

## ESSAY WRITING ATTITUDE

### Use this sheet to help you:

- Clarify academic expectations of university-level essays
- Develop effective approaches for writing essays

### 5 minute self test

The following points are discussed in this helpsheet. What do these mean to you at present? Which are you least clear about?

- Presenting arguments
- Providing reasons and examples
- Originality
- Coherence and relevance of points
- Disciplinary expectations
- Redrafting and editing
- Clarity and precision of written work
- Acknowledgement of the work of others

Essays are used for the purpose of assessment. However, they are also an opportunity for you to learn, and you can learn a great deal from writing essays if you approach them with the right attitude. At the same time, essay writing can be an endlessly frustrating and demanding activity.

This Help Sheet aims to introduce the general principles of essay writing. In particular, we try to suggest the best attitude to have when beginning an essay, and carrying it through to completion.

For pointers on essay structure see the **Study and Research Help Sheet: Essay Writing, The Basics**.

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

### 1. Take it Seriously

The essay is a very difficult genre. Professors and lecturers also write essays but they call them “papers”. It is not unusual for academic staff to spend weeks, and even months (sometimes years!) working on a paper. No one finds the process of essay writing easy. Part of the difficulty is that it is important to say exactly what is required in a limited word limit. Most people could cover the topic with an unlimited word limit and unlimited time. Being brief and succinct—and yet covering everything that needs to be covered—is always a challenge. This is the main difficulty in writing essays.

Given this, it is absurd to think that students can rush the process of writing an essay. The student who “throws an essay together” at the last minute (before a deadline) may be lucky to get a good grade once or twice, but they will rarely do well in the long run. Therefore take your essays seriously. Treat the essay genre with respect. To do a good job, make sure you allow at least 4 weeks to complete an essay:

- Week 1 for research and writing the first draft;
- Week 2 for “laying down” time (you can still do additional research during this period);
- Week 3 for correcting and revising the first draft;
- Week 4 for correcting and polishing the penultimate draft.

If you are a non-native speaker of English you may need to allow longer time.

### 2. Don't be a Perfectionist

While you should take essay writing seriously, you need not be your own worst enemy. We began by saying that the essay is a difficult genre. A “perfect” essay, in fact, is a regulative ideal—it doesn't exist in reality. None of us can write a perfect essay, but that doesn't mean that we can't get better and better at trying. That's what professional academics do too. Like them, the more work that you put into writing essays, the more you will improve, both in terms of style and substance. The process of gaining a degree makes you better at writing essays. The better students may go on to postgraduate study and to become academics themselves. But you never stop learning to become better at writing essays. Therefore don't be too hard on yourself.

## WHAT NOT TO DO WHEN WRITING AN ESSAY:

### 1. Don't Write For Your Lecturer!

This may seem odd, but it is sound advice. When writing an essay do not think of yourself as writing for assessment. In particular, do not think of yourself as writing for a highly scholastic reader such as your lecturer. Why not?

If you write for a lecturer or professor you will probably make yourself nervous. You might start to think that you are writing for "experts". This usually makes people feel a little anxious. For example, you might think that you need to write in an "academic" style using big words that you are not very good at using (and probably only half-understand). You might also imagine that the lecturer/tutor already knows everything about the subject (probably a very generous assumption!) and that therefore you can leave out lots of details and write in a super-sophisticated, "wordy" style.

This approach, unfortunately, will generally produce incomprehensible essays. The result of this strategy, inevitably, is a poor grade and much misery. Pretend you are not writing for assessment and this problem evaporates. Who then should you write for? (See '**Write for an Imaginary Audience**' below).

### 2. Don't Merely Reproduce What You Think the Lecturer Wants

This might also seem odd advice. However, essays are not exercises in reproducing and rehashing "correct" answers—unlike some exams, for example. Essays test your ability to question and criticise ideas—including the ideas of your lecturers. A good essay shows the reader that you can develop coherent arguments and counter-arguments and bring forward or marshal evidence for an idea or proposition. Some lecturers take great delight in reading criticisms of their own ideas; especially good, well-argued criticisms. It shows them that they have a good student that can think for themselves.

