Write That Essay! Guidelines and Suggestions

Why write essays

In some of the courses you will be doing as part of your degree, a good deal of emphasis will be placed on getting you to produce essays and on assessing how effectively you do it. There are two main reasons for this: supporting your developing **understanding** of the issues and material involved in your courses; and enabling you to acquire **research and writing skills** that will be useful to you both within and beyond the degree context.

As far as developing your understanding of your discipline goes, you will need to get to grips with a wide range of new concepts, issues and methods of inquiry. The aim of a degree-level essay is not primarily to show how many facts you know or how comprehensive your knowledge is. That is not to say that learning new facts is unimportant, but even more important are your appreciation of how those facts fit together, and your ability to use them to discuss or argue about a range of issues. Essay work aims to help you develop several abilities that tutors consider important to being an effective student. These abilities will continue to be of use to you beyond your degree course. Whatever occupation you take up will most likely include some component of preparing papers or reports that are intended to convey information effectively to other people, and to convince them of some particular point of view. Like writing essays, this involves:

- Searching for and selecting information **relevant** to a question or task
- Understanding **relationships** between evidence and concepts
- **Structuring** thought and argument -- as opposed to straightforward information gathering and repetition.

The most general transferable skills that are promoted by essay work include:

- Practice in **scheduling** work
- **Professional** writing style(s) and format(s)
- **Evaluation** of your work methods and understanding of material, and use of **feedback**

Using this guide

You should not expect to try out all or even most of the suggestions in the following pages in one go on your first essay. Probably, you will already be doing effectively some of the things that are discussed, but not others. Be realistic about how many new things you can try out at one time -- you are going to be doing a lot more than a single essay during your degree course!

Start by overviewing the sections, and think about which areas are familiar and which are newest or may require most work for you. Feedback from your tutor will help you target parts of the essay production process to which you need to attend. Then you can build a list of priorities of things to try out, or to attempt to improve, on a particular essay or sequence of essays. It is often a good idea to write these things down as the basis of a work plan for yourself. Explicitly stating what you are trying to do, e.g. to concentrate on getting references in the appropriate format this time, helps you to become more aware of your behaviour and to assess the extent to which you are moving towards the goals that you have set for yourself.

Come back to this guide at regular intervals, until you have a clear idea of which suggestions work for you and which don't. Discuss alternatives with your tutors and other students (and share with them things that work for you). The most important thing is to become clear in your own mind that producing effective academic essays is mostly a question of systematic work and skill acquisition. Nobody is 'just good at doing essays'. They may, however, have skills that make it seem as if this kind of work comes easily to them. With time and effort you too can develop those skills.

Research and notes

Any essay begins with research to help you clarify the issues, positions and supportive evidence in the area concerned. In your first-year course, your research will be scaffolded by regular lectures and the reading list, which suggests overview and supplementary material on the topic concerned. Within that context, you will be introduced to ways of using the Library to explore other reading that is not directly specified by your tutor. This forms a bridge to later courses in your degree programme, where you will be expected to be more independent in defining questions and finding appropriate sources of information for answering them.

Making notes - why

It may seem obvious, but you should **always make notes** of some kind to keep a record of your listening and reading, whether at the same time, shortly afterwards or both. Working against time pressure, people sometimes pass up on notes. In the long run, however, you don't save time if you hurriedly look over a book or some articles, then immediately write out from memory an essay or ideas for a presentation. It may get you through that particular essay or presentation, but it is unlikely to do a great deal for your broader understanding of the material, especially as time passes and your memory of what you read fades.

If the course concerned is assessed by an unseen examination, the specific question(s) you have previously tackled in this way may come up, but more likely they won't and you will be stuck with reproducing irrelevant material that does not really answer the questions you choose. Information about, say, a single idea or experiment can often be used in many ways to address different issues; and questions relating to a single issue may be phrased in different ways. So, making notes that help you to clarify the different aspects of a topic and how they are interconnected will support much more flexible learning that you can apply to a range of questions, including new ones that you have not yet encountered.

This does not mean that you should read and make notes without specific questions in mind, whether your own or those set by your tutor. You should, however, consider those questions as possible routes for exploring a complex terrain that you may later need to look at from a different perspective.

Making notes - how

Equally obvious, but again too often passed up under time pressure, making notes should not consist of writing down word-for-word as much as possible of what you hear or read. People often talk about

taking notes, as if notes are reducible to something that you can copy or be given, but the more active description, **making notes**, is (or ideally should be) more appropriate. For notes to further your understanding of an area and be useful for a range of purposes, several key **activities** are called for on your part:

- **putting things into your own words** -- your notes then make more sense to you and are easier to use for revising or writing
- **selecting information** relevant to your purpose(s) -- ranging from helping you to understand the material for its own sake to various forms of talk/writing preparation
- **abbreviating** -- as far as is compatible with maintaining intelligibility to you
- **structuring** -- to highlight main and subsidiary ideas/evidence and links between them
- **organizing for flexibility** -- so that you can use your notes right now but also come back to them in the longer term, possibly expanding them or using them for a new purpose.

