

Clear, Concise, and Specific

A Short Guide to Academic Writing

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Instructions for use: Read. The rest, I hope, will become clear.

Feel free to share and email me with any questions.

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A note for academics and professional writers

I hope you find this document helpful, as a well-meaning collection of guidance. Before we proceed, I unfortunately feel compelled to add this cautionary note, a necessity, perhaps, before we can return to what I intend as a celebration of the writing process and all it has to offer.

If, upon receipt of this document, you flick through and find all the ways in which you disagree with its approach and purpose, then I ask that you take pity on your students. Some of you may offer practical help and guidance on how to write. Others, many others, do not.

If you take umbrage with the lack of ‘nuance’ (see [Crib sheet of generic problem words](#)) then you will find me in complete agreement. Let’s hope that the students will achieve such competence as to reach the same conclusion one day.

If you believe the phrasing too aggressive and prescriptive, I wonder where you have been hiding. Students require actionable direction and guidance now. Schools do not produce writers, they produce results. Students write for their exams, and do not learn the craft. The universities cannot sit idly by and expect the students to learn through osmosis. This guide offers a place to start.

If you disagree with the content, to whatever degree, and refuse to get in touch, perhaps those criticisms could serve as a discussion for a seminar. Turn your disagreements into a teaching moment for your students.

We should all be aiming for the same goal.

For valid complaints, email me with your criticism but you had better provide actionable additions or alternatives and not simply whine about ‘falling standards of education.’

Likewise, I would love to hear from anyone who has suggestions for content to add. This document is a work-in-progress. There are sections I would like to elaborate further but I am trying to live by the maxims, “something is better than nothing” and “don’t allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good”. The rest can be added in time. I would like it to serve as a living document, adapting to the needs of students.

Any would-be contributors are welcome!

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SECTION 1: Preface and Introduction: why?

Obligatory, rambling preface

This guide is not a book on how to write. Notwithstanding the lack of time at my disposal to write a book, as well as my lack of published books, I've kept this as a short guide mainly because few of you would read it if it were any longer. I will consider it a personal victory, for both you and I, if half of those who download and intend to read this thing manage to. This means that this guide cannot hope to be exhaustive – more's the pity. It provides an index of rules, hints, tips, and tricks which I have managed to remember and cobble together. I have been a teacher and critical reader for a long time, and this has made me opinionated, some may say discerning, when it comes to writing. The result is that I now have a long list of irritations that crop up everywhere I look – they bother me. Yet my job forces me to look at them, comment, and grade such things, so this guide is my attempt to make life easier and outline improvements with direct instructions and suggestions. I feel confident some of the advice that follows will clash with what you have been told previously. That is education for you. I have found students have done well following my no-nonsense and direct approach over the years so here's hoping you do too. I don't claim I have written an objective guide, although some parts I will stand by until the day I die, but it gives you somewhere to start. Try them. Adapt them. Find a better alternative. Improve.

Eagle-eyed readers may note that I consistently break my rules. This self-aware statement offers the excuse: *I know what and how I write and the reasons behind my choices*. I have underlined (this page only) those instances where I play fast and loose with some of the key rules that follow. Perhaps a good exercise prior to jumping into the rest of the guide is to question why these instances are underlined and how to remove or replace them. It is useful to assume the mindset that you do not know how to break the rules yet. Follow the rules and break them only after you are conscious of the reason and how doing so improves the work more so than following them.

Do as I say, not as I do. I feel compelled to state this as no doubt some smart so-and-so will find a typo or grammatical mistake somewhere in this guide and reach the conclusion that, as I have not caught it, then the value of the guide is nil. Perhaps they are correct, or they are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I can imagine that many such people have skipped this preface as it does not provide much in the way of overt writing support, so one could question, who is the more thorough proofreader? I have a small request in return for using this guide. If you find a mistake, email me so I can correct it.

I have written this work for those who want to work at improving their writing, not the lowest common denominator. Laziness has its time and place, but I have taken the stance that you are here to challenge yourselves and aim at improving. My aim is not to make this anymore verbose than needed, yet some uncommon or technical words occur. This leads us to the first rule of the guide.

