

ESSAY WRITING GUIDELINES

LAYOUT

Some of the comments in this section apply mostly to term papers (in-course essays) and not necessarily to essays written under exam conditions:

- It is preferable, if you have access to a computer, to use a *word-processor* which today allows you extensive editing capabilities. If you write the essay by hand, do your best to write *legibly* as examiners are unlikely to waste precious time trying to decipher the indecipherable.
- *Write the Question (Q.)* at the head of your term paper but do not waste time doing so in an exam, though in the case of the latter you should remember to number the Q. correctly.
- Always *double-space* your lines. The benefit of this is that it permits you to read your own work, and notice any errors, more clearly even as it also gives your reader adequate room to make his/her comments.
- Always *number* your pages.
- Always *indent* paragraphs or, failing which, leave a line between paragraphs.
- Always respect the *word-limit* assigned because it could endanger your performance, given time- and other considerations that may be involved. Some examiners may even stop reading after the limit has been reached.

STRUCTURE

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

Introduction:

- Answer the Q. asked right away and continue to hammer at it throughout (this will be your *thesis*). Everything subsequently included in the essay ought to be related to the Q. Constantly reassert and hammer at your thesis without, however, merely and incessantly repeating the very same terms and expressions.
- Do not merely regurgitate the wording of the Q. *Paraphrase* the *key terms* given in the Q. to show that you understand them. Reserve longer and more precise definitions for Foot/Endnotes which perhaps should be reserved for the Main Body.
- Give an outline of the main argument to come by offering a *brief preview* of the *main* points which you will develop in the Main Body of your essay. To decide on these points, you might need to engage in what rhetoricians (those who study the production of both oral and written forms of discourse) term *invention*: to be precise, you may need to think carefully about and shop around for the most effective lines of argument or argumentative strategies (*topoi*) pertinent to the literary work(s) involved and question asked.
- Specify the title(s) of any (literary) text(s) you will be looking at. Do not refer to a text vaguely as a 'book': what sort of book are you dealing with, an encyclopedia? A play? A novel?
- A suitable length for your introduction is 5 - 10 lines; any longer means that you are going into too much detail here.
- In the case of an in-course essay (and, by extension, research papers and theses), it is often true that the introduction may be the last thing you will in fact write. In other

words, it is often the case that you have to figure out the points you would like to make, develop them in what will become the Main Body of your essay, and then write the introduction to provide a preview of the argument to come. (Some movement backwards and forwards may be required, i.e. you write the Main Body, then you write the Introduction, then you make adjustments to the Main Body, then you revise your introduction, etc.)

Main Body:

- Each of the main points mentioned in your introductory paragraph should, ideally, be dealt with in a separate paragraph.¹ In effect, each paragraph is an autonomous (i.e. a more or less, though not completely, self-contained) unit that, theoretically, can be extracted from your essay but still make complete sense on its own. As a result, if you mention six points in your introduction, the main body of your essay should, ideally-speaking, consist of six paragraphs. Where a single paragraph threatens to grow out of hand and extend for several pages, it is advisable to divide it into two or even more smaller paragraphs.
- Each paragraph should ideally be structured according to the formula *PDI: Point, Development, and Illustration*:
 - The opening sentence of each paragraph should make your *point, thesis statement or topic sentence* crystal clear.
 - Your next sentence(s) should be devoted to an in-depth *development, explanation or expansion* of your point. Leave nothing to chance and take nothing for granted: always assume that your reader is ignorant and not that (s)he will automatically understand your intention. Your task is to clearly communicate, by fully explicating, the point in question to your audience.
 - Finally, *illustrate or exemplify* the point you seek to prove in this paragraph. In the case of a literary essay, this will involve making close reference to the text in question either by *paraphrasing* or *directly quoting* from the text. Do not be content, however, to merely quote: it is your job, either before or after doing so, to explicate the quotation by both paraphrasing its meaning and analysing the literary devices, if any, used to convey this meaning. It is for this reason normally not wise to end a paragraph with a quotation. In the case of other kinds of discourse, for example, scientific treatises, other forms of illustration are necessary, such as the citing of statistics, references to historical documents, reports summarising the results attained via experimentation that verify one's hypothesis, references to other relevant scientific research supportive of your claims, etc.
- Determine for yourself the precise order in which you will present the points, each in the form of a paragraph, which comprise your argument. You will need, in this regard, to pay attention to what rhetoricians call *arrangement*, that is, the most effective order in which your main points will be presented. In the case, for example, of essays of a scientific nature, the ideal sequence would be logical (i.e. point A should lead logically to point B, and so on). In other kinds of discourses, such as political or legal speeches, other considerations may come into play as a result of which, although A leads logically to B, it might be more effective to begin with B before mentioning A.