At first, achieving this may seem easier when reading than at lectures, but do not sacrifice trying to understand the main issues and points that the lecturer is trying to get across, and how they relate to one another, in favour of copying down every word that is said and/or shown to you. The possibility of making notes of a lecture does not end as soon as the lecture does. You can, for example, use filling in details of the lecture notes soon after the lecture as a bridge to your reading, say by looking up the fine detail of empirical studies for which you have already noted the context and general significance from the lecture. Actively using and expanding your notes in such ways can be a great help to improving your understanding of the area concerned.

Psychological research on memory shows that getting subjects to impose structure on information (e.g. by thinking up meaningful links between initially unrelated items, or by sorting items into categories) can support retention and recall as well as, or even better than, instructing them to memorize. The most common ways of making effective notes function in a similar way, helping the user to focus on connections between facts they encounter. Often, spatial structure (the way words representing information or ideas are arranged in relation to each other on the page) is used to support the construction of new mental structures. You have to experiment and find out what works for you for different purposes. Three common strategies are not mutually exclusive:

(a) **Patterned notes** (sometimes called 'spidergrams' or 'spiders') have a web-like, branching structure, with lines drawn to indicate which ideas go together, are subsidiary to one other and/or connected in some way. Detailed coverage of this method is provided in T. Buzan's (1974) book Use Your Head, and in K. Williams's (1989) Study Skills (under 'branching notes'). This one-side, see-at-a-glance format is useful for getting a feel for the overall organization of an area, though they can easily become overloaded, hence unclear, if you try to add too much detail.

(b) **Sectioned notes** more closely follow the organizational format of much that you will read and many of the essays you will write. They summarize the structure of an area by distinguishing sections, sub-sections, sub-sub-sections and so on through the use of numbers and/or different styles of writing (underlined vs. not; capitals vs. lower-case, different coloured pens, etc.). Very brief linear notes for this guide might look like the contents list on the front page. They can be used for any amount of material, but you can still get overloaded as increasing numbers of pages are involved. Unlike patterned notes, connections between material in separate sections can rarely be indicated by a simple line or arrow, so some method of cross-referencing is needed, e.g. by mentioning the number or heading of the related point.

(c) **Filecards** are generally used to keep full details of the bibliographical reference of any book or article that you have read. They are most useful if you wish to use the information on them for several tasks over a period of time, e.g. constructing reference lists for several essays. You can also make notes about the content of the item on the card's reverse side. Clearly, those notes cannot be very extensive unless your writing is tiny or you use very large file cards, so they usually need supplementing with notes in some other form. However, they can form a compact, useful record of things you've read. You can check them over later for relevance to a new area, and arrange them on your desk in different ways to help work out the best order for presenting the material they refer to when you plan an essay.

Some prohibitions

Your research and note-taking should enable you to report accurately other people's ideas and studies, and to distinguish them clearly from your own commentary and evaluation of them. To this end:

- **Never forget to write down the author/speaker and source** for any notes that you take. Tomorrow you'll probably remember where they came from, but by next month or next year.....?
- **Don't forget to use quote marks** for sentences or ringing phrases that you feel need noting verbatim, and note their page number. Don't forget either that such reproduction is rarely merited unless the manner in which an author defines or expresses something, or the fact that they did so, is itself the focus of your discussion.
- **Don't write down entire passages of hundreds of words that you don't understand** in the hope that you'll achieve enlightenment if you come back to them at a later date. You are more likely to succumb to (intentional or unintentional) plagiarism.
- **Don't plagiarise**. Plagiarism is passing off other people's work as your own, and it is viewed extremely dimly by assessors. Putting into your essay sentences, paragraphs or pages that were written by someone else, without acknowledging where the words or ideas come from, is always plagiarism. Always put things in your own words, unless quoting, and use the accepted ways of `citing your sources' to make clear where the ideas come from.
- **Don't rely solely on a review article or 'secondary source'** written by someone who has read a range of original material, summarized, ordered and commented on it for you. Even if you rephrase this in your own words, all the real work of selecting, structuring and analysing the material has been done for you. At worst, this is a form of plagiarism; at best, it makes for exceptionally unoriginal essays. (Producing a critical evaluation of a review article is another matter, but you will need to draw on other sources to do that effectively.) Whether the review that you may think 'says it all' is Rutter's *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed*, Levy's *Artificial Life* or whatever, your tutors will have lost track of the number of times that the same sequence of points and experiments have come their way. If your entire essay could be prefixed by the phrase "X (date) says that...", and X is not you, think again! Using several sources and putting them together in your own way is one of the main ways you can develop your originality.

Planning and writing your essay

Unless you have truly remarkable powers of handling multiple sources of information simultaneously in your working memory, you will need to follow your research and note taking by making out a plan before you begin to write an essay. Indeed, it is a false economy to spend little or no time on the plan, thinking that you will sort out any gaps or fuzzy bits during the process of writing -- you are more likely to get stuck or wander away from your line of argument/discussion. Time spent on effective planning should quickly repay itself by greatly cutting down writing time.

Answering the question

To understand what a good plan looks like, you need to be clear on what it should enable you to do. Certainly that is to write out the full essay, but what are you trying to do in that? Whatever your topic, the same applies: **the cleverest thing you can do is answer the question**. Although many people believe this to be obvious, one of the most common faults with early essays is their failure to address and/or to answer the question the tutor or examiner has set.