If you do not know a word, look it up.

Do not ‘make a note of it’, or try and remember it, or butcher its meaning by applying it incorrectly. Learn its meaning and keep reading. Over time your vocabulary will expand without you needing to test yourself. A dictionary does the job however Google serves this purpose as well as anything else.

Those of you oh so lucky individuals who have had the pleasure of being one of my students will notice that I write how I speak. Perhaps you are reading it and imagining my voice. Poor you. This is no accident. I want my writing to reflect my thoughts as well as speech. Never let it be said that this guide was AI generated. Ask yourself if you wondered, even if for a second, whether it was. I like to think that impossible and telling. Would you want someone to ask that of your writing? The insinuation being that your work has as much soul as a machine could supply. I must suppress the temptation here to tell you to “find your voice”. The suggestion, although well-meaning, is as useless as it is trite. How do you know your voice if you haven’t found it yet? Such suggestions tend to have the opposite effect and frustrate students who do not receive clear instructions on what they do well, and pertinently, what they do not. The latter being at the heart of what holds them back. My suggestion is to *write what you mean to say*.

Grammar matters. If you believe ‘your voice’ includes clutter and slang, fine. Keep it out of your academic writing. Formal only. We require formal writing as the grammar has set rules that everyone can follow. Some appear insane, but they are universal. It allows everyone to be on the same page. It promotes comprehension. Grammar will come up throughout the guide, but this guide is not a grammar book. They already exist. I recommend reading one, but again few of you if any will do so I’ll save my words.

When reviewing students’ work in person, I’m often pointing to a sentence and asking them what they mean by it. Cue a few minutes of them doing their best to outline their real thoughts, tripping over imprecise articulations and waffling as they go. Is it clear, concise, and specific phrasing? No. Do I understand far more about their thoughts on the subject afterwards? Often. The issue is that they don’t provide themselves with the freedom to explain more when writing than when speaking. Talk is cheap. We can ramble hundreds of words per minute. Meander around the point. Inflect and add body language. Back track on mistakes. Speech is rarely committal. It has a low barrier for entry, and each word doesn’t need to earn its place. It doesn’t require the efficiency that written words do. If you haven’t communicated your views, should it become apparent, you simply explain more. The trick to writing your views is to think through what you intend to communicate and formulate the words to do that. You don’t get to ask if your reader has understood and add more. Your writing must do its job upon an initial read.

- What do I think?
- What do I want to say about it?
- Who do I write for?
- How can I communicate what I want to say to that audience?

The last question is the difficult part. Are you over or under explaining? Both are annoying. The former makes the reader wish they stopped earlier since they already got the gist and can also appear patronising. The latter leaves the reader ignorant of what you wanted them to know. Unsurprisingly, given the style of this guide, I find the under explainers to be worse than the over explainers. Sure, over explaining is inefficient but at least you know what the author wanted to say as long as they haven't bored you to death. Finding the balance between both approaches takes practice and even the pros fall foul of ideal explanations.

The key purpose of academic writing is to communicate your understanding of a topic or concept, even the complex, multivariate, and unintuitive. You must understand the difficult topic first, or as you go, then communicate that to your intended audience. For most of you, this audience is likely an examiner, perhaps even myself, if you are one of my students. Your objective for your time in education is to learn how to grapple with difficult ideas, become confident doing so, understand them, then communicate them to others. There are three words that you should hold as your holy trinity for this pursuit: clear, concise, and specific. The degree to which they apply will vary for each piece of writing, but the rule is universal, whether for a text, email, essay, etc.

Aspire to achieve as clear, concise, and specific phrasing as possible for the purpose of the piece. Writing must also take an appropriate form. When I speak, I add a smattering of adages which would not strengthen the purpose of this work, were I to deliver it by lecture. I swear when I speak. I use colloquialisms. I take long pauses to think. I mispronounce, which is basically verbal misspelling. All these things hinder writing and so I have left them out.