This is not to say, of course, that you have to disagree with everything the lecturer says. You should approach ideas from all sources with a critical attitude. Take nothing for granted unless you have good arguments or evidence for it (or if it is common sense). Agree with things that you think have good arguments or evidence for them and disagree with things that do not. Agree in part with things that you think have some evidence for them, and so on. Give your reasons in your essay.

If you are only trying to produce what you think the lecturer wants to see you are doing the wrong thing. What the lecturer really wants to see is to see how well you can "think" on paper. It is quite irrelevant if you agree or disagree with them. Of course, they will not be impressed with poor arguments criticising their ideas. You need to do better than that!

### 3. Don't Leave the Essay to the Last Minute

As we said earlier, the academic essay is a very difficult genre. Writing essays requires considerable abilities in reasoning, scholarship and literacy. It takes time and effort to do a good job. Rushing it will virtually ensure that you won't make the grade. Don't rush it.

### 4. Don't be a Soloist. Use Others for Support

"Flying solo" (working on your own) can be a lonely and miserable experience. You may be convinced that you know exactly what to do and don't need help. However, collaborative scholarship occurs at the highest levels, between professors and lecturers. Therefore, it is silly to think that you don't need it too. Form a study group, share your work and take advice from others. Your work can only benefit from the input of others.

We have said what NOT to do, now let's look at what to do.

## WHAT TO DO:

### 1. Write For an Imaginary Audience

This is one of the best pieces of advice ever given to students on essay writing.

Don't begin an essay thinking that you are writing for assessment or for a professional academic such as your lecturer. Imagine yourself writing for an intelligent, friendly, but unformed audience. Imagine yourself being asked to address the senior students at a local high school, for example. The students are not familiar with your subject, but they are intelligent and interested. Imagine you are standing in front of them and reading your essay to them. Doing this you will feel the necessity of being clear and systematic. You will feel the need to be clear and systematic in a way that does not produce anxiety in you.

This strategy does, of course, involve a slight fiction. However, the fiction is useful for you, the writer. Lecturers and tutors use criteria such as this when they mark papers. They will ask themselves:

- "Is this essay clear?"
- "Does it communicate the ideas well?"
- "Would anyone who is intelligent be able to follow this?" etc.

They will NOT ask themselves as they read:

- "Is this essay using big academic words?"
- "Does this essay use long and complicated sentences?"
- "Has the writer carefully hidden their meaning?"

A word of advice. For the fiction to work you really do need to take it seriously. First close your eyes and imagine the high school students in front of you. Start to write

your essay (after you have prepared your outline and your notes). As you write every sentence of your essay ask yourself if they would understand it. Perhaps you need to simplify your main points. Perhaps you need to add an example to make this point or that point clear. When you redraft the essay imagine them listening to you read (see [2] below).

## 2. Ask Yourself Questions about the Paper

Ask yourself this after you have written a paper:

- “How much could I, if I were in that Year 12 class, learn from reading this essay?”
- “How could I make certain points more obvious and clear?”
- “Does this point follow from the previous one?”

You might like to assume that your audience is, by nature, a sceptical one: you should imagine that you need to be convincing in the material you are presenting. This will also help you in producing a better piece of work. How would you make your points more convincingly? More evidence? More examples? Clearer arguments?

## 3. Recognise the Need for Redrafting

You would never present a difficult idea to a Year 12 audience successfully on the first attempt. You will need to redraft your work carefully. This procedure helps you to recognise lack of precision in your paper, and this helps you to improve your writing. Indirectly, of course, it assists you in a better understanding of the topic or issue you are presenting. You may find that you will need to rework and revise your essay several times. Indeed you may never be entirely happy with your efforts. You will just have to do the best you can. But, equally, don't get depressed about the process. Remember: there's no such thing as a “perfect” essay.

## 4. Use Lots of Examples

It is critically important to make use of examples. If a point is difficult or subtle it is essential to use an example or an analogy to illustrate it. You can either think of examples yourself, or you might draw them from the texts that you happen to be reading (with acknowledgement, of course). An example will always help your imaginary Year 12 audience—and your lecturer—understand what you are trying to say.