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

Conclusion:

- A useful way of beginning your Conclusion is simply 'In conclusion, . . .'. Do not begin with 'Therefore, . . .': it is not a maths problem.
- Reiterate your *thesis* (i.e. your position on or response to the Q.).
- Present a *brief review* of your argument.
- Try not to repeat your Introduction word for word – the trick is to say the same thing more or less, but differently.
- Your Conclusion is also the place for including any additional conclusion(s) (these often take the form of hitherto unforeseen implications to your argument) which you may have come to realise only (as is often the case) in the course of actually writing your essay. It might be useful to indicate here that these implications cannot be treated within the confines of this particular essay but will be addressed on another occasion.

STYLE

(Please read in this regard the separate list of do's and don'ts.)

- Use *Standard English*, not dialect.
- *Diction*: use the correct words. For example, what is wrong with this statement: 'Woolf purports that women are oppressed'?
- *Spelling*: spell words correctly.
- *Grammar*: construct sentences correctly by following accepted rules of syntax. For example, what is wrong with this sentence: 'The cats sits on the mat' or 'I does eat hamburgers'?
- Punctuation: punctuate correctly. For example, what is wrong with this statement: 'The cat, sat on the mat'?
 - All *full-stops*, *question marks* and *exclamation marks* must be followed by two spaces.
 - Use *commas after subordinate clauses*: for example, 'In this novel, the theme of human mortality is . . .' or 'Here, we see . . .'
- Be *succinct*: avoid verbal diarrhoea and 'beating about the bush.' Do you recognise such 'polyfills' as 'In the Shakespearean Renaissance play Hamlet, . . .'? Or 'Mr. William Shakespeare, who wrote poems as well as plays, is here saying . . .'? Remember that 'meandering' like this is usually a sign that you are not sure how to proceed and, thus, a ploy designed to gain you enough time to think about a (difficult) question. However, it really only wastes precious time in the long run.
- Aim for *fluency* and avoid *stiltedness* in your self-expression. Your writing should 'flow' nicely and be easy to read. For example, what is wrong with the sentence, 'I to the town am going'? Fluency, it should be noted, is achieved only through a combination of reading widely and, in turn, writing as often possible.
- Avoid (for the most part) *repetitiousness*, unless it is a way of effectively getting your point across.
- Adopt a *formal, scholarly* tone rather than a colloquial one. For example, avoid expressions such as 'Shakespeare is the man! He was one cool cat!').
- Beware of *verbose* but ultimately meaningless sentences that, while seeming to say much, actually say precious little. For example, what does this sentence, drawn from an actual essay, which purports to be very scholarly, in fact mean: 'The author manipulate [*sic*] the theme being portrayed in the case of these fair stories it is the theme of alienation where the characterisation develops around the theme to enhance

it.'?

