

AN ESSAY ON ESSAY WRITING

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January 2004

ABSTRACT

This essay outlines writing skills and techniques that should be incorporated in any university level essay within a science discipline. It provides both definitions of the skills and techniques to be used plus it is structured in a way that demonstrates their use. Key points raised relate to creating a stand-alone document, use of headings, presentation, balance, referencing and language choice. The essay demonstrates that despite the application of a rigorous approach to essay design and writing, creative writing can still be produced.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the overriding concerns of students seems to be in obtaining a particular university degree that will enable them to attain an interesting and well paid job. However, students may be surprised to realise that prospective employers may not be as concerned with the specific degree a person possesses but rather the overriding preoccupation of the ‘hirer and firer’ seems to be: can this candidate write and speak well and effectively? (Pers. comm. B. Oliver, University of Notre Dame Australia, 12-2-97). It has been suggested, for example, that poor literacy and numeracy can not only hamper a job-seeker's attempts to find work, but also cause further problems when a person is employed (Crossweller 1998). This essay defines and describes the major essay writing skills and techniques that should be incorporated into university assignments written for science courses. More detailed guides to writing and submitting university work can be found in Nightingale (1986), Petelin & Durham (1992) and Bate & Sharpe (1996).

In order to demonstrate the most important writing skills and techniques explicitly, this essay is presented in keeping with the author's own preferred approach. In each section, definitions and explanations of the skills and techniques are provided and examples of their use are in the form of the essay itself.

The main discussion of the essay (Sections 2-5) begins by considering the concept of a ‘stand-alone’ piece of work. It then addresses the issue of structure in terms of the use of headings, the importance of presentation and essay balance. The essay then deals with referencing and other issues such as the use of non-discriminatory and colloquial language. It is important to note that spelling and grammar are not discussed as it is assumed that all university students would have an adequate knowledge of these basic writing skills. The essay concludes with a summary of the main points and presents a vision for the future of university essay writing.

2. ‘STAND-ALONE’ DOCUMENT

An essay (or any other piece of written work for that matter) should be presented as a ‘stand-alone’ document on the subject it addresses. What this means is that any stranger to the essay assignment (and/or university course) can pick it up and understand exactly what it is all about. Creating a ‘stand-alone’ document can be easily achieved simply by:

- providing a descriptive heading to the work (e.g. ‘Assignment 1’ does not tell the reader anything about the nature or subject matter of the work);
- providing an introduction much like the one outlined previously which clearly defines the purpose and structure of the essay; as well as
- a discussion section providing the required response to the assignment question.

Nightingale (1986, p15) suggests that by writing for a different audience (e.g. a stranger) is less stressful for the writer who otherwise may feel threatened by having to write for an experienced learned authority. An additional advantage of writing for the benefit of a ‘stranger’ to the topic is that it requires the writer to lead the reader through the work in logical and progressive steps (i.e. to provide ‘signposts’ or directions for the reader who might otherwise become lost or disoriented). In other words, the reader should always be able to clearly understand where they are in the essay and where they are going. An example of providing guidance to a reader is the final paragraph of the previous section and the use of

connecting sentences between different sections of the essay such as: ‘In the next section the issue of essay structure is addressed’.

3. STRUCTURE

An essay should be well structured with consideration given to use of headings, balance and writing presentation. Structure is very important and it assists both writers and readers (Petelin & Durham 1992, p59).

3.1 Headings

A scientific essay should have clearly defined sections with a minimum of six headings including Abstract, Title, Introduction, Discussion, Conclusion and References. For long pieces of work, or essays that particularly describe several specific separate topics within the discussion section, sub-headings should be used where appropriate, although Commonwealth of Australia (1994, p242) cautions against excessive heading use. All discussion headings should be provided with descriptive titles relevant to their content and should be numbered sequentially. The act of dividing up an essay in this way and numbering the sections makes it easier to structure and balance for the author. Petelin & Durham (1992, p62) also advocate the use of headings and sub-heading as a means for providing focus for the reader.

For smaller pieces of work (e.g. a short answer question in an exam or assignment), it is not necessary to use explicit headings. However, the writing style and structure should automatically assume this role. Hence there should be a minimum of three separate paragraphs each dedicated to providing discrete Introduction, Discussion and Conclusion functions, even if the introduction and conclusion are only one sentence each in length.

