

Some Suggestions for Writing Essays

'An old tutor of a college said to one of his pupils: Read over your compositions, and whenever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out'(Samuel Johnson). J.Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791).

This is not a definitive guide to writing essays but it may help you to focus what you already know into something useful. Writing is inevitably largely a question of personal style and there are a variety of 'correct' ways of approaching essays. N.B. There are also a variety of 'incorrect' ways of approaching them!

Preliminaries

Do make sure that you understand the question! You need to understand every word of it, particularly if there are terms which you may find familiar but be unable to define; for example: caricature, didactic, irony, satire. If in doubt, head for a dictionary.

Break down questions into blocks. This helps to structure the essay and makes sure you deal with each part of the question (see examples below).

Jot down all relevant ideas, references and quotations. Take each of the ideas and try to think of one other relevant idea, reference or quotation.

A clear essay plan will help you to keep your writing relevant and concise.

Introduction

An introduction is just what it says it is: it introduces your interpretation of the question and your ideas. Try to avoid clumsy comments such as 'I am going to', 'I think the question means' etc. If a writer has commented on the issue, you may find it helpful to begin by considering a relevant quotation. Alternatively, it may be helpful to define important words or phrases in the question and use this as a starting point for discussion.

eg. Is Eliot's poetry difficult because it is the poetry of ideas, not feelings?

Possible answer: Eliot argued that 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality', inviting us to interpret his poetry in terms of rational ideas, not personal emotions. However, it would be too simplistic to argue that his poetry is devoid of emotion. His comment reads like a statement of intent and, whatever Eliot's intentions, some emotion is clearly present in his work.

NB Essays are arguments and your style must reflect this

The process of writing essays is not dissimilar to that of a trial: a lawyer is trying to convince a jury and you are trying to convince your reader. A lawyer structures his / her argument around the evidence, as you should. You give 'evidence' in the form of quotation and close textual reference and quote 'expert witnesses' in the form of critics. In his / her summation, a lawyer will remind the jury of the most convincing pieces of evidence and give a clinching point. They always try to close with something convincing and interesting; you too need to sound interesting and convincing.

Using Critical Sources

Scholarly use of critical sources will strengthen your argument; simply quoting critics adds nothing to your argument and can obscure (or even take the place of) your own views. Critics are useful as authoritative references to support comments about cultural or historical context (historians are equally appropriate for this of course). Avoid unsupported generalisations about a writer or a period. 'The Romantic period was one of political upheaval' is true but without supporting references it is a simple assertion rather than an argument. If you write, 'As Baker points out, the Romantic period was one of political upheaval, including riots over the price of bread, the shadow of the American War of Independence and the bloody revolution in France' (and footnote Baker), you are providing an authoritative reference, together with some brief examples of the kind of political activity you want to discuss.

Do not simply quote critics; integrate them into your own argument, indicating whether or not you agree with them and why (textual evidence). If you write, 'Baker argues that Wordsworth is a political activist', you're simply describing his argument. To make it part of your own argument, you need to write, 'Baker elucidates the political context of Wordsworth's poetry convincingly', or simply, 'Baker argues pertinently / helpfully that...' Feel free to disagree with critics eg 'Baker argues that Shelley's work lacks political conviction but the poems do not support such an assertion / analysis'.

Conclusion

I'll state the obvious again: this is the part of the essay where you give the reader your considered conclusion, ie. your personal answer to the question. Try to avoid overly personal comments such as 'I think' or 'I feel', which weaken the argument. Phrase your comments indirectly, eg:

Eliot defined poetry as:

the abstract conception
Of private experience at its greatest intensity
Becoming universal ('A Note on War Poetry').

This clearly directs the reader to view the personal and emotional register of the text in the context of the poet's desire to universalise; emotion and ideas are not diametrically opposed but complimentary.

If you want to be more direct, you can simply write something like: 'Eliot's work clearly does express emotion but it is always subordinate to the ideas he is trying to express'. If you use a phrase like 'Eliot's poetry' or the name of the novel or play you're studying, or the writer's name, followed by 'is clearly concerned with / addresses / engages with', you use the text itself as evidence for your view and can thus avoid 'I think / feel', which are weak in that they do not establish an argument.

If in doubt, the easiest way to structure your conclusion is to sum up one or two of your best points and clinch your argument with a final comment or quotation. The conclusion is not simply the last paragraph of your essay where you tail off because you have run out of things to say!

N.B. Reading the title before writing the conclusion will help to guide your comments and make sure you answer the question.

Sample questions. Key words / phrases are underlined.

Are Chaucer's characters all caricatures?

The question has three 'blocks': 'characters', 'all' and 'caricatures'.

Introduction: you may wish to define your concept of character and caricature, indicating what differentiates one from the other. One easy way to approach the question is to use the dictionary, eg. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'caricature' as 'Grotesque representation of person or thing by over-emphasis on characteristic traits'. This automatically helps you to structure your essay by giving you a basis for discussion. You will naturally want to consider a number of the pilgrims and discuss to what extent they are characters or caricatures. You may feel that they are all credible characters or that they are purely caricatures. Alternatively, you may decide that while the portraits were largely conceived in a satiric vein and as such, bear the hallmarks of caricature, many of them are too rounded to be dismissed as such.