- Do not abbreviate (e.g., 'don't,' 'can't,' etc.). Write these out in full (e.g. 'do not,' 'cannot,' etc.)
- The view, right or wrong, is still widespread (especially in secondary schools) that one should try not to appear too *personal* and *subjective* in voicing one's opinion and, thus, should avoid saying things like 'I think that . . .' or 'It appears to me that . . .' or the ever popular 'It is the opinion of this writer that. . . .' This is because the scientific ideal of objectivity and neutrality in the production of knowledge remains very influential both within and without academia. However, the tendency is growing, especially within certain sectors of higher levels of academia, not least literary and cultural studies, to identify the particular stance from which you are writing and which inevitably shapes your position on the matter at hand (e.g., 'As a working-class black lesbian, The Color Purple has special significance for me . . .'). Consequently, you should strive to be aware of the field of study (e.g. Sociology or Physics, as opposed to English Literature) in which you are writing, to consider whether or not the scientific ideal prevails therein, and to adjust your style accordingly.
- Whether writing an in-course or an exam essay, be your own worst critic by carefully reading and re-reading what you write, going over it with a 'fine-tooth comb,' ruthlessly looking for errors not only of content, of course, but also of form. In terms of content, constantly refer to the Q. throughout, asking yourself things like 'Have I understood the Q.?', 'Am I answering the Q. asked?', 'Have I done enough research?', 'Am I making the right points in support of my argument?', 'Are there other important points which I have left out', 'Have I treated the topic in sufficient depth?', 'Is the evidence utilised both relevant and adequate?', 'Should I order my points differently?', etc. In terms of form, pay close attention to *diction*, *spelling*, *grammar*, *punctuation*, and *sentence construction*: vital marks are lost for trivial and easily avoidable mistakes made in any or all of these areas and which may very well detract from and mar what is otherwise a valid and worthwhile argument.

DOCUMENTATION OF SOURCES

If one is to be intellectually honest and, equally importantly, avoid charges of *plagiarism*, it is imperative to openly acknowledge, by crediting, all the sources which one has knowingly consulted. Consequently, all in-course essays (or term papers), research papers and theses must be accompanied by a list of *Works Consulted*, comprising all primary sources (i.e. the texts you are studying and writing on) as well as all secondary sources (critical commentaries, etc. on the former) to which one makes reference or upon which one draws, directly or indirectly, in some way. It is preferable, in my view, to label this 'Works Consulted' rather than 'Works Cited' for the simple reason that one does not necessarily cite (or quote) every work which one consults and by which one's outlook is accordingly influenced. The label 'Bibliography' is also acceptable and, in fact, quite common.

The Faculty of Humanities and Education here at Cave Hill requires that the list of Works Consulted must be formatted strictly according to the *most recent* guidelines of the Modern Language Association (MLA) which are updated from time to time and often change in significant ways. Generally speaking, notwithstanding such changes, these guidelines specify that entries must be:

- listed in *alphabetical order*,
- must each take the form of a *hanging indent* (see the Derrida example below), and
- include specific *information* laid out in a certain *sequence* and *punctuated* in particular ways as dictated by the relevant MLA Guidelines.

For example, version 7 of the MLA guidelines insists on the following:

Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Tallahassee: University of Florida Press [this can be abbreviated to U of Florida P], 1986. 120-136.

Smith, John. "The Image of the Indo-Caribbean Woman in Olive Senior's *Arrival of the Snake Woman*." *Journal of Caribbean Culture* 2.3 (2010): 46-82.

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

If you are following the requirements of Version 8, on the other hand, you will have to alter the entries above as follows:

Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *Critical Theory Since 1965*, edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, University of Florida Press [this can still be abbreviated to U of Florida P], 1986, pp. 120-136.

Smith, John. "The Image of the Indo-Caribbean Woman in Olive Senior's *Arrival of the Snake Woman*." *Journal of Caribbean Culture* vol. 2, no. 3, 2010, pp. 46-82.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, edited by Bernard Lott, Longman, 1968.

It is crucial, of course, to follow the guidelines stipulated by your institution (in this case, the Faculty of Humanities and Education), the journal for which one is writing, etc.