Never underestimate the value of a well-placed example or two. Remember that you are writing for an audience of intelligent, but uninformed, students. They need examples to understand your main points. The more complicated your argument is, the more you need to step back from the flow of your argument and support your points with examples.

## 5. Give Reasons for What You Say

Essay writing—at the tertiary level at least—involves careful and rigorous reasoning and detailed argumentation. The student should not rely on tradition, authority (including that of a lecturer), faith or hunch. Students should distrust bold assertions for which no reasons or arguments are given. Academic essays are not works of fiction, personal monologues or statements of your beliefs. They involve the presentation of arguments and the support for those arguments, and/or the criticism of other arguments (See **CELT Help Sheets: Critical Thinking 1, 2 and 3**).

The good student should not be dogmatic but should always be willing to evaluate arguments for or against a view and arrive at a conclusion based on his/her deliberations. Instructions cannot easily be given as to how to reason rigorously, or to present good arguments. This comes with practice. However, this is what distinguishes the “A” student from the “C” student. But make sure you always give reasons for what you say. Don’t just assert things or claim things without giving reasons. Ask yourself: “would my imaginary audience accept this point, or do I need to give reasons?”

## 6. Apply What You Learn from Lectures and Articles to How You Argue and Reason in Essays

Try to apply what you learn from the lecturers and from the way points of view are argued in class in the presentation of your essays. Classes model the kind of thinking required in essays. Sometimes these models are not as good as they should be, but they are models nonetheless. If necessary, seek the assistance of books on logical methods and critical thinking in your subject area.

Be aware that professional texts in the discipline, while useful as models for arguments and a source of ideas, are NOT always useful as models for writing for students. This is to be expected. Journal articles are written by professionals for other professionals in the discipline. Journal articles are not intended to be undergraduate or graduate essays. The writers have not used the “imaginary audience” test either. Sometimes professionals in the discipline write in an idiosyncratic (strange or unusual) style. Sometimes they leave out details (they know their audience will understand their point). Many famous articles in a discipline journal are famous because of the ideas expressed, not because of the style or the presentation of their paper.

To model your writing on these articles is often a mistake. Professionals use criteria for “quality” that do not apply to graduate or undergraduate students. The criteria that apply to you are:

- Clarity of arguments
- Brevity and succinctness
- Coherence and cohesiveness
- Formal academic structure
- Correct citation of others
- Answering the question, and so on

But articles in discipline journals are good for something. They are a rich source of ideas you can borrow (with acknowledgement). Learn to recognise “good” arguments and



“bad” ones. Be aware of the many informal fallacies that are commonly made in writing and speech (see **Study and Research Help Sheet: Fallacies**). When required, isolate these in your essays and evaluate them in as much detail as you can. When you think that a particularly bad argument is being used to support a certain position, criticise it forcefully using these techniques of reasoning and analysis.

## 7. Be Clear about the Expectations of Different “Academic Tribes”

A good essay in one subject is not necessarily a good essay in another. Science essays are not written in the same manner as subjects in the liberal arts, for example. But there are variations within faculty areas too. In the Faculty of Business and Economics essays for Accounting require a different emphasis than essays in Management and Economics, for example.

However, the point of most academic essays is to try to solve a certain problem. The aim of an essay is to try to come to a satisfactory understanding and resolution of these problems and the assumptions underpinning them. The conceptual tool used in this process is the evaluation of arguments by clear and precise methods of reasoning.

*However, what each subject regards as “good” reasoning, and the methods of reasoning used, can vary.*

Become informed of these different methods and use them in your essays. You will eventually get the idea. With practice and application the process of writing an essay for a particular discipline area—and the different requirements for each discipline—will begin to make sense. Initially, however, the exercise will be difficult and even seem foreign to you.

## 8. Always be Relevant

Irrelevance is a common complaint by lecturers of student work.