'Joyce's didactic purpose and personal resentment make *Dubliners* a thoroughly monotonous, blatant and squalid book.' Do you agree?

The title structures the essay for you: take a key word, define, explain, give examples / quotations. N.B. Don't forget to consider the question in its entirety: is Joyce's purpose didactic, do we see his personal resentment in *Dubliners* and if so, do these things make it 'thoroughly monotonous, blatant and squalid'?

Is Chaucer's representation of women essentially hostile?

Is the word 'hostile' too strong? Does Chaucer judge according to gender or individual character? Is his criticism of the Prioress, for example, based on a dislike of women or a desire to expose hypocrisy within the Church? Is his

representation of men ever hostile? Chaucer clearly appreciates the vitality and sensuality of the Wife of Bath and seems to revel in her outrageousness. Does this suggest hostility to women?

Consider the statement that *Heart of Darkness* is no more than an anti-Imperialist tract.

What is Imperialism and how does Conrad present it in *Heart of Darkness*? Is it simply a tract or does this dismiss Conrad's writing abilities? What is a tract? Does *Heart of Darkness* deal solely with Imperialism or are there other important issues?

Common Errors:

Write an essay on any one of the following themes in two or more of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure For Measure* and *The Tempest*: nature, power, law, dreams, sexuality, hypocrisy, magic, justice, innocence.

It's obvious but make sure you read the question carefully: it requires a discussion of one theme in two plays.

Write on vision or on memory in Edward Thomas, with reference to at least three of his poems.

ie. one subject in at least three (but hopefully more!) poems.

Essay Checklist:

Relevance!

Grammar

Clear argument: essays are not exercises in creative writing. Be analytical and use language clearly. Your language should not be familiar, as in letters to friends but articulate and controlled.

Context: consider the literary, philosophical, historical, socio-political or religious background if necessary.

Structure: organise your material logically and coherently. Good structure gives the appearance of competence and makes your argument seem more persuasive.

Proofreading

It is always essential to spend time proofreading your work before handing it in. Ideally, you should write your essay a week or so before the deadline, leave it for a couple of days to distance yourself from it and then read it carefully to check that it makes sense and to remove any careless errors in writing and referencing which will affect your marks adversely.

Common crises:

'I can't do any of the questions'.

The most important thing is not to ignore the problem in the hope that it will go away because it won't - if anything, it will get worse. The earlier you tackle it, the more time you have to deal with it and the more opportunities to get help if necessary.

Look through the list of questions and number them according to difficulty so that the easiest question becomes number one. You may find that two or three questions are equally approachable. Jot down a few notes on each of these questions: you might just define the title and think of one or two **relevant** points. You may be able to formulate a possible argument and then think of one or two points to support this. However bad you think your notes are, they will probably help you to feel more positive because you will at least have done something and you won't be facing that awful sheet of blank paper! If you do this for two or three questions, however quickly, you will see that one is better than the others. If they are all equally brilliant (or abysmal), choose the one which you like most / hate least. Write what you can and then leave it for a few hours or until the following day. When you look at it later you may feel pleasantly surprised by what you have written and may be able to use it as the skeleton of your essay. Alternatively, you may decide to bin your earlier efforts and start again. Whatever you decide, you will probably be able to focus your ideas a little more clearly.

'I've got writer's block'.

Again, there are no magic solutions but you might find it helpful to try other forms of writing: diary, letter to Mum(!), review of your favourite T.V. programme or magazine. You may not feel capable of writing on Shakespeare but a review of something you know well will develop similar skills in an easier context. The only cure for 'writer's block' is writing!

'I can't motivate myself'.

Inevitably, no one can do this for you but there are things you can do to make things easier.

Study pairings or groups can be useful, although they can also be an excuse for a gossip! You could try meeting for coffee at 9am (let's be realistic - 10am), have a **quick** coffee and a moan (set yourselves a time limit) and then go to the library for a few hours. Going together means that you can't weasel out!

Alternatively, you can simply ask a friend to nag - most are only too happy to do so.

'Carrot before the donkey' technique: decide to work for a set time or give yourself a task to accomplish and reward yourself when you have completed it eg. chocolate bar, favourite T.V. programme. I'm sure you don't need any suggestions.

Lists can also be useful, although the concept is hardly new. Make a list of everything you have to do, eg. read 20 pages of *Heart of Darkness*. This will help you to organise your work and crossing things out will make you feel good!

Work timetables are also very useful. Ideally, you need to make a general one for the whole term, together with more detailed weekly ones. If you decide to do this, be flexible and leave room for work which takes longer than you anticipated or arrives unexpectedly. Please don't spend too many hours producing beautiful multi-coloured timetables: they're supposed to be an aid to work, not a distraction and excuse for not doing it.

Ultimately, it comes down to self-discipline and you will find your own way of coping with things but the above may be of some use as a starting-point.

Try not to spend too much time worrying. Your time will be employed far more usefully in reading and writing - aversion therapy! However, if you really feel you have a problem, see your tutor - preferably well before the essay deadline.

Happy brainstorming!