3.2 Balance

Balance is important in terms of both the essay content and actual presentation and these are discussed in turn.

With respect to balance of content, it is essential that the level of detail given to specific components of the essay match the importance of each component. Firstly, this means that issues of major significance to the assignment question should be covered in good detail (e.g. several paragraphs or pages each) while smaller or sideline issues require only a brief mention (e.g. 1-2 sentence or a single paragraph at most). Secondly, the major sections of an essay (Introduction, Discussion and Conclusion) should be in balance. For example, a 1500 word essay (i.e. approximately 5 pages) should comprise of a 1-3 paragraph Introduction (maximum of 1 page), 3-4 pages of Discussion and a 1-2 paragraph Conclusion. Clearly, extreme deviations from this pattern, (e.g. a 1 sentence introduction or a three page introduction) would be grossly unbalanced.

With respect to presentation, it is important to balance both the length of individual sections (as outlined previously) and the lengths of individual paragraphs. For example, an essay may appear unbalanced if long paragraphs (say 10-12 sentences in length) are interspersed with single sentence paragraphs. However, as Bate & Sharpe (1996, p33) point out, some variation in paragraph length is important to avoid monotony for the reader. Similarly, a minor point being made in an essay may not warrant a heading of its own that places it on an equal footing with the major points being covered. In this instance, headings such as ‘Other Issues’, ‘Additional Concerns’, ‘Other Considerations’ etc. may be appropriate with a brief outline of several minor points beneath it.

3.3 Presentation

An essay should always be presented as well as possible, i.e. the arrangement of headings, sentences and paragraphs should create maximum visual interest. Bate & Sharpe (1996, p42) suggest that like careless spelling, poor presentation can prejudice an essay during assessment by leading the reader to assume sloppiness of thought. The effects of presentation are demonstrated in Table 1 in which identical text is presented in two ways. Which approach is easier (and more pleasurable) to read?

Table 1. Comparison of Two Writing Presentation Styles

<p>When talking about presentation issues, there is no need to discriminate between typed and un-typed work. All of the comments about essay presentation are equally applicable to both typed and hand written work. They also apply to essays written under both mid-term assignment and exam conditions.</p> <p>One useful presentation technique is the use of ‘dot points’ to break up the discussion of a multi-faceted item. Some advantages of ‘dot points’ include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• less words are used;• ideas or information can be presented in a quick and direct fashion, thereby enabling more ground to be covered; and• provision of visual relief for the reader. <p>An important consideration in presentation is to keep paragraphs to a reasonable length and to separate them with a blank line. This is further addressed in the section on Balance. Additional considerations are the provision of an appropriate margin (e.g. 2cm minimum) on all sides of the page and the use of ‘fully justified’ text for typed work.</p> <p>An essay with no breaks or margins is the equivalent of a lecture or speech delivered in a monotone, i.e. guaranteed to put the reader to sleep! Some useful presentation tips are provided in Commonwealth of Australia (1994, pp237-265).</p>	<p>When talking about presentation issues, there is no need to discriminate between typed and un-typed work. All of the comments about essay presentation are equally applicable to both typed and hand written work. They also apply to essays written under both mid-term assignment and exam conditions. One useful presentation technique is the use of ‘dot points’ to break up the discussion of a multi-faceted item. Some advantages of ‘dot points’ include: less words are used; ideas or information can be presented in a quick and direct fashion, thereby enabling more ground to be covered; and provision of visual relief for the reader. An important consideration in presentation is to keep paragraphs to a reasonable length (unlike this one) and to separate them with a blank line. This is further addressed in the section on Balance. Additional considerations are the provision of an appropriate margin (e.g. 2cm minimum) on all sides of the page and the use of ‘fully justified’ text for typed work. An essay with no breaks or margins is the equivalent of a lecture or speech delivered in a monotone, i.e. guaranteed to put the reader to sleep! Some useful presentation tips are provided in Commonwealth of Australia (1994, pp237-265).</p>
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It is clear from Table 1 that the passage on the left is by far the better of the two in terms of presentation for all of the reasons discussed in the passage itself.