Always stick to the point when you are writing an essay. If you are asked to “critically assess” such-and-such a position or argument, you should give a brief statement of the positions or arguments concerned, then get on with a consideration of arguments for or against that view. (See **Study and Research Help Sheet: Task Words**). You should NOT waste time with bibliographical sketches of the proponents of the position to be discussed, or the historical details of the development of the view—or anything else not directly connected to the topic.

If you refer to the views of some writer on the position or argument you are discussing, make sure that you keep to those views that only bear in on the matter in hand. Don’t take time off to sketch his/her whole theory. You are NOT being asked to do that, and essays that wander off the main topic will be seen as “irrelevant” by the lecturer.

Your imaginary audience of Year 12 students will be puzzled if you do this too.

Note that there are many **cultural differences** in essay writing styles. Kaplan (1966) showed how there were Oriental, Semitic, Romance, Russian and English ways of writing. While his evidence has been questioned since, there is no doubt that some cultures find approaching the topic of an essay question in a very "direct" manner, rude and inappropriate. However this is exactly what is required when you write academic essays in English-speaking countries.

Expunge all unnecessary information that might clutter the first draft of your essay: get rid of repetition, literary frills and fancies, side issues, unargued points about the lecturer's preferences for a certain theory etc. Also, get rid of any obscurity (see '**Clarity and Precision**' below.)

You are not being asked to write a long diatribe on everything you think or know about a topic. You are being asked to focus on a particular thing or idea. If you are asked to "*critically discuss X or Y*", you are not being asked to rave on about the relationship of X or Y to the general subject area.

Attempt to be as brief and succinct as possible and concentrate what detail you do provide on your central arguments and/or criticisms of other arguments. *Make these detailed points powerfully.*

## 9. Coherence

Plan your essay so that your reader will always know where he/she is being led. The reader should always be informed by the writer on how what you say at any point in the essay fits into your overall theme or argument.

First state what you want to cover in the introduction (see **Study and Research Help Sheet: Essay Writing, The Basics**). Use quite precise and direct language:

- "This essay will discuss X and Y.
- Firstly, the essay will ....,
- Secondly, the essay will ....,
- Finally the essay will ..."

**Then go on and do it. Do NOTHING else!**

In the body of the essay guide the reader from point to point. Again, use very direct language:

- "The next point that will be discussed is ...
- Now let us move on to look at ...

The reader should **NEVER**:

- have to ask themselves how something is connected with what you said before.
- have to try to work out where the essay is going.
- have to ask themselves how a paragraph in your essay relates to what you had been saying in a previous section.



Cultural differences in essay writing have been a cause for confusion for many students. Some students are used to a very different essay writing "style". Some cultures require the reader to make an effort to understand the paper without the writer's help. In the English-speaking academic tradition this is evidence of a poor and inconsiderate writer. Make everything absolutely clear to your reader.

You might even use headings, sub-headings, numbered paragraphs, etc., as a way of making clear how your points are to be understood. Use the "Imaginary audience" test when you write a section: "Would they (the audience) understand it?" "Do I need to make it clearer?" etc. If you don't do this, coherence can suffer and your reader—your lecturer—can get lost.

Another good way of doing this is to use "signposts" in your essays. These have the effect of guiding your reader through the points that you are making. Examples of this are expressions like "Following from this point..", "Given this argument ...", and paragraph starters like, "Firstly", "Secondly", and "Thirdly" etc. (See **Study and Research Help Sheet: Language for Citing**). Making deliberate use of signposts will also help you gather your thoughts on the essay topic. This is a most useful technique. Lecturers look for it in your essays.

## 10. Make it Clear at the Outset what you are Arguing For or Against

Essays should begin with a clear statement of the position or argument that you are to discuss. Always make it clear at the outset whether you propose to attack or defend that position or argument. This is known as the **thesis statement**.

You can do this by writing:

- "This essay will argue that ...".

You must always write a thesis statement in the introduction. You should always indicate your position in regard to any argument that you raise or present in your discussion as well.

