body of the text because it would disrupt the thread:
> listing of the programs
> instructions
> glossary, etc.(Bodlet)

IV. The Final Touch

Most students think that, at this stage, the work is over. THEY ARE WRONG!
Read now the whole paper over to yourself. We are sure that you will still find stupid spelling or grammatical mistakes. Besides, you may find some redundancies (you have repeated things) or some gaps in your explanations (you may have forgotten to write one paragraph, for example). Chapman advises you to read it loud to yourself and listen to how it sounds in order to be sure that your brain doesn't skim it inadvertently.

To improve further your essay, **get a friend to read it.** They may find errors you skipped after staring at it for so long. Furthermore, they may give you an indication about its content. If they don't understand a sentence, a paragraph or a whole chapter, then you must have done something wrong. Think that if a fellow student doesn't understand you, the teacher might not either!

When you are satisfied with form and content, **go over the essay for consistency**. Have you used the same structure throughout the whole paper, for example, numbers for sub-headings? With the same font size for all of them? Before printing an essay, we **all** have to do a little bit of cleaning for consistency about font style, font size, capitalization, underlining and layout.

Conclusion

A lot of students think that writing a paper in English is a frustrating experience but it doesn't have to be. When you understand what to do, how to do it and the basic rules to follow, with a little bit of organization writing a paper can be easy and even ... fun.

The 4 steps presented in this guide will have taught you how to make an effective research, write formally, avoid plagiarism and edit a complete, meaningful and structured paper.

Respecting the prescribed rules will allow you to have a solid essay worthy of a decent grade!

References

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Example of title page

HAUTE ÉCOLE DE LA PROVINCE DE LIÈGE
CATÉGORIE TECHNIQUE

Cloud Computing: The Pros and Cons

by Jean Dubois 2399

Course: English
Lecturer: Dominique Smets

10 November, 2010