4. REFERENCING

All sources of information used to write an essay (including both ideas and quotations) should always be properly referenced to avoid accusations of plagiarism (Bate & Sharpe 1996, p39). An approved and consistent format should always be used. An excellent guide to the correct procedures for referencing can be found in Australian government publication *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers* (Commonwealth of Australia 1994). This document (now available in its sixth edition published in 2002) outlines the correct way to reference practically every form of communication (e.g. journals, books, chapters in edited books, legislation, newspaper articles, films, personal communication etc.) including both hard cover and electronic forms. Further information on 'citations in cyberspace' can be found in Reddick & King (1996) or by performing an online search to locate a current website on this topic.

Commonwealth of Australia (1994, pp.145-184) and Nouwens *et al.* (1998) both describe several styles of referencing. For university writing, two acceptable ways of referencing are the 'author-date system' and 'references within notes'. The most commonly used referencing style in scientific writing is the author-date system which is used throughout this essay. In summary this system entails always citing the author of a reference item (or a title if no author is evident) and the year of publication in the text where the ideas or information from that source are used. It is also helpful to the reader to provide the relevant page number for citations within the text, particularly for book citations (Commonwealth of Australia 1994, p149).

How many references should be used in an academic essay? There is no 'hard and fast' answer to this question other than: 'enough to do the topic justice'. Given that university assignment topics tend to increase in complexity as students become more experienced learners, it is not unreasonable to expect the number of references utilised per assignment to increase over time. Hence a typical assignment at 100 level may warrant 6-10 references, 200 level 10-15, 300 level 15-20 and 400 level 20+. It is important to realise that students are unlikely to be penalised for using too many references but the converse is frequently the case.

A reference list should always be included in an essay with complete bibliographic entries corresponding exactly to the references cited in the text (see Section 7). It is not acceptable to list information sources utilised in writing the essay in a reference list if these are not actually cited within the essay text itself.

5. OTHER ISSUES

Two other important issues to consider in essay writing involve the use of non-discriminatory and colloquial language. These are addressed in turn.

5.1 Non-Discriminatory Language

An essay should use non-discriminatory language at all times and this is now considered a normal part of professional writing (e.g. see Petelin & Durham 1992, p133 and Bate & Sharpe 1996, p64). Language can be used to discriminate against individuals or groups on the basis of their sex, ethnicity, their disability, age, social class, lifestyle and sexuality (Commonwealth of Australia 1994, p122). It is important to be aware of potential discrimination in language and

choose alternative phrases and language. The only exception to this is if directly quoting a passage from another author in which discriminatory language is used.

Commonwealth of Australia (1994, p122-124) describes the various forms of language discrimination, including a list of common words and phrases, and provides examples of acceptable and simple alternatives. Two examples of gender discrimination are use of terms like *mankind* and *policeman* instead of the non-discriminatory alternatives *humanity* or *humankind* and *police officer*.

5.2 Colloquial Language

Scientific essays are most commonly written in the 'third person' (i.e. with no personal pronouns used at all as this essay demonstrates throughout) and as a general rule, colloquial language should not be used. Colloquialisms are expressions people use in casual conversations and create an atmosphere of informality (Petelin & Durham 1992, p144). Essay writing should exhibit a high degree of professionalism and academic skill which generally precludes the use of colloquial language. However, in some circumstances, it may be appropriate to include examples of colloquial language to give particular emphasis to a point being made. In this case it is necessary to use single quotation marks to acknowledge the colloquialism (Commonwealth of Australia 1994, p102).

6. CONCLUSION

This essay has demonstrated some of the fundamental writing skills and characteristics that should be incorporated in a university level science essay. Some recommendations for creating good writing include:

- creating a 'stand-alone' document;
- provision of descriptive headings and sub-headings;
- giving careful consideration to presentation and balance;
- correctly using references and colloquial language; and
- avoiding discriminatory forms of language.

While rigid adherence to these points may sound onerous or stifling to creativity, it should actually improve both work performance and organisational skills. A good piece of writing enables boundless amounts of creativity in terms of the exploration of the actual topic and presentation opportunities. The writing skills outlined in this essay can be viewed as the foundations of good writing upon which the true creative elements are overlaid. Following the structures and methods outlined here will hopefully result in an improved standard in university essay writing in the future and improved performance from students. These skills can then be taken into the work place where they will contribute to achieving a high professional work standard and satisfying the expectations of employers.

7. REFERENCES

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