It is also possible to document this information by means of Foot/Endnotes but you should be aware that the formatting of these is different in some ways from that required of entries comprising the list of works consulted. For further information on as well as examples of the differences between the formatting of entries comprising the list of Works Consulted and that of Foot/Endnotes, please consult the most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook* or, at the very least, the version thereof currently required by the Faculty.

Where all works consulted are documented in the Bibliography, in my view, it is not necessary to repeat this information in Foot/Endnotes. The latter remain an alternative and equally viable means of documenting your research but it is a waste of time and energy to needlessly do the same thing twice. My advice is to draw up a full and comprehensive list of Works Consulted and to make use of Foot/Endnotes for the most part in order to explain, clarify or expand points made in the course of the essay, information which may in some way, however, interrupt the flow of the essay.

WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE: LITERARY CRITICISM

Literature is a type of discourse which seeks to represent or, to put this another way, make certain truth-claims about the world. Literary criticism is, in turn, an academic discipline or field of study that strives to make sense of literature as it in turn strives to make sense of the world. Literary criticism normally takes the form of commentaries on or interpretations of particular or, in some cases, groups of literary works, the meaning of which it is the goal of criticism to grasp. There are four main approaches to criticism: some critics focus on what the literary work represents, others who wrote it, others who reads it, and still others on the form of the literary work. It is often impossible to separate these approaches (e.g. a consideration of what a work is about involves examining how it accomplishes this). The questions which a student encounters, whether for in-course essays or exams, may be divided into four types each corresponding to one of these approaches. In other words, notwithstanding the specific wording involved, some questions concern the claims which a literary work makes about the world, others the person behind the work, others how the literary work affects the reader or, vice versa, how readers affect the literary work, and others the precise form of the literary work.

Do not simply *retell the story* – your examiner/teacher is undoubtedly familiar with the literary work in question. Your job is not to write a summary but, rather, to demonstrate a

detailed knowledge of the text by analysing and explicating not only what the work is about but also, how it accomplishes this.

In discussing the events depicted in a literary text, use the *present tense* consistently throughout, even though most texts are written in the past tense. For example, 'Hamlet quarrels with his mother in Act Three' or 'We are told in the fourth chapter that Rupert *is* responsible for the death of his mother. He *does* not stop crying for days.'

Until recently, it was permissible to either underline or italicise the *titles* of the following, but the most recent editions of the MLA Guidelines insists on the latter. Hence, the following should be italicised:

- novels (e.g. D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, not Women in Love);
- plays (e.g. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*);
- collections of poetry (e.g. Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants*);
- collections of short stories (e.g. Olive Senior's *Arrival of the Snake Woman*);
- anthologies (e.g. *The Heath Introduction to Poetry*);
- journals (e.g. *Shakespeare Survey*);
- works of literary criticism (e.g. Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy*); etc.

The following should be placed in *double inverted commas*:

- individual poems (e.g. Eliot's "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock");
- particular short stories (e.g. Senior's "Arrival of the Snake Woman");
- articles in scholarly journals and books (e.g. "The Image of the Indo-Caribbean Woman in Olive Senior's *Arrival of the Snake Woman*"); etc.

Note, in this regard, that the first letter of the most important words in a title are capitalised as illustrated above.

All quotations must be followed by exact references in parentheses. These vary according to the genre in question:

- in prose writing, the reference is to the page in question: e.g. "Blah blah blah" (33) (the symbol 'p.' or 'pg.' or 'pp' is unnecessary);
- in poetry, the reference is to the lines in question: e.g. "Blah blah blah" (210-213) (the symbol 'l.' or 'll.' is unnecessary);
- in drama, the reference in older, more traditional plays (e.g. Shakespeare's) is to the Act, Scene and Line(s) in question: e.g. (4.2.37-39) (Roman numerals are obsolete) or, in the case of more recent plays, reference is made to the page number, e.g. (88).

It goes without saying that all works quoted in this way must be itemised in the list of Works Consulted. Of course, students may, alternatively, make use of Foot/Endnotes to document the reference in question though, as indicated above, I personally find this a much more cumbersome and unnecessary method.

