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**Department of English Language and Literature Module: Research Methodology…. 1st Year**

**Lecture n° 07 RM**

**How to promote effective writing**

***The academic essay: what, why and how***

***What is an essay?***

The word ‘essay’ is said to derive from the Latin *exagium*, the presentation of a case. Thus, when writing essays, students have to think about ‘making a case’, i.e. constructing arguments and utilising evidence rather than making assertions. It may help students to think about the legal precedent. That is, lawyers do not just prosecute or defend in a vacuum – both prosecution and defence must take account of the case the other side is going to make, and they must strive to gather and offer better evidence than their opponent.

***Formal writing – set length***

An essay is a continuous piece of writing, in formal English. That is, the typical academic essay is not divided and subdivided by headings as is the report or paper, and it must be written in clear, academic English, with no abbreviations or slang.

Essays are never an invitation to write on a topic, but an invitation to explore a question, undertake targeted research and active reading, and then to structure a logical and clear response that typically answers the question one point at a time via the use of argument supported by evidence.

This answer has to be produced within the word limit set, writing too little or too much can lead to an automatic fail.

Typically essays should be well presented, looking neat and well cared for. Word-processing is a boon here in terms of offering ease of drafting and redrafting – and of presentation.

***Formal convention***

The academic essay also constitutes a specific academic form or genre, that is it must have a particular shape or structure.

The essay structure is comprised of introduction, body, conclusion and bibliography, and each part has a distinct function to perform.

**Introduction – plus agenda (5–7% of word limit):** Tells the reader how you are going to tackle the question and in what order you have structured your essay answer. A good introduction helps the reader understand the essay and it will allow an assessor to judge whether or not the subsequent essay will answer the question set.

**Tip:** It is difficult to write an introduction for an essay that does not exist. Write the introduction last.

**The body (80% word limit): *Is* the answer** and is comprised of well-structured academic paragraphs.

Typically the body is made up of rather long (can be 200–350 words long in some subjects) paragraphs. The rule of thumb is **one** ‘big idea’ or topic per paragraph. Each paragraph is structured like a mini-essay:

Introduction – opening sentence that introduces paragraph topic which is:

Defined, Argued, Supported by evidence (which is discussed) andConcluded (often by relation back to the overall question).

**Paragraph tips:**

Write the paragraph questions

When writing **each** paragraph, look at the questions and attempt to answer them.

Do not aim for perfection first draft – always intend to draft and redraft work, refining in the redrafting stages.

**The questions in practice**

As you write answer the reader’s questions:

**What is this paragraph about?** This invites you to introduce the subject or topic of your paragraph. In first drafts this could be as simple as: ‘Now we are going to look at . . .’ Hopefully you will find that you can improve paragraph introductions in subsequent drafts – this also gets easier with practice.

**What exactly is that?** This invites you to define or clarify what you are writing about.

**Tell me more . . .** This invites you to say something about your topic, in relation to the essay question that you are answering.

Typically this is where you offer an argument of some sort.

**What is your evidence for this?** This invites you to offer relevant evidence, excavated from your research, to support your argument.

**What does it mean?** Here you must discuss your evidence, linking it to the argument that you are making.

**[Possibly also] But what about the contrasting evidence?** This invites you to acknowledge that other arguments and evidence exist.

**What is your final point (and how does it relate to the**

**question)?** Here you are invited to draw the paragraph to a conclusion, perhaps by making a point that goes back to the question.

**The conclusion (13–15%):** The conclusion is where you draw your essay together and prove that you have answered the whole question. It is the place to reiterate your main arguments and restate your main points.

**Tips:** use the language from the question in your conclusion; this will help your reader to understand that you have answered that question.

**Bibliography:** The bibliography is where you record the sources that you have utilised in the construction of your essay, typically in alphabetical order

***Why write essays?***

There are many reasons for writing essays and, yes, they are assessment devices and your tutor will mark your essay and award you a grade that will have significance for you as a student. The problem with only focusing on the essay as assessment is that it can increase your trepidation and this can get in the way of your thinking. It also hides the fact that we ‘write to learn’ rather than writing what we know – writing is a **thinking** process.

Yes, essay writing produces a product that tutors can assess, but more than that, the whole planning, drafting and reviewing of your written work is a valuable learning process for you the student. Essay writing is designed to be heuristic – you are supposed to learn through all the processes involved in the generation of a written assignment.

**That is, essay production encourages you to:**

Revisit and revise various elements of the taught programme.

Extend your understanding by undertaking independent research – reading around the question.

Synthesise your thinking – that is, as you read you will encounter people who argue one thing and people who argue to the contrary, and typically both will offer convincing arguments and evidence. You will be expected to form an informed opinion by judging contrary arguments and deciding which is the strongest.

Struggle to write a coherent, well-structured essay that communicates clearly and effectively with an informed reader.

None of this is easy. That is why writing is a struggle – and it is in the struggle to write that learning is refined: this is very intense, active thinking and learning.

***How to prepare and write an essay***

**1 Preparation**

We stress that typically preparation is the key to assignment success and that students have to think and read and struggle before they are in a position to answer any assignment question. Problems arise perhaps because students see a question and believe that they ought to just **know** the answer, whereas we tend to set questions that prompt students to investigate, research, think and come up with answers.

