Dear MIT students

The following general comments, based on mistakes often made by students in assignments and examination papers, may be useful for you to keep in mind:

1. Please read a question carefully before you attempt to answer it. Words like “essay”, “report”, “compare”, and “discuss” give you a good indication of what is expected.
2. Follow the instructions; they are there to guide you and you will be penalised in the examination for not following them. The instructions may indicate a certain format; for example, there are differences between an executive summary (written after you have completed your research and based on your findings and not on what you are going to do), an introduction to a chapter or an assignment (where you spell out what you intend to do and what you anticipate to find), a report to your boss, supervisor or manager and colleagues, your report as consultant for which your client is paying good money, or a memorandum (memo) to your supervisor or manager, or one to your colleagues and team members. It is part of academic discipline to follow the instructions of your department, your examination paper or the journal you may be submitting an article to, and definitely for your thesis.
3. For academic work at Master’s level, use appropriate academic material, from accredited sources by acknowledged authors. For general background information and to start research on a topic it is in order to read blogs and popular internet sources. At an advanced level of research you will depend mostly on academic sources. (Unless you are studying internet sources or, for instance, comparing popular views or internet communication and blogs.) You will be penalised in the examination if you do not use academic sources. We regularly check the University of Pretoria Library and can always find plenty of appropriate sources which you can access electronically.
4. Use academic language, not “I” or “we” and do not quote academic qualifications or mention biographic details of the authors you are quoting or call them “gurus” or “renowned experts” unless there is a very good reason to do so.
5. Check your language so that your reader can follow your arguments. If the reader cannot follow the logic or the flow of the argument, you cannot expect to get marks for your work.
6. One of the most common mistakes is to quote several authors and present their work without drawing some conclusion from their views or theories. A whole list of bullet points makes no sense on its own. You have to discuss, explain, confirm, question or reject them and make some summary or draw a conclusion and indicate to your reader why the list is there. These conclusions serve as the ending of your paragraphs, sections and chapters, and will do so in your theses. The whole idea of an essay-type question is to make you read enough sources to be able to present adequate facts to support your argument and to come to some valid conclusion.
7. Link your paragraphs and sections. You cannot jot down a list of facts under a heading without explaining what they are supposed to say. Use introductory sentences to a paragraph and introductory paragraphs to a chapter, section or assignment.
8. In academic writing shorter sentences often work better. Keep your flowery language and poetic jargon for the next big novel that you may want to write. Less is often better and more. Every word, sentence, punctuation mark, paragraph and chapter in academic work must have meaning, scientific meaning, and counts towards building up your argument. This means that you also do not use “etc” or a/b – you spell out what you want the readers to know, you do not leave it to him/her (sic!) to decide, or guess, or to add their own ideas or interpretations to your list – which must be the result of your own thought processes. Do not use sms or text message language. The English language uses the articles “the”, “a” and “an” – do not leave them out and write telegraph style, but also use them correctly; do not say “the conflicts” when you mean “conflict”, or “the stress” when you mean “stress”. Use full sentences.
9. Do not put non-academic value statements or judgments to material that you quote, for example an “excellent” or “well-written” article or book, and be careful of adjectives like “exclusive”, “superior”, “profound”, or say that you did an “exhaustive” or “extensive” literature study, or studied the “existing” literature and then quote a meagre ten articles from the vast literature on a topic. (Unless you are working on a topic that really has only ten articles and you are going to write number eleven!)
10. Another common mistake is to quote a long section from one author (A), adding statements from another author (B) halfway through A’s quoted work – the reader then becomes confused and does not know who said what. In academic writing it must always be clear to the reader which author is being quoted. This often happens when students quote a long list by author A but find that author B has something supportive or additional to say about one of the items on the list and then adds it to author A’s list or quotation.
11. Another common mistake is to start a sentence with the name of an author but only put the reference at the end of the sentence, thus repeating the author’s name. It is not only poor style, it is incorrect referencing when instead of: “*Williams (2004:15) posed that conflict…”* you have it as: “*Williams posed that conflict ………. (Williams 2004:15).”*
12. The abbreviation “et al” in references is often used incorrectly. Please check its proper use and the distinction between two authors, three authors and more than three authors. (Depending on your reference method.) We prefer the Harvard style. And we always want the page numbers so that we can check the references. Whichever style you choose, be consistent.
13. Some students often find and use some interesting and recent material, which is good to see. With most of the topics that you deal with, there is usually also a core of older literature which you can hardly ignore since those are the authors that first identified a concept, described a phenomenon or developed a theory. It is part of the research process to discover who those authors are and to affirm their theories, to question them, to develop them further or to reject them. It is better to go back to these authors, if possible, than to refer to them as cited by another author.
14. Do not leave out page numbers of an article or a chapter in book if there are page numbers.
15. Be careful with the dates of your sources. You cannot say that Author B (2004) confirms the theory of Author A when Author A only wrote his book or article in 2014, thus ten years later.
16. Be consistent – in style, numbering, paragraphs, format, spelling, and bibliographic style.
17. Beware of words often confused – *practice* and *practise, sign* and *signal, mediate* and *meditate, relieve* and *relief, believe* and *belief, affect* and *effect, regard* and *regards, burn out* and *burnout, moral* and *morale, lifestyle* and *life style, treat* and *threat, infected* and *affected* and *effected, brake* and *break, bear* and *bare, regard and regards, its* and *it’s, their* and *there, theirs* and *there’s,* *where* and *were*…. The list is long and sometimes the incorrect word gives reason for a smile! Last year a student confused *jeans* and *genes…* what a difference to the meaning!
18. Pronouns are often used incorrectly – you should not start a sentence with “one” or “a person”, or “an employee” and then use plural pronouns like “them” and “they”, or change to he/she or his/her. *Singular persons take singular pronouns in the same style when referring to them.* (Look at this last, interesting sentence in *italics* – you could also say “A singular person takes a singular pronoun when referred to.”) Singular should remain singular and plurals should remain plural.
19. Beware of “and”, “also”, “as well as”, “in addition” – often in one sentence and even “and as well as”.
20. Beware of words like “but”, “contrary to” - they suppose some contrast or juxtaposition or comparison – two different things that you may be referring to. Also watch out for words or expressions like “actually” and “basically”, “in principle”. (Basically and actually these words must, in principle, actually say something!)
21. Always keep a copy of a good reference manual, such as the guide by Theo Bothma, Erica Cosijn, Ina Fourie and Cecilia Penzhorn, *Navigating information literacy; your information society survival toolkit*. 3rd ed, 2011, at hand when you do an assignment, for frequent consultation and to look at examples that match your sources if you are in doubt. (Note: I could also have phrased this sentence as follows: Never work on an assignment or write an essay or an article without the excellent source by Bothma, T, et al., or another one, at hand. This time the word “excellent” is warranted and used on purpose in this communication with our students.) (Or use any other good guide or manual on reference technique. There are several good ones and a specific one may be prescribed for a certain course.) But again, be consistent in whatever reference style you choose.
22. There is much more, but enough for now. We hope you find it useful and that it will help you to write even better assignments.
23. Every time that *one* writes something like this, *one* has to be careful not to make the same mistakes that *one* is warning about. I could also have said: Every time that *you* write something like this, *you* have to be careful not to make the same mistakes. Or: When *students (or lecturers!)* write something like this, *they* have to be careful that *they* do not make the same mistakes. (Note: The agreement between subject and pronoun.)
24. End of grammar lesson! Wishing you all a good day and success with your assignments.

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