An essay question asks you to **do something(s)** and so establishes a **domain of relevance** for your answer -- to 'compare and contrast...', 'discuss...', spell out 'why...' or 'how...' and so forth. Some concepts, arguments and sources of evidence are relevant to answering it, many more are not. Analysing what the question means, and what material is relevant to answering it, is an important part of planning an essay's structure. No essay question is ever intended to mean 'write out everything you know about X', unless it says so -- and generally it won't! Often, however, producing an unordered list of points that they have come across in connection with terms in the essay title is precisely what people end up doing. This is especially likely to happen if you make up your own essay titles by simply putting a noun phrase at the top of your paper, e.g. 'Piaget's Theory' or 'Learning and Development'. You should notice that the essay titles you are set are **never** noun phrases like those, although you may encounter something like 'What are the differences between learning and development in Piaget's theory?' For everything you include in an essay, you should be able to justify why it is there and necessary to answering the question; if you can't, leave it out.

Building an essay plan should also aim to avoid a further common problem with essays: **leaving the material to speak for itself**. In a novel, it is considered a mark of skill to build up 'evidence' that leads the reader to a 'conclusion' that the author does not present explicitly, say 'X stumbled across the room, his speech slurred, as the empty whisky bottle caught my eye...' but not 'X was drunk'. In academic essays, however, it is important to express the structure of your argument and your conclusions as explicitly as possible. Each step of your argument, or order of discussion, should be stated explicitly and clearly, and part of building your plan should involve articulating precisely what those steps are and why they are going to be located as they are in relation to the other parts of the essay.

One page plans

So, if it is to help you to write an effective essay, a plan should make explicit the skeleton of an answer to the set question. One side of paper should be ample for planning a 1,000-1,500 word essay, and has the advantage that it can help you to see how the whole essay fits together. Your essay plan can usefully include five components:

(a) A summary of the **introductory paragraph**, which will orient the reader to what you are trying to do and how you intend to do it. This tells the reader what to expect and also sets the criterion of relevance against which they can judge whether or not your essay achieves what it sets out to do. Sentences in this paragraph should: highlight the terms from the title that you believe are important; make clear how you are interpreting the question; state your aims; and very briefly indicate the general line of argument and/or order of discussion that follows. If the full version of this paragraph gets beyond about half a side, it's too long; cut out any superfluous material and/or make your prose style terser.

(b) In the order in which you will present them, the **main** points of your argument. Express the essential idea behind each stage of your essay in a single sentence.

(c) Under each of these points, a brief reference to the **evidence, examples and supporting material** that will be included to support it. This will mainly involve outlining someone's argument(s) and/or details of empirical studies. Arrows may be added to indicate any cross reference between stages of the essay that you intend to include.

(d) A **conclusion**, which should relate to the essay question and follow clearly and logically from your preceding points.

If (a), (b) and (d) are expressed in coherent sentences (harder to do but far more effective than unrelated words or phrases), putting them together should produce an intelligible abstract or précis of your whole essay.

Interconnected material - linear order

If you follow the preceding guidelines about planning, then writing the essay should be a straightforward task of producing appropriate prose to flesh out the skeleton that you have constructed. Easy enough once you have mastered it, this fleshing out process often requires practice to prevent what should be an explicitly structured, systematic argument ending up as a list of points that seem relatively unrelated as far as the reader is concerned. This is not surprising. There are all sorts of interconnections between the issues, concepts and studies that are relevant to a typical essay. You may be able to express these for yourself in a diagram, and they should be made clear in your plan. However, when it comes to final writing, you have no option but to work in a linear mode, producing a series of words, one after another.

You have to use appropriate phrases in appropriate places to make the structure of your argument clear and compelling to the reader. The best rule of thumb is that your reader should never have to try to work out for themselves why you have included any particular material in your answer. You should tell them, and do so at a time when they can best take advantage of that information. Ask yourself: how likely is it that someone paraphrasing my essay would end up with something close to my original plan? Have a serious look at how a good academic book or paper tries to make its structure transparent through sentences in the introduction, start of each section, and beginning and ending of each paragraph. In the meantime, some widely applicable suggestions are
given below:

(a) **Ensure that all the steps of your argument/discussion appear explicitly** in the essay and are not

left behind in your plan or your head. Don't just present the evidence for points that you wish to make, thus leaving it to speak for itself, or the reader to try to speak for it.

(b) As far as possible, **make your question-related commentary as you go along**, don't 'save' it all for a final conclusions section. The main conclusions should draw together what has already been said, not do new work for the essay. For example, if you aim to 'compare the views of A and B', avoid devoting two sides to what A has to say about X, Y and Z, then the same amount to what B has to say about X, Y and Z, only at the bitter end drawing attention to agreements and disagreements. By the time your conclusion launches into 'so, A and B agree on X insofar as.....', the reader may have to look back four pages to check. It's fine to conclude: 'As we have seen, A and B agree on X and Y but disagree on Z' -- provided the agreements and disagreement really were explicitly flagged and spelt out for the reader earlier on.