Trust the process.

Writers find developing their skill difficult. Unlike many skills, almost everyone can write in the modern age. Literacy levels, by some estimations, have never been higher. What a time to be alive! Yet that does not equate to everyone being able to write well. Most people are poor writers. This speaks to more than their ability to put words in a pleasing order. The adage that 'clear thought produces clear writing' rings true. Not to get too poetic about it, but this is the not-so-secret secret to competent writing. Your writing is a window into your mind. If you cannot explain something clearly, there is a good chance you have not understood it. Understanding your mind is beyond the scope of this guide. Another poor unfortunate soul can complete such a guide. Therefore, I assume you know what you want to write about, have opinions, and could discuss it with someone as if you were the expert on the topic.

I cannot make you love writing. I wish I could, but I cannot. If this is not the case, fear not, you can learn to. Perhaps you have a favourite author who makes you think and feel ways that enthrall you. What a testament of their work. You can do the same. Your words matter. Your opinions matter because they reflect you, and you matter. It is important to believe this to start taking writing seriously. When you write, you place a part of you on the page. Meditate on that. It is a reason to care. Your language is no less important than anyone else's. Take pains to concern yourself with the quality of your expression. Make it serious. Make it impactful. Make it delightful. Make it speak for you. We are the species with language. Others have communication but we are the only with language. The English

language, with its many quirks, is subtle and has been the framework for some of the greatest art ever composed. You share that same toolkit and can wield it with as much grace and poise as anyone who has come before you. View it as a privilege and a burden, but most of all a call to adventure. See it as a challenge. Drab academic writing, and yes, I include the sciences here, does not have to exist. Few see their research as literature anymore. It has become a corpse in the modern age, enjoyed by an ever-decreasing audience. What a pity. Yet I hope you feel a need for its reanimation once more. I hope you share this ideal. I'll end my rant with a proclamation.

Never settle for boring writing, the greatest cardinal sin.

If you place your mind, heart, and soul on the page, take pride in it.

Do not consider the examples used throughout this guide as exemplars of the craft. They came to mind, and I thought they served their purpose. Do not get distracted by the reputation of the authors or the context of their work. Approach their use of language with an open mind to discovering their approach to expression.

AI: enemy and aid

AI (artificial intelligence) is seemingly everywhere. By AI, I am referring to LLMs (large language models), which have become synonymous with “AI” - in most people’s minds they are the same thing. Arguments about whether they are *truly* AI aside (spoiler: as of late 2025, they are not), the most popular models can pass the Turing Test with ease, with their generated texts on encyclopaedic topics often being indistinguishable from human writing. This is no mean feat. Despite this, the uncanny valley continues to hold AI back from fooling us all. Many of us realise when something is human-like but somehow off, unnatural, wrong. As the days go by, it takes more of a trained eye and a knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of the LLMs’ stylistic tendencies to spot. Well, or so you would be tempted to believe. In the last section, I pointed out that this guide is obviously not the result of AI, but it is conceivable that one day it could be. But as of now (03.10.2025), it is not. Toggle with the ‘friendliness’ and ‘professional tone’ settings to your heart’s content, you will not be able to reproduce this style of work. For this, I am thankful, but I am not blind to the possibility that in the future this could change.

For now, the reason you shouldn’t have an AI do your writing for you is simple: people who can write can tell, and they will think less of you for it. A friend recently forwarded an apology email that they had received from a senior manager at their company who had made serious and harmful racial comments to their colleagues. This person felt the compulsion to apologise to all company employees. However, there was an obvious problem with their approach. Many of the recipients recognised the tell-tale signs that the apology had been generated by an AI. No doubt this person believed they were being clever. AI is renowned for its vague but readable tone and excels at producing professional, if soulless, statements. It would produce an apology which did not accept too much specific blame and dodge any phrasing landmines that a person could accidentally include, digging themselves into a deeper hole. Yet, the use of the technology was far more condemning. I have no doubt their colleagues felt disgusted. Whatever shred of dignity this person could have saved by making a genuine apology evaporated. Even a poorly written apology would have been better than no apology at all, which is what getting a computer to write it amounts to. The moral of the story is that there are many instances when the form of the text is not important – ten years ago the same email, vacuous as it was, wouldn’t have raised any unexpected eyebrows – but the process, intent, and authenticity of the text are where the value lies.