Shorter quotations must be placed in *double inverted commas*. A special effort should be made to make the quotation fit smoothly into the flow of the sentence, not least by including appropriate punctuation. For example,

Hamlet begins his soliloquy by clearly contemplating suicide: "to be or not to be" (3.1.56), he asks.

Or,

Irene's alienation as a child is worsened when she is called a "country Bumpkin" (29) by the other children.

Where a short passage from a *poem* is cited, every effort should be made to indicate the end of lines by means of strokes and to respect the original punctuation. For example,

Eliot's point in "Preludes" is that there is no meaning to life: "The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots" (53-54).

Longer quotations (roughly, anything that exceeds about two or three lines of the original text) should be 'double-indented,' that is, they must begin on the line below and be

indented both on the right and the left, and should not be placed in inverted commas. A similar effort, however, must be made to incorporate such quotations into the smooth flow of the paragraph. Note, in this regard, the importance of the correct punctuation and the usefulness of a simple colon in the following example:

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

Peace came at a price, oh, a terrible price not only for himself but for everyone with whom he had any contact. Day in, day out, he pored over his collection of stamps, huddled in the dimmest of lights, the hunger gnawing at his stomach, the gold glittering in his eyes, his son, all the while, dying of consumption. (24-25)

The cost of Mr. Smith's obsession is nothing less than the life of his son. There are many ways to accomplish these goals. For example, note that, instead of utilising a colon after 'family' above, a full stop might have been used, followed by 'We are told that'. Note, too, that the paragraph does not end with a quotation but with an explanatory comment.

Where a part of a quotation is omitted, students should use *three* dots with a space in between each. For example,

Eliot's point in "Preludes" is that there is no meaning to life: "The worlds revolve . . . vacant lots" (53-54).

Students should always be very careful in this regard lest a long quotation be too truncated, i.e. in case too much of the quotation is omitted as a result of which the point being made is obscured.

WRITING A LITERARY THEORY ESSAY

Literary theory (often abbreviated simply as 'Theory') is an academic discipline or field of study that seeks to understand precisely how literature makes sense of the world and how, in turn, literary critics makes sense of literary works. To put this another way, literary theorists seek to understand existing theories of, or hypotheses concerning, literature and literary criticism and, in some cases, to come up with new ones. There are, basically, two kinds of essays that literary theorists write, one *analytical* in nature and the other *practical*.

Analytical Theory Essays

In the case of *analytical* Theory essays, one analyses (in the sense of breaking apart or dissecting with a view, ultimately, to understanding) a given theory by scrutinising the claims made or conclusions arrived at (e.g. the view that literature can represent reality accurately [this would be the theory of literary realism]), the various concepts (e.g. 'Mimesis') utilised to make such a claim and, more generally, the precise nature of the argument advanced to this end. In such essays, you are sometimes asked to analyse the views of a *single* theorist, while at other times you may be asked to adopt a *comparative* approach.

Here are two examples of typical analytical questions:

1. What do you understand by the term *realism*? Answer by referring closely to Zola's *The Experimental Novel*.
2. Compare the views of TWO (2) of the following theorists on the impact which literature has upon the reader:
 - Plato;
 - Aristotle;

- Sir Philip Sidney;
- William Wordsworth;
- Percy Bysshe Shelley;
- Matthew Arnold;
- Leo Tolstoy.

