

# Essay Skills

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## Overview

1. Structure
2. Argument
3. Lay-out
4. Information
5. Language

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## Structure

- Perhaps the most important point
- From your reading, decide what you want to argue.
- Make sure that you are answering the question that has been set.

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## Planning the Structure

- Structure your essay like an argument with a logical progression that leads to a logical conclusion
- Put forward your plan in the introduction: tell the reader what you want to argue and how. (e.g. "The argument of this essay comes in three parts. First ... Secondly... Thirdly...")
- Then do what you said in the introduction that you would do.
  - And highlight/sign-post your plan along the way. (e.g. "Moving on now to the second part of my argument... Having concluded that... we go to the third part of the argument...") This makes it easier for the reader to follow and shows that you have control over your argument.

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## And finally ...

- Write a conclusion that sums up the main points of the argument (if necessary) and, above all, concludes the logical train of argument.
- Do not introduce new evidence or a new argument in the conclusion.

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## Practical Criticism vs Essays

- Practical criticism (gobbets or commentaries) are formal pieces of work but differ from essays
- It does not require a full introduction, but a statement of the key issue(s) in the passage at the start is helpful.
- You can write it continuously (as a mini-essay)
- or, for detailed comments use **lemmata**: subheadings with a line or section number and a snippet of text that you want to comment on
- A summary sentence can be helpful, particularly if you lead up to the broader literary, thematic or historical issues: this lends itself to a summary sentence

### Argument

- Minimise:
  - Narration of historical events
  - Summary of texts (primary or secondary)
  - Quotations and paraphrases of text (primary or secondary)

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### Argument (cont.)

- Maximise:
  - Combining and explaining what you have read in different texts (with proper referencing!)
  - Evaluation of arguments of others (ancients or modern scholars)
  - Discussion of the evidence and your own thoughts about it (making it clear what thoughts are your own, and which ones you have from somewhere else).
  - Analysis and interpretation of the sources/text.

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### Lay-Out

- Use 1.5 line spacing.
- Justify left and right margin
- Mark quotations clearly by quotation marks.
- Long quotations (more than five lines) should be set off from the main text and the whole quotation indented on both sides.
- Keep references in footnotes brief, e.g. Miles 1995: 28. Do not give the title of the work; this can be found by consulting your bibliography.
- NB *Classics Handbook*

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### Information

- Avoid sweeping generalisations. Phrases such as “ancient historians valued moralizing over facts” are likely to get you into trouble, especially if they are not backed up by carefully referenced evidence.
- Do not state the obvious. Your reader is either an ancient historian or a classicist, so explanations such as “Thucydides, a Greek historian of the 5th century BC” and “Finley, a modern historian” are unnecessary (and slightly insulting).
- Reference ALL your information, ALL the time! Never, ever make a statement of fact without referencing your source, ancient or modern.

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### **Referencing: Advantages**

- Only if you reference all your acquired information carefully, will you get credit for what are genuinely your own thoughts.
- These can be sign-posted even more clearly by means of expressions such as “I believe that”, “I would like to argue”, and “in my opinion”, it will be clear what part of your essay is your own thoughts, and you will get credit for this. But don’t overdo this: using evaluative language will indicate that you are making a judgement and taking a view.
- And only by referencing carefully will you avoid being accused of plagiarism.

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### **Language**

- The language of your essay is the medium through which your thoughts are transmitted to your reader. It is important to write in a clear and unambiguous style to ensure that your reader grasps your genius!
- Write in a simple, straightforward style. It is more important to get your message across than to be overly academic.
- Keep a simple sentence structure. If your sentence structure is very complicated, it becomes difficult for the reader to follow. You should rather have too many full stops than too few.

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### **Language: Points to Note**

- A very common mistake is in the use of “however”. Use “however” after full stop, “but” after a comma.
- Get your punctuation right. Incorrect punctuation can make your meaning unclear. (It also upsets grumpy markers.) There are rules for the placing of commas, semicolons, and full stops. If you do not already know them, you should learn them.
- Do not use superfluous words or phrases. Rather than “Thucydides would have thought that Pericles was a great man” or “Thucydides seems to have thought that Pericles was a great man”, write “Thucydides thought that Pericles was a great man” if that is what you think.

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### **Language (cont.)**

- Use formal language.
  - This does not mean difficult language, but it does mean do not write like you talk.
  - No don’t, doesn’t, won’t, wouldn’t etc. Write the full and correct form.
- And, finally: Proofread your essay before submitting!

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### **Further Reading and Practice**

- Academic writing skills package (on moodle)

#### **Recommended books**

- Carey, G.V. (1971) *Mind the Stop: A Brief Guide to Punctuation with a Note on Proof-correction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Warburton, N. (2007) *The Basics of Essay Writing*, London: Routledge.
- And, of course, the Classics Handbook, available on moodle.

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