

Some Dos and Don'ts for Essay Writing

Mark Strom

SOME BIG ONES

1. Present your own thoughts. You must do more than string together the thoughts of others. You must show you have wrestled with the core question or ideas.
2. Argue a case. Do not simply assert points. Show the examiner that you have a sense of the question (you may have to turn the given topic into a meaningful question), and that you are unfolding a coherent and thoughtful answer to the question. In the case of an exegetical essay, there is always an implied set of questions: (1) What might this text have meant to its original audiences, (2) how does this text contribute to the wider biblical story, and (3) what might it mean to people today in the light of (1) and (2) – do not answer (3) in a way that ignores your answers to (1) and (2).
3. Don't include things that don't support your argument. Stay focused on the theme or main point.
4. Do not preach – not even in an 'application' section. Please avoid clichés.
5. Use the conclusion to wrap up the argument and perhaps suggest further lines of enquiry. Unless the particular essay or personal exploration essay calls for a personal reflection, do not use the conclusion to talk about how the essay made you feel.

SOME MATTERS OF STANDARD AND STYLE

6. Always use quote marks when you are quoting. Whatever your intention, it will look like plagiarism to an examiner if you do not clearly indicate when you are using someone else's words or ideas.
7. Always show the page from which you are quoting.
8. Quotes from other authors are included in your word count.
9. Please use secondary sources appropriate to your level of study. **Level 5 students** should not base their arguments or supporting evidence on popular level commentaries, magazines, topical works, or notes from study edition Bibles. You should be starting to use more serious scholarly works. Don't base your whole reading on old works (valuable as they may be). **Level 8 and 9 students** should be working exclusively with technical monographs and journal articles and with nonbiblical primary sources wherever appropriate. **Level 6 and 7 students** should show an increasing familiarity with the resources standard to Level 8 and 9.
10. If you are quoting a work cited in another author, or referring to a point made by this other author, and have not actually read the second source for yourself, then you must show in the footnote where it comes from:

3 The point is made by Momigliano, A. *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, 34 as cited in Bassler, J. M. "Divine Impartiality in Paul's Letter to the Romans", *Novum Testamentum* 26 (1984) 58.
11. Read the essay carefully for sense and sentence structure before submitting it. If you can't read it smoothly, and can't follow your own line of thought, then the examiner will have even more trouble. If you are unsure, ask a friend to read it and to show you every sentence that does not make sense. Feel free to ask for their ideas on improving the language, but remember it must be your work – including the accuracy and clarity of the English.

12. Write full sentences. A sentence starting with “If...” needs a second half of the same sentence beginning with “..., then...”. A sentence starting with “When...” or “While...” or “Whereas...” needs a second half that follows or completes the first clause.
13. Do not use capitals for pronouns in the middle of sentences – “and He said” – even when referring to God. Likewise, do not use capitals for other words – “and Leaders should...as the Epilogue was written” – other than names and titles.
14. Use semi-colons (;) to link two separate ideas that belong closely together: “The sun was struggling to shine; the wind lashed the coast.” [This last example could be two sentences, or simply joined with a word like “while” or “as”.]
15. Use a colon (:) to show a further idea that explains the first. A prime example is introducing a list or a set of ideas separated by semi-colons (;). Here is an example. <This account opened with the Milesians – Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes –searching for the stuff which shapes all reality: the *archai* of the *kosmos*.> Note also how I have used the dashes (–) above.
16. Use a colon (:) to link a quote to your preceding point. <The contrast to men was extreme: “For the gods there are no crucial turning points in past or future; their life is diluted by immortality”.
17. Use double spacing to allow the examiner room to make corrections. This holds for those submitting hand written essays.
18. Add an extra blank line between paragraphs. This holds for those submitting hand written essays.
19. Place a sufficient border on all four sides. This holds for those submitting hand written essays.
20. Put page numbers on your essay. This holds for those submitting hand written essays.
21. Check your spelling and punctuation before you submit it. Pay particular attention to whether you have overused semi-colons (;) and commas (,), and included all necessary question marks (?). “It’s” is an abbreviation for “it is” not for “of it”.
22. Don't rely exclusively on your computer to check your spelling. It will miss many mistakes.