(c) **Don't 'save' your points or commentary until the ends of the paragraphs or sections in which they occur**. As the plan proposal, above, suggested: evidence or examples should be assembled under points you are making, not before them. Don't spend half a page or more summarizing an experiment, then tag on words to the effect: 'This means X for the essay question.' Instead, start by saying 'X is demonstrated by a study that...', then summarize the experiment. This can help you to be more selective about what details of studies you present; and it is easier for the reader to work forwards rather than backwards.

(d) **Avoid repeating the same point or conclusion in a series of paragraphs** (though it is better to repeat yourself than not to comment explicitly at all). Say, for example, you want to establish that X is the case and you have three sources of support, A, B and C. Obviously, you should not just write three paragraphs summarizing A, B, then C, with allusion to X nowhere in view. Neither is it good style to begin or end three consecutive paragraphs with X. Where a single point is supported by several sources of evidence, this branching structure can be expressed quite simply in words by saying something like:

Three sources of evidence support the conclusion that X.
Firstly, A.....
Secondly, B.....
Finally, C.....

There are many similar constructions. For example, you can often begin a series of thematically related paragraphs with a sentence like:

I shall outline three sources of evidence for X:A; B; and C', where you substitute brief phrases for A-C before the more detailed 3-step exposition.

A similar solution copes with one piece of evidence, say A, relating to several aspects of an issue, for example X:

Study A makes three important contributions to our understanding of X.
Firstly, aspect 1 of A challenges the opposing view not-X.
Secondly, aspect 2 of A suggests X2.
Finally, aspect 3 of A confirms X3.

(e) **Develop your repertoire of 'hooks' between paragraphs**. Adjacent paragraphs should be

explicitly related to one another in more than a spatial sense. One way of achieving this was shown in (d) above. Other methods involve making a paragraph's opening sentence follow on from the theme of the preceding paragraph, using expressions like 'However, further studies...'; 'An equally important point/issue...'; 'We need also to consider...'; etc. Alternatively, it is sometimes effective to start a paragraph, or to end its predecessor, with a query. For example, 'Might [whatever you've just outlined]have occurred because X?' explicitly licenses you to go on and discuss X.

(f) When you are beginning to try out these kinds of techniques, **don't be afraid to be blatant or clumsy** in designing your structuring and linking phrases. Too explicit is always better than opaque. With practice, and an eye to the many good examples you will encounter in your reading, your style should soon become smoother so that the 'joins' in your essay show less.

Essay format

You have the content of your essay under control. All that remains is to get details of the presentation right. This section considers some commonly asked questions, and outlines essential aspects of making your essay fit the appropriate academic format.

To section or not to section?

Should you subdivide your essay into separate sections, each with its own heading? In a practical report this would be essential. In an essay it is optional, but it will sometimes be useful.

In general, you should think about introducing sections if you believe it will make the structure of your essay clearer and easier to follow for the reader. You should not sprinkle section headings throughout an essay as a substitute for clear, planned structure. If the sequence of your argument or analysis doesn't make sense, a series of logically unrelated section headings will certainly not help anything. Section headings can help you and the reader by marking key shifts in an essay's structure; they make it easy to see at a glance where each main division in the essay starts and ends. However, they do not speak for themselves. The introduction will still need to include something like: `This analysis is divided into three main sections. In section 1... Next, section 2... Finally...in section 3.' That is, section headings may mark the main steps of your answer, but you must be clear on what those steps are before you can use sections effectively.

Employed sensibly, section headings become increasingly useful as pieces of writing become longer. Most people can follow a few sides, but an extended essay of 4,000 words will be about sixteen double-spaced pages of typing plus a reference list. By that point, section headings take on less of an optional quality and generally they should be used. When you read journal articles and book chapters you will see that they are almost invariably divided into sections.

Acknowledging your sources

Making clear where the ideas and evidence you include in an essay come from is essential. There are standard academic ways of doing this that you will need to learn. These cover acknowledgement of other people's writing and research in the text of your essay -- **citations** -- and addition to the end of your essay of full **references** of what you have cited.

Naming names

You will come across two main ways of acknowledging the source(s) of previous work. Footnotes are sometimes used: the name, date, title and publication details of each source are numbered according to the order in which they are being cited, and given in full at the bottom of the relevant page, with a corresponding number on the page where the work is discussed or mentioned. This makes it fairly hard to see who said/did what during reading of the text, so you should not use this method for essays where such information is often crucial.

For psychology essays, you should always include the name of the **author and year** in which the work you are citing was published, **in your text**. This information should then repeated in a references list at the end of your essay, together with the full title and publication details of every piece of work that you have cited.

Only the author's surname should usually be included in the text. For example, where a single author and piece of work are involved:

- Two ways of testing this hypothesis have been suggested (Johns, 1990).
- Johns (1990) suggested two ways of testing this hypothesis.
- In 1990, Johns suggested two ways of testing this hypothesis.