You may be tempted to think that such a poignant example is a current limitation and one day AI will be so accomplished at writing that no one could possibly tell. Surely with that future on the horizon, investing in a craft which will be made obsolete seems like a terrible waste of time. So, why bother?

First and foremost, unless you possess a foretelling crystal ball, you do not know what the future holds. We are living through a time of profound change, true, but how will this trajectory continue? We are told by Silicon Valley CEOs that AI will revolutionise the world, replace careers, optimise everything, discover the universe’s secrets, bring forth a global Utopia, or become our cyber overlord. What a thrilling future to contemplate. The sales pitch has certainly worked to increase stock values and gain government support to the

tune of hundreds of billions. In all seriousness, the technology and its potential should not be underestimated. Perhaps the hype bubble will pop, but there is no putting the genie back in the bottle. The truth is that it has never been easier to produce technically correct and coherent writing, and this capacity will continue. However, anyone who can guarantee that AI will one day be capable of perfectly emulating human writing is lying. No one can know this until it happens. If human writing was so easy to perfect, there would be little need for the Pulitzer Prize or the Nobel Prize for Literature since anyone who put their mind to it would all be able to master the craft. This guide argues that writing is one of the most difficult crafts to master. Competence is impressive in a world of mediocre writers, but good, or dare I say artistic literature, is orders of magnitude more difficult. AI has achieved mediocrity, but it is nowhere near good.

Some would argue that they are not undermining their efforts by using AI to write for them. They have thought through their opinions, ideas, and understand the topic well, and can now direct AI to help it take form. If they have done all the heavy lifting of thinking through the problem and feel like they understand it, why not outsource the reporting of those ideas? This reasoning is fallacious and amounts to laziness. Let's not con ourselves. The truth is, if you cannot write about it, you haven't understood it. Ask yourself whether you want to put in the effort to understand what you are writing about. The purpose of writing is simple: writing communicates what you think. Because you write slower than you speak, you can take your time and edit indefinitely, which means writing offers the opportunity to fine-tune your thoughts before passing them on to others. Writing has the greatest potential for accurate transmission of ideas. Nothing else comes close to its flexibility and thoroughness.

George Orwell, in his essay "Politics and the English Language" wrote:

"If people cannot write well, they cannot think well, and if they cannot think well, others will do their thinking for them."

The reality is poor writing is poor thinking. Unless you are happy for AI to replace your capacity to think, you should not confuse passing on the task of writing with outsourcing an inconsequential chore. If you do not wish to think and deepen your capacity to wrangle with complexity and difficult ideas, I doubt there is much in this booklet, or anywhere for that matter, which will convince you otherwise. Others will decide what you should think, and you will lack the critical thinking capacity to challenge them.

AI is a tool. Like all tools, it is suitable for some tasks and is unsuitable for others. Although it promises to be a modern technological Swiss army knife, the trick to applying it well relies on your ability to know its strengths and weaknesses.

In my opinion, **the best use of AI** for aiding the writing process is using it as a proofreader. Uploading your work (assuming you are fine with the concept of your work being stolen and worked into the training mode) and asking for it be checked for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors can point out errors which are easy to miss by common word processors such as Microsoft Word, which despite being by far the most used programme for writing for decades still cannot recognise basic errors. AI does not catch

everything and can do little to fix sloppy or underdeveloped ideas, but they tend to highlight the most egregious mistakes and recommend appropriate fixes. It does not catch everything, however. I have proofread much work which has been checked by AI and still found simple mistakes. There is no substituting human due diligence yet.