See the following simple guide to sentence structure:

<http://www.dersimizingilizce.com/writing%20web%20pages/common%20flts.htm>>

COMMON FAULTS WITH ESSAYS

From: <http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:00UtHXooFOQJ:dc37.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/stylesheet/Docs/CommonFaults.doc+CommonFaults.doc&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=nz>

Content

Undeveloped opening paragraph: just a thesis without any discussion, without any overview of the essay's main points.

Paragraphs that open with a detail instead of a comprehensive topic sentence.

Paragraphs that drift off the topic, or that include several main ideas.

Quotations that are simply 'stuck in'—not smoothly integrated into the essay, and/or not properly discussed or explained.

Undeveloped conclusions: a sentence or two instead of an effective, interesting closing discussion.

Writing Style

Awkward phrasing: cases in which there is a clearer, more straightforward way to make your point or a better way to organize a sentence.

Wordiness (too many words where fewer would be more effective), unnecessary words and phrases that should have been edited out, repetition and redundancies.

Two or more sentences written as one (run-on sentences or comma splices). In many cases, the problem is a comma placed where a period or semicolon is needed.

Tense shifts: e.g. switching back and forth from present to past for no reason.

Careless errors in word usage (e.g. there in place of their, were for where, than for then). These can be missed due to reliance on spell-check systems as a substitute for proofreading.

Apostrophe errors, usually in forming possessives (two boy's boys had; its it's a girl!).

Faults in agreement involving pronouns (e.g. one student submitted their her paper early; someone lost their his wallet).

Errors in subject-verb agreement (e.g. neither of them want wants to do it; many newspapers including The Gazette is are published daily).

Faults in parallelism: every item in a list should be in the same form (e.g. She enjoys skating, skiing, and her snowboard snowboarding).

HOW LECTURERS JUDGE ESSAYS

The following samples are from the University of Bristol philosophy department. See <http://www.bris.ac.uk/philosophy/current/undergrad/studyguide/essayguide2.html>

"Low-level survey of many of the basic issues from familiar sources. General understanding, but poor attempts to argue. B-"

"Well-written scissors-and-paste job. Unusually, stronger on primary sources than secondary. Does very little with them, however. B+"

"Fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far. In need of elaboration and more consideration of argument and counter-argument. Marks for analytical clarity. B"

"Too little Hume, too much not fully explained commentators. Not bad, but needs stronger focus. B"

"An impressive bibliography and well word-processed. However, little indication that the student has learnt much philosophy or learnt from philosophical works cited. A provocative essay for a newspaper. C+"

"An impressively thorough and, as far as I can tell, independent research job. The writer has dug out key passages, added their own assessment and written a mature piece of work. A"

"Nice tightly controlled arguments, subtle distinctions, scholarly. It does not reveal quite enough depth or breadth for an A. A-"

"A good solid piece of work based on both independent reading and critical reflection. A"

"Long, labored, badly written. Seems to understand some of the detail of Hume's argument, but after the exposition just one damn thing after another without very much evidence of relevance to Hume. B-"

"Boring but thoughtful. B+"

"Well presented and nicely written and, for all I know, correct reporting the views of Durkheim. Nevertheless from beginning to end it seems to me to be baloney. C"

"A clear exposition of a very narrowly focused topic. There isn't really much philosophising in it, but a decently researched bit of the history of ideas. B"

"I think this is excellent. It's an essay without any definite thesis and without any marked conclusions, but he/she is swimming in some pretty murky waters. Basically, this essay is just intelligent grappling with a very difficult bit of text. As such, it's extremely lucid, shows evidence of good reading and a lot of hard work, and seems to handle the Greek and the logic without stumbling. I make it worth an A."

Essay writing is a craft. An important craft. Some find it easy. Others don't. Most can learn it. Read a lot and pay attention to how clear sentences and paragraphs are structured. Take notice of reasonable criticism of your own work. Edit your own work until writing clearly becomes second nature. Read a lot and pay attention to how good writing works. Edit your own work imitating the best sentence and paragraph structures you have seen until they become second nature.