

ESSAY / TERM PAPER WRITING

(Please refer all queries to the MLA HANDBOOK)

ESSAY STRUCTURE

Each essay consists of an Introduction, a (for want of a better term) Main Body, and a Conclusion:

Introduction

- Answer the Question (Q.) asked right away and continue to hammer at it throughout (this will be your thesis).
- Do not merely regurgitate the wording of the Q. Paraphrase the *key terms* given in the Q. Reserve longer and more precise definitions for Foot/Endnotes.
- Give an outline of the main argument to come by offering a *brief preview* of the *main points* which you will develop in the Main Body of your essay.
- Specify the title(s) of any literary text(s) you will be looking at. Do not refer to a text vaguely as a 'book': what sort of book are you dealing with, an encyclopedia? A play? A novel?
- A suitable length for your introduction is 5 - 10 lines--any longer means that you are going into too much detail here.

Main Body

- Each of the main points mentioned in your introductory paragraph must be dealt with in a separate paragraph.¹ In effect, each paragraph is a self-contained unit that, theoretically, can be extracted from your essay and yet still make complete sense. If you mention six (6) points in your introduction, the main body of your essay should, ideally-speaking, consist of six (6) paragraphs. Where a single paragraph threatens to grow out of hand, it is permissible to divide it. Determine for yourself what logical order best suits the sequence of points/paragraphs.
- Each paragraph should be structured according to the formula P.D.I.: Point, Development, and Illustration:
 - The opening sentence of each paragraph should make your point, thesis statement or topic sentence crystal clear.
 - Your next sentence(s) should be devoted to an in-depth development, explanation or expansion of your point. Leave nothing to chance and take nothing for granted: always assume that your reader is ignorant and not that (s)he will automatically understand your intention. Your task is to communicate and to fully explicate the topic.
 - Finally, illustrate or exemplify the point you have been seeking to prove. In the case of a literary essay, this will involve making close reference to the text in question either by *paraphrasing* or *directly quoting* from the text. Do not be content, however, to merely quote: it is your job, after doing so, to explicate the quotation in order to show that you understand. Hence, do not end a

¹These are the 'building blocks' of your essay, just as words are the 'building blocks' of a sentence.

paragraph with a quotation. (In the case of other kinds of research papers, other forms of illustration are necessary [e.g. statistics, historical or scientific documentation, etc.])

Conclusion

- A useful way of beginning your Conclusion is 'In conclusion, . . .'. Do not begin with 'Therefore, . . .': it is not a maths problem.
- Reiterate your thesis (i.e. your position on or response to the Q.).
- You may also want to present a *brief review* of your argument.
- Your Conclusion is also the place for any conclusion(s) which you may have come to (as is often the case) in the course of writing your essay.

LAYOUT

- It is preferable, if you have access to a computer, to use a word-processor which today allows you extensive editing capabilities. If you must write it out by hand, do your best to write legibly.
- Always double-space your lines. The benefit of this is that it permits you to see your own errors more clearly and gives your reader room to make his/her comments etc.
- Always number your pages.
- Always indent paragraphs.
- Always respect the word-limit assigned because it could endanger your performance, given the time-considerations that may be involved. (Some examiners even stop reading after the limit has been reached.)
- Write out the Q. somewhere at the head of your paper (do not waste time doing so in an exam, merely number the Q.). Constantly refer to it throughout and let it be your guide (this is equally indispensable in an exam).

STYLE

Avoid verbal diarrhoea: be succinct. Avoid 'beating about the bush.' Do you recognise such 'polyfills' as 'In the Shakespearean Renaissance play Hamlet, . . .'? Or 'Mr. William Shakespeare, who wrote poems as well as plays, is here saying . . .'? Remember that 'meandering' like this is usually a ploy designed to gain you enough time to think about a (difficult) question but really only wastes time in the long run.

- Aim for fluency and to avoid repetitiousness.
- Adopt a formal, scholarly tone rather than a colloquial one.
- Beware of meaningless, verbose phrases or sentences that, while seeming to say much, actually say precious little. For example, what does this sentence (drawn from an actual essay), which purports to be very scholarly in appearance, mean: 'The author manipulate [*sic*] the theme being portrayed in the case of these fair stories it is the theme of alienation where the characterisation develops around the theme to enhance it.'?
- While the tendency, especially at higher levels within academia, is to identify to your reader the stance from which you are writing and which inevitably shapes your criticism (e.g., 'As a working-class black woman, The Color Purple has special significance for me . . .'), it is still advisable to avoid making personal and subjective intrusions (e.g.. 'I think that . . .' or 'It appears to me that . . .' or the ever popular 'It is the opinion of this writer that . . .').

MECHANICS

- All full-stops, question and exclamation marks must be followed by two spaces.
- Use commas after subordinate clauses: for example, 'In this novel, the theme of human mortality is' or 'Here,'
- Do not abbreviate (e.g.. 'don't,' 'can't,' etc.). Write these out in full (e.g. 'do not,' 'cannot,' etc.)
- In discussing the events depicted in a literary text, use the PRESENT TENSE consistently throughout, even though most texts are written in several past tenses. For example, 'Hamlet quarrels with his mother in Act Three' or 'We are told in the fourth chapter that Rupert is responsible for the death of his mother. He does not stop crying for days.'
- Always read over what you write with a 'fine-tooth comb,' looking for errors not only in terms of content but also in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation, diction, and sentence construction. Marks are lost for deficiencies in any or all of these areas.