The first two of these examples are the most common formats. Brackets are used to help the reader see which of the information you are providing you want them to pay most attention to. In the first example, suggestions for testing a hypothesis are highlighted, so the name/date of the person making the suggestions are put into brackets, separated by a comma. In the second example, the fact that Johns was the person who made this suggestion is given equal emphasis, so the author's name appears unbracketed in the text, with only the date of the work in brackets. In the final example, the precise year in which the suggestion was made is also given emphasis, as it might be if the history of a research area is the theme, so date and author are both mentioned in the text and no brackets are used. In all cases, the reader should be able to look up full information about the cited work in the references at the end of your essay, if they wish to do so.

Always use this method to cite information from **electronic sources, articles** and **books** that you read or **lectures**, **conference papers** and **seminar presentations** that you attend.

Never use vague allusions to theory or research for which you are unable to provide any reference(s). If "all philosophers now agree that.....", you should be able to name at least one!

If several works and/or several authors need to be cited, you can do this in the following ways:

Several works by the same author -- give the surname only once, followed by the years in which the work appeared in chronological order, separated by commas:

- Several tests of this hypothesis were undertaken (Johns, 1978, 1980, 1986).

Several forms of one work, e.g. a new edition or a translation -- you may have read a recent edition of a much older work, or something that is a translation from an earlier text in another language. For clarity, give two dates, the year of the first publication and the year of the edition that you read:

- Poincare's (1905/1958) ideas about spatial understanding...

Several works by different authors -- give the surnames in alphabetical order, with their year(s) of publication, separated by semi-colons. If several works are being cited by one or more of these authors, arrange the years of publication chronologically as in the preceding example:

- Attempts to replicate these findings have so far been unsuccessful (Johns, 1978, 1980; Jones, 1976; Smith, 1981, 1983; Thomas, 1980).

Several works by different authors who have the same surname -- to avoid any confusion, include their initials:

- C. Johns (1981) findings were subsequently replicated by N. Johns (1984).

Several authors of a single work -- give their surnames in alphabetical order, followed by the year of publication in the usual way. Any of the three basic citation formats introduced above can be used:

- Two ways of testing this hypothesis have been suggested (Johns and Thomas, 1991).
- Johns and Thomas (1991) suggested two ways of testing this hypothesis.
- In 1991, Johns and Thomas suggested two ways of testing this hypothesis.

Three or more authors of a single work -- can take up a lot of space in your essay as the list of names gets longer, without adding much information. It is usual to give all of the surnames the first time you mention the work, then shorten the citation to the surname of the first author and the abbreviation 'et al.':

- First mention: Johns, Thomas, Waters and Young (1981) argued that...
- Subsequent mentions: Johns et al. (1981) argued that...

Secondary citations are those where you wish to cite work that you have not read in the original but have read summarized and/or discussed in some other (secondary) work. For example, you will come across summaries of the theories and experiments of hundreds of psychologists in a textbook such as Gleitman. In your essay, you should acknowledge the primary (unread) and secondary (read) sources of your material as follows:

- Johns (1980, cited in Stevens, 1988) failed to confirm this hypothesis.

At the end of your essay, you should put the full reference to the work you actually read, in this case Stevens (1988), not the reference to the work you read about at second-hand, in this case Johns (1980). This absolves you of responsibility for any errors in the secondary source's coverage. But you may also be missing out, since originals are frequently more interesting and may include material not hinted at in the secondary source. Obviously, the more advanced you become in your subject, the less acceptable secondary citations become. If in doubt, check with your tutor. Even in the early stages, if you find that all your citations are from a secondary source or sources (e.g. Gleitman), you should ask yourself: 'why?'! You did attend some lectures and do some other reading -- didn't you?

Personal communications, when someone provides you with details of an unpublished argument or research findings through correspondence or discussion, are generally acknowledged as follows:

- A recent attempt to replicate Johns's (1980) study has been only partly successful (Thomas, pers. comm.).

You will be unlikely to need this form of citation unless you correspond with a researcher about their

work-in-progress, e.g. while undertaking a Finals Project. Be sure to avoid direct transfer of such citations from your reading to your own work. They are generally a clear indicator of copying without acknowledgement -- most obviously when the supposed personal informant has been dead for many years!

Reproducing others' words

Sometimes you need to do more than cite the source of an idea or piece of work in your essay; strengthening your argument may require you to reproduce word-for-word something you have read. Reproducing ringing phrases, sentences or whole sections of what you have read is quotation. You should not include quotations just because you feel the author puts things better than you can do yourself. You can include quotations when something
striking is said that you will discuss but cannot summarize in your own words without loss of meaning, or when the way that something is being put is important in its own right, e.g. a definition. Always acknowledge such quotations appropriately: by adding the number(s) of the page(s) on which the phrases or sentences occur to the author's name and year of their work, and by marking the words you are reproducing.

Short quotations, from a single phrase to a maximum of about 40 words, should be marked with **double quotation marks** and run in with your text:

- However, this position is contradicted by a subsequent argument that "It is inconceivable that any evidence could be provided to support this deeply flawed hypothesis" (Johns, 1981, p.32).
- Contradicting his earlier position, Johns (1981) found it "inconceivable that any evidence could be provided to support this deeply flawed hypothesis"(p.32).