These points may seem obvious, but they are frequently neglected by students. Try to get into the habit of paying attention to them. They are necessary skills not just in essay writing, but in general communication. You might feel that you are not an expert and, because of this you are uncomfortable giving your opinion about an issue. It is true that your opinions on a topic will not carry much weight with "experts". However, this is not the point of essay writing. You are not expected to be "an expert". Remember that the essay is for assessment as well as an opportunity for you to learn. Being prepared to give your point of view in relation to a topic and then going on to argue for it and defend it is an important part of this process. It is also a vital skill to acquire. This is what you are being assessed on.

## 11. Clarity and Precision

This is critically important: it is a reason for passing or failing essays. One simply cannot write essays well without being clear and precise with one's expression. A few tips:

***Never use words in essays that you only half understand.***

Technical terms should all be explained and used consistently. Inconsistency will be noticed and corrected. Also, be aware of the many different positions that can be held under general technical labels. Don't make uninformed statements about such terminology, because you may be quite wrong. If in doubt, look up such words in a dictionary. To the extent that it displays misunderstanding, lack of familiarity with key terms in the discipline can be penalised.

***Take pains with your use of the English language.***

Academic disciplines emphasise detailed and fine-grained use of language. It is the only way that the subject matter of many disciplines can be profitably discussed. Make sure that you use the English language well in your essays.

This applies particularly to matters like punctuation, grammar and syntax. Poor expression can cause ambiguity (many different meanings) or be responsible for work being meaningless and unreadable.

For example, compare the meanings of:

- Charles I walked and talked five minutes after his head was cut off. and:
- Charles I walked and talked. Five minutes after, his head was cut off.

Absence of the full stop and the comma suggests that Charles can walk and talk while headless! (NB: "Charles I" means "Charles the first [King of England]") Punctuation is not something to be used indiscriminately or carelessly.

You may laugh at the example, but lecturers often find worse mistakes than this in students' work.

Bad expression at this level of study often creates obscurity. Be careful. You are expected to be reasonably literate before entering university; it is also expected that you demonstrate this familiarity with language in your essays. Failure to do so can influence grades.

Check your work once or twice THEN check it carefully again! (See **Research and Study Help Sheet: Editing and Proofreading.**)

***Don't try to impress by using complicated words and sentences.***

This is most annoying for your reader. Strive for simple, uncluttered and clear expression. Some of the texts that you will be reading are not always good examples of clarity and precision. This can't be helped in some cases when you might be consulting texts from distant history where language use has changed, and where translation from a foreign

language can affect clarity. It is less excusable in the case of contemporary writing. However, remember that professional texts are written for a different audience (fellow professionals) and use criteria that does not apply to graduate or undergraduate students.

DO NOT attempt to emulate obscure, convoluted or technical professional writing. Avoid secondary texts that confuse you, and find other material that is more accessible. For your purposes, the exercise is to explain the subject matter of your essay in a manner that is comfortable and familiar to you. Remember the “imaginary audience” test.

One of the worst things that students can do is to try to “sound academic”. Often they have the impression that this will impress their reader. Students sometimes try to “sound academic” before they have mastered simple and clear writing. Usually this results in lack of clarity and the writing seems “woolly” and “vague” or even “silly” to the professional reader. Think of it this way: before a good musician can improvise and play their instrument well, they need to practice their scales. It is the same with writing. Before you can write in a convincing “academic” way, you need to master the rudiments of writing. This is what you are being assessed on when you write essays.

If an issue is complex, try to make it simple by choosing your words and phrases carefully. Take great pains in constructing your sentences. Do you mean this? Or that? If the sentence is unclear, rephrase it again and again until it is clear. You will be surprised at how difficult it is to do this. Nonetheless aim to do it as well as possible. Unclear expression results in a lower grade.

### ***Attempt to be precise about what you mean at all times.***

Make sure that you know exactly what position you are arguing for or against. Often students waste time on arguments for or against an idea that sounds much like— but is actually different from—the idea that they are supposed to be writing about. What exactly is the essay question asking me to do? Check carefully.