**Step 1** of the ten-step programme encourages students to think – it suggests that you do not need to know answers, but it is helpful to generate questions as avenues of research.

To prepare to research and learn from a whole programme it will help if students:

Open a research folder.

Write out the question in full (photocopy and stick on if too long to copy).

Analyse the task: in terms of form and content.

Check (with the tutor) the characteristics of the form that they have requested (essay, presentation, report, etc.).

Investigate the question set: underline key words in the question.

Make links with module aims and learning outcomes, highlighting key words in the course handbook.

Make links with the syllabus: note which bits of the taught programme will relate to specific parts of the assignment question.

Make links with the reading list, highlighting books that must be read to answer the question.

Brainstorm all the key words in the question– typically brainstorming improves when undertaken collectively.

**Brainstorming and question matrixing**

Typically we encourage students to engage creatively with assignment topics by using the brainstorm and/or the question matrix.

The brainstorm encourages creativity by prompting uncensored thought around key words in the assignment question. If students follow up the ideas generated in a brainstorm they will often find they have an original approach to an assignment.

A question matrix can be used instead of or alongside the brainstorm. The question matrix involves turning all the key words in a question into a series of smaller questions. It is in the struggleto answer the smaller questions that students move towards answering the larger question.

**2 Follow the action plan**

Once students have thought about the assignment in the proactive ways described above, they should derive more benefit from the lecture and seminar programme – and they can move on to undertake targeted research and active reading alongside the taught programme. Typically this will involve students in adopting the QOOQRRR system:

**Question:** Read with a purpose. Know why you are reading – are you a novice or an initiate? Are you searching for a general understanding or for specific arguments and evidence? How will this affect the notes that you make?

**Overview:** Read with a context. Within which unit, module or programme is this reading taking place? What are the aims and outcomes? What has to be done and learned to pass the course? How will a specific reading activity enable you the student to demonstrate in the assignment that aims and outcomes have been met?

**Overview:** Know what you are reading. Have you scanned the computer catalogue? Have you scanned the journals? With texts, have you scanned contents and indexes? With a chapter/journal article, have you read the introduction and conclusion?

**Question:** Question once more – so why am I reading this now, and with which bit of the assignment will it help me?

**Read:** Read actively and interactively, marking up as you go, noting perspective, arguments, evidence, dis/agreements with other reading, etc.

**Re-read:** Re-read annotations and marginalia, construct pattern notes, consider building topic patterns – with all reading on a topic captured on distinct sheets of paper.

**Review:** Review notes – think again . . .

Remind students that each bit of reading that is undertaken can lead on to yet more reading – but at some point the reading has to stop and the student will have to move on to the next step.

**3 Review findings**

Students will have to review their notes and make decisions about which of their notes relate to material that is relevant and will be drawn upon in their writing, and which is not.

Students will have to decide if there are any gaps in the research – and if so, they must decide on a course of action.

**4 Plan the outline of the essay**

Typically we recommend that at this stage students should return to the question and the key words that they have underlined. They should now plan the **body** of the essay – that is, they should think about the separate paragraphs that they would need in their essay answer. It may be possible to structure the essay in terms of what they would discuss first, second, third, etc. but equally, this structuring could come after the paragraphs have been drafted.

**5 Prepare a first draft**

At some point – and hopefully several weeks before an assignment deadline – students should attempt to write a rough draft of an answer.

**tip:** Typically we recommend that students actually start writing individual paragraphs before they have finished all their reading – and this could definitely be supported in seminar work.

When writing what is an acknowledged **rough** draft, students should not be aiming for perfection – they should not yet be struggling for the right word or phrase or all the correct quotes. It helps at this stage if students utilise their plans and the paragraph questions and write with a ‘flow’. Stopping for spellings, tenses, exactly the right word is fraught with problems

**6 Leave a creative time lag**

The brain likes closure; if we write with gaps – ellipses, ‘blah’, highlighting text in pink, etc. – we are telling our brains that work is unfinished. The brain will seek to complete unfinished work, so students should leave a time lag between the production of first drafts and the review, revise and edit process.

**7 Review, revise and edit**

It is in the review, revise and edit process that students learn in their struggle with their material. There are a variety of struggles engaged with here. There is the struggle to structure work to best effect. There is the struggle to harness the best evidence to support one’s arguments. There is the struggle involved in cutting out irrelevant material. There is the struggle to actually answer the question – and to prove that to the reader. There is the struggle to harness the appropriate use of language, tone, style – and discourse or linguistic markers . . . and so forth.

**8 Proofread**

All work has to be spell-checked and proofread. often in proofreading the eye sees what should be there rather than what actually is there. To facilitate proofreading it can help to look for one problem at a time, and to make strange the proofreading process thus it helps to:

proofread from the back to the front; proofread from the bottom of the page to the top; proofread someone else’s work.

**9 Hand work in on or before the deadline**

Remind students of just how important deadlines are. Often a missed deadline leads to an automatic fail. Further, we always recommend that students keep copies of final drafts of work – photocopies if handwritten, or on floppy disks if word processed.

**10 Review**

For many students the completion of an assignment absolves them of all responsibility for it– and all contact with it. Obviously much can be learned from completed work and as we indicate above, students should get in to the good practice of judging the quality of their own work before they hand it in, and of ‘SWOTing’ it once they get it back, exploring its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities (links with exams?) and threats (fear of success as well as fear of failure?).