Long quotations, of a paragraph or so, should be marked by **indenting** them from the margins. Provided this is done clearly, quotation marks are not needed. For example:

> It is inconceivable that any evidence could be provided to support this deeply flawed hypothesis. Beyond the fact that all existing experiments are open to alternative interpretations, the fundamental concepts in which the hypothesis is expressed are simply too ill-defined to be clearly operationalized for empirical study. (Johns, 1990, pp.32-33)

You should note that:

- Name, date and/or page(s) appearing **after** a quotation go after the closing quotation marks.
- The abbreviation **pp**. is used to indicate page numbers when a quotation spans two pages from the source that you read.
- If you want to leave words out of the quotation, replace them with 5 dots to indicate that something has been taken out of the original.

Technical terms/expressions of one or two words do not generally have to be treated as quotations. You may, however, want to emphasize that they are being introduced and/or used as technical terms. Do this simply by using quotation marks or by placing the term(s) concerned in italics. If you are hand-writing your essay, or your typewriter or printer doesn't have italics, underlining is equivalent to italicizing:

- Bruce and Green (1986) discuss how distinguishing between "seeing" and "seeing as" may help to

clarify the way that experience affects perception.
- Piaget's (1972) notions of equilibration and reflective abstraction have proven difficult to operationalize in behavioural terms.

References

Every essay or report that you write should include a full reference for each published item that you have cited. This includes material on the web, as this is also a form of publication and the source needs to be acknowledged. Direct quotes can be used if this will enhance your argument, but you should ensure that quotations are acknowledged appropriately. Failure to acknowledge the source of material is regarded as plagiarism, which is a serious offence against examination regulations (please refer to BA Examination Handbook for Candidates for further details on plagiarism and the examination regulations). You should always give your reader the information they need to find the source and consult it for themselves if they wish to do so. There are different ways of doing this, but most of them require you to list:
- Author(s)
- Full title
- Publication details

For psychology students, it is best to adopt the standard British method, as illustrated in *The Psychologist* and the many journals published by the British Psychological Society, such as *The British Journal of Psychology*, *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* or *British Journal of Social Psychology*.

Whether you are giving a reference for an **article**, **book**, **book chapter or paper/presentation**, you always begin with the **initial(s) and surname** of each author of the work in reverse order, followed by the **date of publication**, which will already have appeared in your essay. Then use the following guidelines for each type of material:

Journal articles -- full title of the article (ending in a full stop and with only the first letter of the first word capitalized), title of the journal in italics (or underlined if handwriting, or italics are unavailable on your typewriter/printer), separated by commas from the volume number and numbers of the start-end pages of the article:
- Lewis, M. (1969). Infants' responses to facial stimuli during the first year of life. *Developmental Psychology, 1,* 75-86.

Books -- full title of the book in italics (ending in a full stop and capitalized throughout), place of publication and publisher's name (separated by a colon):
- Piaget, J. (1953). *The Origin of Intelligence in the Child*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Chapters in edited books -- full title of the chapter (ending in a full stop and with only the first letter of the first word capitalized), initial(s) and surname(s) of editors in normal order, book title and publication details as above:
- Pirolli, P. (1999). Cognitive engineering models and cognitive architectures in human-computer interaction. In F. T. Durso (Ed.), *Handbook of applied cognition* (pp. 443-447). Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Lectures, conference papers or seminar presentations -- although unpublished in written form, these should be included in your reference list using the following general formats:

- Person, A. (1993). Title of cited lecture. Lecture presented at the University of Sussex. Brighton, 12 September.
- Person, A. (1993). Title of cited conference paper. Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Interesting Psychology. Brighton, 12-15 September.

Ordering entries in your reference list should always follow the general principle of arranging them in **alphabetical order** and **chronological sequence**. The following examples of ordering references to **several authors and/or several works** offer basic guidelines:

- **Single authors** -- order alphabetically, comparing their surnames letter by letter from left to right. When several authors have the same surname, they are ordered by comparing their initials. When the letters of a surname are identical to the opening letters of a longer surname, the shorter surname is listed first, whatever the initials. E.g.

Jameston << Jemeston << Jeriston
John << Johns << Johnstone
John, A. << John, P. << John, P.A.
John, P. << Johns, A. << Johnstone, E.

Prefixes like Mc and Mac can be ordered alphabetically like other surnames, e.g.
Macdonald << McArthur << McWilliams

Articles and prepositions like 'le', 'von' and 'du' should be included as the start of the surname for ordering purposes, if that is usual for the language concerned (e.g. 'Claes von Hofsten' becomes 'von Hofsten, C.' for reference purposes). Otherwise, put them after the author's surname and initials. If you are unsure, you can usually check the way the author references their own other work at the end of the article or book that you read.

- **Identical author(s), several works** -- list in chronological order by year of publication, e.g.

Piaget, J. (1953)
Piaget, J. (1955)
Piaget, J. (1972)

- **Identical author(s) and year, several works** -- order alphabetically by title (ignoring 'the' or 'a', which occur so often that they are deemed invisible for alphabetic ordering purposes). Add 'a', 'b', 'c' and so on to the year, in your essay as well as in the references, so that these entries can be distinguished and text matched up to references in this particular piece of work, e.g.:

Piaget, J. (1978a) *The Development of Thought.*
Piaget, J. (1978b) *Success and Understanding.*

- **Several authors** -- order alphabetically, as above, working from left to right across the surnames, e.g.