The conclusion in your essay should mirror the precision in your arguments. Make sure you don't get confused about what your arguments demonstrate. Conclusions should follow from your arguments (See **Research and Study Help Sheets: Critical Thinking 1, 2 and 3**). Ambiguities of these kinds occur frequently in academia, and you should be wary of them. “You conclude X in your essay, but your arguments support Y” is a common complaint by lecturers of students' work. Failure to recognise and avoid problems like this results in a lower grade.

## **12. Show Independence of Mind**

You will be expected to think carefully about the issue(s) discussed in your essay. If you are given an essay question you must try to make up your own mind on the question, even if your conclusions are only tentative. This may cause you some difficulty.

You may find certain arguments cause you to rethink long-held (unargued and assumed) views on an issue. It may be that they cause some conflict with other beliefs incidental to these views. Don't be afraid of this metamorphosis (changing your mind on things). This is really what university study is all about—the critical exchange of ideas and arguments and the assessment and reassessment of them.

Professional academics change their opinions on things in response to the arguments of others all the time. This is what it means to educate yourself. If you are unwilling to accept better arguments for something, you are being dogmatic. If you continue to hold a belief about something that you no longer agree with—or for which you have no convincing arguments—perhaps you need to seriously consider why you continue to believe it.

### 13. Be Consistent

It is fine to change your mind as you read and consider arguments by others when you are planning and preparing an essay. However don't change your mind during an essay. The essay must exhibit a single, clear and unambiguous point of view.

Be consistent in the conclusion you are aiming for, look at it from a number of angles and try to defend it from attack from other arguments.

The situation may arise, of course, where you are just not sure which of two conflicting views is correct, and cannot come down to either one side or the other. In this case, consider the conflicting views as best you can, and then show why you personally regard the reasons for both being equally valid or important. If you have to "sit on the fence" at least be consistent in doing so. Do not write giving the impression that you think theory "X" is better than theory "Y" but hedge your bets in the conclusion because you are afraid to be "wrong". The chances are that there is no "right answer" anyway. Remember: the lecturer is interested in how you think through the issues and arrive at a conclusion based on your arguments. He or she is not interested in your conclusion as such. It does not really matter what you conclude. It does matter if you are consistent or not.

### 14. Use the Work of Others—But Always Use Your Own Words

Your work must be just that: your work. You can borrow ideas from others with acknowledgement, but you need to do more than that if you want a good grade. Don't just summarise the views of the lecturer, or one or more of the authors you have looked at. Let these things influence your conclusions, but your arguments and conclusions must be your own. Extend or develop the ideas of others and relate them to your particular topic if you can.

**Above all else:** Do not merely reproduce the views of some author in their own words. This is never acceptable and is, in fact, grounds for failure and—in exceptional cases—dismissal from the university. If an essay contained large sections lifted straight from a reference book, the essay would fail.

On the other hand, this does not mean that one cannot use quotations from texts. One can make moderate use of quotations to good effect in essays, but one should always use them only having put forward the view in your own words, or after having explained the meaning of the quotation as you understand it. You must always integrate quotations into your argument. Never use quotations for anything more than an additional articulation of the position that you support or do not support, and never try to “prove” anything by an appeal to someone else—it is simply not good scholarship.

## **15. Don't be Scared of Following the Argument to its Conclusion**

A good essay is not merely a documentation of certain positions in regard to a particular issue. You are expected to think through different perspectives on a topic and come to some conclusion. A good essay will extend an idea to new areas, or make connections between different ideas and pieces of evidence. A good essay looks like an ingeniously constructed spider's web. A bad essay looks like a boring shopping list of other peoples' ideas.

The conclusion you arrive at in an essay may be conventional, or even turn out quite unusual and unconventional. It may also—though it is highly unlikely— be original (see '**Genuine Originality**' below).

The thing that will be assessed, is whether your arguments and reasons you have advanced have been carefully thought about and carefully presented. You will also be assessed on whether you have demonstrated an understanding of problems and possible solutions in the area of study. Your conclusion will be evaluated in terms of how well it follows from your arguments and your reasons for them. In a sense what you conclude is less important than how you arrive at your conclusion. No lecturer will give you a good grade simply by agreeing with them. Exceptional students are awarded good grades by taking issue with the lecturer's point of view and advancing good arguments that convince the lecturer they were wrong.