TITLES

- Underline the titles of:
 - novels (e.g. Women in Love);
 - plays (Hamlet);
 - collections of poetry (Eliot's Selected Poems)
 - collections of short stories (Arrival of the Snake Woman);
 - anthologies (The Heath Introduction to Poetry);
 - journals (Shakespeare Survey),
 - scholarly texts (Dollimore's Radical Tragedy); etc.
- Put into double inverted commas:
 - the titles of individual poems (e.g. "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock");
 - short stories ("Arrival of the Snake Woman");
 - articles in scholarly journals ("The Image of the Indo-Caribbean Woman in Olive Senior's Arrival of the Snake Woman"); etc.

Note, too, that the first letter in the most important words in a title are capitalised. [Cf. MLA HANDBOOK sec. 2.5.3]

DOCUMENTING YOUR RESEARCH

The higher you reach within academia, the more *research* (i.e. intensive reading and studying around the subject in question) becomes indispensable. In literary studies at the university level, it is advisable to read a selection of commentaries on the literary text in question. The notion of an original and untutored thought does not hold much water today: your insights into a particular text are rarely (if ever) solely and uniquely yours. They are most often, rather, the product of a history of previous readings, methods of interpretation and ideological world views to which one has been exposed. Therefore, it is important not only to 'read around' the subject in order to expand your intellectual horizons but also to openly acknowledge this process by crediting your sources in a list of Works Consulted in order to be intellectually honest and to avoid the charge of plagiarism.

Consequently, all research papers and dissertations must be accompanied by a list of Works Consulted, consisting both of all the primary text(s) (the one[s] you are studying

and writing on) and all the secondary sources (critical commentaries, etc. written on the former) to which you make reference or upon which you draw in some way. *This must be set out strictly according to the format dictated by the MLA Handbook, which specifies that entries must be compiled in alphabetic order, and that each entry must be laid out according to a certain sequence and pattern of punctuation.* For example:

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Ed. Bernard Lott. Essex: Longman, 1968.

Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." Critical Theory Since 1965. Ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Tallahassee: U of Florida P, 1986. 120-136.

Where all works consulted are documented in the Bibliography, it is not necessary to repeat this information in the form of Foot/Endnotes. The latter remain an alternative and equally viable means of documenting your research. I prefer to draw up a comprehensive list of Works Consulted and to make use Foot/Endnotes only in order to clarify points made in the essay with information which may not be directly relevant to the topic in question.

For a fuller listing of examples of the differing formats of both bibliographical items and Foot/Endnotes, see either the MLA Handbook or the pamphlet Student Guidelines for the Preparation and Documentation of Essays prepared by the Faculty of Humanities at Cave Hill. The latter is an abbreviated version of the former.

QUOTING A LITERARY TEXT

- All quotations must be followed in parentheses by exact references:
 - in prose writing: to the correct page: e.g. (33) (*the symbol 'pg.' is unnecessary*);
 - in poetry: to the correct lines: e.g. (210-213) (*the symbol 'll.' is unnecessary*);
 - in drama: the correct Act, Scene and Lines: e.g. (4.2.37-39) (*Roman numerals are no longer necessary*)

It goes without saying that all works quoted in this way must be itemised in the list of Works Consulted. Students may, alternatively, make use of Foot/Endnotes to document the reference in question.

- Shorter quotations must be placed in *double inverted commas*. A special effort should be made to make the quotation fit smoothly into the flow of the sentence. For example, 'Hamlet begins his soliloquy by clearly contemplating suicide: "to be or not to be" (3.1.56), he asks.' Or 'Irene's alienation as a child is worsened when she is called a "country Bumpkin" (29) by the other children.' Where a short passage from a poem is cited, every effort should be made to indicate the end of lines by means of strokes and to respect the original punctuation. For example, 'Eliot's point in "Preludes" is that there is no meaning to life: "The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots" (53-4)'
- Longer quotations must be '*isolated*': that is, they must begin on the line following the point you are trying to illustrate and be doubly-indented (i.e. indented both on the right and the left). Such extended quotations must not be placed in inverted commas. The same effort, however, must be made to incorporate such quotations into the smooth flow of the paragraph. Note, in this regard, the importance of the correct punctuation and the usefulness of a simple colon in the following example:

'Selfishness is a prominent theme in this short story. Mr. Smith not only estranges outsiders but also the members of his immediate family:

Peace came at a price, oh, a terrible price not only for himself but for everyone with whom he had any contact.

Day in, day out, he pored over his collection of stamps, huddled in the dimmest of lights, the hunger gnawing at his stomach, the gold glittering in his eyes, his son, all the while, dying of consumption. (24-25)

The cost of Mr. Smith's obsession is nothing less than the life of his son.'

(Note that, instead of utilising a colon after 'family,' a full stop might have been used, followed by 'We are told that'. Note, too, that the paragraph does not end with a quotation but with an explanatory comment.)

- Where a part of a quotation is omitted, students should use *three (3)* dots with a space in between each. For example, 'Eliot's point in "Preludes" is that there is no meaning to life: "The worlds revolve . . . vacant lots" (53-4).' (Students should always be very careful in this regard lest any quotation appear too truncated.)

CONTENT

- Everything you write ought to be related to the Q. Constantly reassert and hammer at your thesis. (Avoid, however, incessantly repeating the very same terms and expressions.)
- Continually ask yourself the following questions: Did I do enough research? Did I answer the Q.? Did I interpret the topic correctly? Did I treat it in sufficient depth? Is the evidence I utilised both relevant and adequate?
- Do not simply retell the story--your examiner/teacher can do that for him/herself. You are not writing a summary. It is your job to explicate, to analyse and to comment on what you have read, while demonstrating a detailed knowledge of the text.