Lee, D.N. and Aronson, E. (1974)
Legerstee, M., Pomerleau, A., Malcuit, G. and Feider, H. (1987)

- **Several authors, identical first author** -- place any references where the first author is single author first, then list entries with other authors in alphabetical order by the second author(s), e.g.

Bower, T.G.R. (1979)
Bower, T.G.R. (1982)
Bower, T.G.R., Broughton, J.M. and Moore, M.K. (1972)
Bower, T.G.R. and Patterson, J.G. (1973)

Electronic Sources _ It is important to remember that the rules of plagiarism still apply to material published on the web. Always acknowledge the source (and use quotations when words are replicated).

As with other material, you need to enable the reader to refer to the original source and a general retrieval statement for material from pages accessed via the web is:

Retrieved [month day, year] from site on the World Wide Web: [URL] [Site name if appropriate] [Author name(s) if given] [date of page/site if given] [reference to version published elsewhere, e.g. in a paper journal, if given]

e.g. Retrieved 20/07/01 from http://www.massey.ac.nz/~ALock/virtual/project2.htm 'Virtual Faculty Site on Lev Vygotsky' Andrew Lock 1996

For further guidelines on referencing electronic sources please refer to the American Psychological Association web pages at: http://www.apastyle.org/elecmedia.html or the British Psychological Association web page (particularly for referencing e-databases) at: http://www.bps.org.uk/publications/jAuthorGuide2.cfm

Does it matter if...?

There are many questions about the style and format of essays that you may wish to ask that have not been covered in the preceding sections. Three of the most familiar follow; if your concerns remain unaddressed, then consult your tutor.

(Mis-) spelling, grammar and punctuation

Do spelling, grammar or punctuation matter? In a word: **'yes'**. If you spell technical terms wrongly, your reader will wonder if you understand what you are writing about. If you spell everyday words wrongly, at best the appearance of your work will be marred; at worst you will not be writing the word you think you are writing, but some other word that may have a totally different meaning. Grammar and punctuation exist to give you the highest possible chance of conveying your precise meaning to the reader. For example, one comma can totally change the meaning of a sentence. If you want to be sure that your reader is decoding what you are trying to say in the way you intend, you need to achieve a basic grasp of spelling, sentence structure and punctuation.

Dyslexic? Do not fear. If nothing else, you may already be more aware of the issues than someone who is simply a sloppy speller. Beyond that, word-processing can help you to produce work that is relatively easy to correct in the light of other students' reading of it, and there are computer spelling checkers designed specifically for you. Consult your Sub-Dean about getting an assessment. Depending on the outcome, you will be able to find out about assistance available, and, if appropriate, about examination arrangements.

Your own ideas

What about 'I/me'? This guide has discussed citing and referring to other people in some detail, but is it okay to use the word 'I' in a scientific essay, and what about including your own ideas?

It used to be thought unacceptable to say 'I', and in some disciplines it remains so. 'We' may be expected, even if you are the sole author (e.g. in certain Artificial Intelligence journals); or you are expected to omit any direct reference to your own perspective (e.g. not 'I shall argue that.....' but 'In this

essay, it will be argued that.....'). This is no longer an inviolable rule. Sparing use of 'I' or 'my' in appropriate contexts will do no harm when expressing your own aims, evaluation and commentary as opposed to that of other people. However, you need to exercise strong quality control over the content of what you express in this way.

Encouragement to include your own ideas should not be confounded with license to express prejudices, feelings or speculations about anything that are unsubstantiated by suitable analysis or evidence. If you want to propose, think or feel 'X' in an essay, you must make clear why this is better than proposing, thinking or feeling 'not-X'. In short, you must justify your own ideas according to the same criteria of logical argument and use of evidence that you should be employing for other people's theories and empirical studies. It is fine to say 'I disagree with A's conclusion.....', provided you go on to say something like 'because it does not follow from the evidence in the following way(s)' or 'because a further study supports an alternative interpretation.'

Do not confuse being original with having ideas that have nothing to do with anything that has been expressed or done so far. The first steps in being original involve becoming familiar with what other people have done, and in building on that.

Getting 'stuck' and 'unstuck'

If you do not find planning and writing essays an entirely pleasurable experience, you are not alone. There may be new skills for you to learn, and nobody enjoys feeling they don't really know what they're doing. Over and above this, the whole point of research and writing is to clarify and change the way you see things; the periods of uncertainty that are an essential part of the process of moving from one level of understanding to another can be unsettling (at introductory and advanced levels). Additionally, completing your essay means that it will be evaluated by someone else, and you may be apprehensive about that. With experience, you can learn to appreciate new skills that you acquire; to look forward to the positive feelings that accompany completing a piece of work and expanding your perspective on things; and to be realistic about the positive benefits of feedback. In the meantime, you may sometimes get 'stuck'. Problem-solving was divided by Helmholtz into 4 phases: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification. He forgot **procrastination** -- putting off starting or completing some activity. This can happen at many points of the essay production process, and this section looks briefly at some things you can try to handle it.