## **16. Genuine Originality**

This is very rare in academia. It is prized highly when it occurs. Students are generally awarded a PhD for an “original contribution to scholarship”.

Lecturers and tutors do not, of course, demand of you that you produce answers to problems that no-one has ever thought of before. Originality is not expected of you. If you believe, however, that you have a genuinely original position to take on a topic—a completely unconventional approach—you would certainly do best to put it forward after you have given reasons for dismissing the more conventional approaches. Only develop something new after you have looked at, discussed and criticised other points of view in the literature. New ideas are welcome in academia, but you won't be taken seriously unless you have shown why other approaches are inadequate.

Further, you will have to give reasons for why your own approach should be considered. Certainly, any grand claims on your part will require substantial defence. Bold assertions of originality will be scrutinised very carefully. Be extremely careful what you are claiming.

*A word of warning:* If you are going to take this line in writing your essays, you had better have your tracks covered. Make sure that you have read all you can on the subject (including journal articles) before you claim that a particular position is your own. It is usually the case that students are not familiar enough with the literature to know that “their” idea is, in fact, decades or centuries old.

A. N. Whitehead once said: “The entire history of western thought is only a footnote to Plato!” (In other words: “Everything has been said before!”)

## **17. Don't Go over the Word Limit**

Part of the whole exercise of writing an essay is to test your capacity to argue cogently for a certain position within a certain word limit.

Most people would do well at arguing for some point of view if they had an unlimited time frame and no bounds on the length of the document. But even so, quantity never equals quality: a long essay is not necessarily a better one. Long manuscripts can be 90% waffle and 10% content. Learn to be your own best critic, and prune your essay heavily if it does not, in your view, make the points convincingly, or if the content seems “scatterbrained” and confused. (Use the “imaginary audience test” above.)

You may even like to swap essays with someone else who is writing on a different topic, for a fresh appraisal of the relevance of your essay. Collaborative scholarship is an excellent way of improving your writing and understanding of an area. It is a procedure which goes on at the highest level of research at all academic institutions, so don't think that it wouldn't be useful to you. Someone with a fresh approach to your essay, might challenge you to revise what you actually thought was relevant to the topic. You will also be surprised how several honest and constructive critics can find different mistakes in your work.

## **18. Acknowledgment**

In all essay writing you must show the sources from which you have obtained material. If you use a point from another author, in that author's words, you must use quotation marks, and provide an in-text reference specifying the author, the work and the page number. This also applies when you paraphrase a writer's work. If you take the words of someone else or their ideas without acknowledgement, it is plagiarism.

In addition, all books and articles that you use in your essay, should be listed in a bibliography at the end of your essay. If you are in doubt about how to compile bibliographies or reference correctly make sure that you have a look at some of the many style manuals that are available in the library.

Make sure that you know what you are doing. It is not a difficult procedure to use the correct methods of acknowledgment and it is best to get into good scholarly habits early in your university training. You are being assessed on general scholarship as well as the content of your essay. Good scholarship is also important for your future career.



## 19. Present it Well

There is really no excuse for poorly presented work. Presentation does influence your overall grade. Use a reasonable font, provide reasonable margins and double-space your text. There's nothing more irritating for a lecturer with 50 essays to mark than to come across a single-spaced essay with virtually no margins. Double space the text, leave ample margins on each page, and provide a blank page at the end of your essay for comments.

## 20. Enjoy Yourself!

As we said at the outset, the essay is used for assessment but is also an opportunity for you to learn. Make sure you enjoy the process of essay writing. Don't leave things to the last minute, take lots of breaks, discuss your work with others, and do the best job you can. You won't get it perfect. No one ever does.

Based, in part, on a draft of an article on essay writing by Dr Stan van Hooft of Deakin University. I would like to thank Ong Eng Ju Turkey for some corrections to the manuscript.

Kaplan, R. B., (1966). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education, *Language Learning*, Vol. XVI, 1-20.