To answer analytical questions, it might be helpful to:

- A) State the main *thesis* proposed or claim made, in your view, by the theorist in question.
- B) *Contextualise* the theory/ies in question: try to carefully situate the precise argument(s) advanced by the theorist(s) in question. For example, you might ask: Why is s/he making this particular claim? What is the debate into which s/he is entering? To whom is s/he responding?
- C) *Analyse* the theory/ies in question: to this end,
- *summarise* carefully, point by point, step by step, the argument(s) advanced in support of the thesis;
 - *define* key terms and concepts utilised in the course of this argument. For example, what does 'realism' or 'literary history' or 'canon' mean in general and in the context of this particular argument? Does the theorist use these terms in conventional or individualistic ways? Etc.;
 - *Analyse the precise form which the argument(s) advanced take/s*. For example, does the theorist follow the syllogistic pattern synonymous with modern logic? Does s/he adopt some other approach, e.g. dialectical (thesis vs antithesis to produce a synthesis) or argument by analogy? Does s/he illustrate in some way or provide evidence for his/her claims? Etc.; and
 - *critique*, where possible, the claim advanced and/or the argument offered in support thereof. For example, does the claim make sense? Is it supported by a logical argument? Etc.
- In short, remember that each theory posited is advanced by means of a hopefully logical argument of some kind, that is, a truth-claim is being made by means of a potentially valid process of reasoning, and it is your job to both analyse and, as far as is possible, assess the pros and cons thereof. In term papers (i.e. in-course essays), you have the opportunity to quote liberally from the work in question (though you should not merely quote but also explain). In exam conditions, you should at the very least refer, in as much detail as possible, to the theorist's argument;
- D) *Compare*, in the case of comparative questions, the theories under consideration: your task is to compare and contrast (the one implies the other) the views of more than one theorist on a particular topic. It may be wise to proceed by comparing the two theories point by point, rather than summarise one argument in its entirety before doing the same with the other; and
- E) *Illustrate* the theory/ies in question: it can be extremely useful to ground your analysis of a particular theory by discussing a relevant literary work which may not, of course, be possible in exam conditions. For example, a poem by Coleridge may be used to illustrate his theory of poetry or some aspect thereof.

Practical Theory Essays

The other kind of Theory essay is more *practical* in nature. Questions of this sort often take a form similar to this:

Referring closely to Aristotle's *Poetics*, criticise a literary work of your choice from an Aristotelian perspective.

To answer this kind of question, you should:

- A) Provide a broad *overview* of the theory of literature and literary criticism in question (e.g. the Aristotelian approach);
- B) Identify the precise *goal(s)* of the critical approach in question by outlining what exactly a critic of this ilk would look for and, thus, on what exactly in a literary work s/he would focus his/her attention;
- C) Decide on and indicate the precise *steps* appropriate to and, thus, derived from the theory in question which such a critic would need to take in the process of reading a literary work and the exact order in which s/he should proceed (this is sometimes called the 'reading methodology');
- D) Choose a *suitable text* for your purposes: be careful in this regard – not every text 'lends itself' to a particular approach as a result of which, for example, it might be wiser to discuss a novel, rather than a lyric poem, if you want to illustrate the mimetic approach to criticism (where the focus of the critic is on the realism of the literary work) and vice versa to illustrate the expressive approach (where the focus is on the author);
- E) *Apply* the reading methodology (i.e. the precise steps which a particular kind of critic would take in reading a given work) which you have decided on in a very *self-aware* way to the work chosen by linking, as you proceed, your comments on the literary work itself to various aspects (e.g. Aristotle's definition of 'plot' or 'character') of the theoretical framework in question (in this instance, the Aristotelian approach).

The Faculty of Humanities and Education here at Cave Hill requires that students follow the MLA guidelines when writing in-course essays, research papers and theses. Many years ago, the Faculty compiled and distributed a very useful pamphlet, entitled *Student Guidelines for the Preparation and Documentation of Essays*, which provided a handy distillation of the then most recent version (no. 6) of the MLA guidelines. However, this pamphlet seems to no longer be available or even relevant, the latter because Version 6 was superseded first by Version 7 (which consisted mainly of minor changes to Version 6) and, more recently, by Version 8 which includes some very significant and, arguably, even radical changes. Consequently, some of the advice given above may very well be out of date because out of synch with the new requirements outlined in Version 8.

Accordingly, for further details of and the most up to date information concerning any of the matters (e.g. documentation of sources) addressed above, please consult the most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook*.