Hard to get going? You may sometimes intend to produce an essay but find it hard to get going at all. It may help to think about this as a difficulty in setting the realistic goals that will help you to convert your intention into action. Finding time to 'do that essay' is not a very well phrased goal: it is too large, too ill-defined in terms of what you are telling yourself to do, and hence too vague to schedule effectively into the time you have available. Specific sub-tasks like reading and making notes on a background chapter, or preparing your plan or reference list, are more manageable. Preceding sections have suggested how essay writing breaks down into many (interconnected) smaller tasks that require different amounts of time. This time doesn't have to be whole days or weekends set aside for the sole purpose of essay writing. Time before/between classes or before you have to travel home for the evening can be useful too. Try scheduling such times to get on with one (specific) thing towards your overall goal of handing in the essay on time.

Can't stop reading? Sometimes people can get stuck at the reading stage of an essay. They believe they can't start planning or writing until they've read 'just the right article' or 'just one more article'. Try to be realistic about how much you can read in the time available to you (the amount should increase as you become more familiar with your academic field). Addiction to reading in your discipline is sometimes commendable, but do not keep reading as escape from getting on with thinking, planning or writing.

Daunted by planning? If plan production is proving especially hard, you may be a victim of 'the tyranny of the notes', worrying about how you can get everything 'in there' into your essay. They lie all over your desk, encouraging you to imagine the inadequacies of your (future) essay. Try looking notes over before you plan, then putting them out of sight and taking a brief break of some kind. Do your draft plan from memory, only then going back to your notes to see if you have left out anything that is absolutely vital to the essay.

Stuck during writing? Part way through writing, the next sentence or paragraph may seem to be out of your grasp. It can help to try diagnosing the reason for this. Is it that the sequence of points in your plan does not really follow? Putting phrases used in a plan into full written form may sometimes expose a gap in your argument, in which case go back to your plan and see if local amendments are possible. Try not to see this as a negative thing -- this kind of feedback from your own activity is one of the reasons you are asked to write; sometimes such gaps will appear because writing is rapidly developing your understanding. Alternatively, your plan may be fine but you may simply lack effective techniques for expressing conceptual analysis and/or links between theory and evidence. If that is the case, practice may be the answer.

Can't finish? If you are writing but don't seem to be able to get finished, you may be in the grip of perfectionism: the (often unconscious) belief that your completed work is worthless unless it achieves absolute perfection. This is an especially silly belief in the early stages of essay writing insofar as you are clearly expected to be learning, not to know everything already. It is always a silly belief to the extent that no piece of work is ever perfect. Try thinking of in-term essays as progress reports that give as accurate as possible a picture of what you think and understand now. Given more time, this will most likely change, but the process of pulling your ideas together in essay format can do a great deal to speed that process.

Seeking and using feedback

When you hand in your essay, your tutor will return it with comments about its strengths and the areas that you could profitably target for improvement next time round. Do read the comments your tutor makes, when you receive the essay back and when you begin to write the next one.

Take a balanced view of what they say: note what went well in your essay, in addition to points where your argument or style were challenged. Congratulate yourself on anything that was an improvement over last time, before noting what you will try differently in your next essay. Don't dwell on negative feelings associated with lack of success in some areas; this will do nothing for your morale or for your writing. Instead, use feedback to make plans for new behaviours that you can try out; if and when those work, it will be a morale booster.

We usually think of feedback as something that happens only **after** an activity is completed, but it may sometimes be more helpful to you to consult your tutor **during the process of essay production**. For example, if you have questions about notes or planning, go along to your tutor's office hours with a set of notes or a plan to discuss. General queries about finding it hard to write essays are tricky to handle, but if you pinpoint what steps are easier and harder for you, you can seek assistance more effectively.

In addition to your tutor, do not underestimate how useful **other students** may be as a resource to support your learning. Show your work to other students, and offer to read and comment on theirs. This will help you build a realistic picture of what other people's work is like, and you can gain useful comments about the clarity and organization of your own work. This process will give you valuable practice in offering constructive feedback and support to others. If their work is less successful than your own in some respects, don't put the writer down. You can make your feedback constructive by directing your comments at the essay not at the person who wrote it, e.g. 'This passage might be clearer if X came before Y' not 'You didn't do this passage very well.' Don't forget to extend the same courtesy to yourself. If someone else's work seems more successful than your own in some respects, don't put yourself down. Try to pinpoint what they did that made it more successful, and try it out for yourself next time.

Suggestions for buying and further reading

As a student, your financial resources are limited, but there are two items you should seriously consider buying:

- A dictionary should be available relatively inexpensively. Go for a standard British version, e.g. Collins or Oxford.
- 'Mind the Stop: A brief guide to punctuation' by G.V. Carey (Penguin paperback, many reprintings) is exactly what its title says and more. It looks also at some frequent queries about style and grammar.

Alongside this essay guide, you should also make use of other learning resources that will be available to you. In particular, look out for guides to:

- Getting the Best from Reading Lists, which will answer many questions that you may not realise you have or feel shy about asking.
- Note-taking for Reading and Lectures, which will expand on the brief ideas mentioned in this guide.

based on the original version written by Julie C. Rutkowska, 1997