Beyond writing, most professional users agree that AI's strength is its ability to create basic code. This can be useful for those who need to work with data but are unsure how to proceed or lack the requisite skill in Python or R. If told the nature of the data and what is hoped to be understood about it, LLMs do a passable job at suggesting what to do with the data and can sometimes produce the outcomes for you, such as graphs and tables. As always, ensure you check this. It cannot be emphasised enough: **they make mistakes**. They acknowledge this. Google's Gemini 2.5 Pro has a statement at the bottom of the search bar: "Gemini can make mistakes, including about people, so double-check it."

In the right hands, it is possible for AI to be used as a research aid. LLMs can review articles and summarise key findings and arguments. The specifics of arguments will be omitted but if you have a huge stack of papers to wade through and are not sure which will be relevant for the argument you are trying to construct, it is a method of thinning the herd. After doing this, you should read the papers to ensure that the AI has not misconstrued the scholar's work. Good scholars select their words with care. LLMs paraphrase and use synonyms, thereby changing the exact meaning the author wished to communicate.

For scoping the field and beginning your research journey AI currently falls short of what even Wikipedia can provide. Also, remember that AI can hallucinate sources which do not exist. A good bibliography, composed by a credible scholar on a topic, will remain a better library of sources for the foreseeable future, especially while companies limit the number of responses their LLMs can produce. Even if those restrictions were lifted, an LLM has no capacity to evaluate the quality of the material it reviews. Its recommendations are stolen opinions, and it is difficult to discern who they belong to. An AI's choice of "best" work on a topic is more than likely to be the result of a random website on the topic than it is from an authoritative voice. Consider that academics can rarely agree on which works are seminal. On this topic, the old advice remains the same. Find out who is a leading authority in your field (ask a teacher if unsure), look up their work, then see who they recommend reading after that.

Do not use AI to generate quotes, even if you provide it with the article you wish to pull quotes from. Quotes can be hallucinated, made up, or paraphrased without you being informed. Page numbers can also be incorrect. Most importantly, a quote without the context of the rest of the text it is taken from can be misleading. You might believe you have understood a scholar's views based on a quote mined from their article, but if you read the work, the next sentence might contradict the quote you are using. This is a sure sign that you have not read the work, or at least have misunderstood it, and makes it appear that you are falsely ascribing opinions to people who do not hold them. Take the time to ensure that you have fully understood the arguments you are utilising in your essays.

Writing to communicate your thoughts

I suppose this section should begin with an innocuous statement like, *words have meaning*. What a painful, unspecific, shell of an assertion. You know this, and while it is true in the same way that ‘the sky is blue’ is (UK readers may not apply), it is meaningless. Words have cadence, taste, flavour, texture, emotion, colour, definitions, connotations, symbolism, etymology, weight, gravity, thoughts, appropriateness, hierarchy, legibility, suitability, etc. They dance with one another on the page and in the reader’s head. Some people read aloud or in their mind. Some read fast, others slow. It does not matter. You choreograph how your words are read. This is in your control. The placement of each word is important. To include it implies another was not. Every aspect of language is a choice. I imagine this is a daunting prospect. Freedom of expression is I’m afraid. Herein lies the exciting part. Learn to communicate in precise terms and the quality becomes apparent for all to read.

Think about your word order. Placing words at the beginning or at the end of your sentences emphasises them. They are prioritised. In most cases, you want your sentences to be in active voice, not passive, and the subject and main verb to be at the start. Which sounds better?

“This guide was written by me to provide insight into writing for academia.”

“I wrote this guide on writing for academia to aid students.”

The second, shorter sentence states who does what at the beginning, and states why, all while using fewer words. Do not be afraid to use short sentences and lots of them! Be discerning. Think of words like currency, an idea referred to as the economy of words. You are paying for each word to be put on the page, so you better be getting your money’s worth. Buy your points with the fewest words needed to achieve the desired result. Long sentences (more than 60 words) must defend their existence. Every extra word decreases the likelihood of comprehension. This effect compounds quickly. Adding more words places an ever-increasing burden on the sentence to be worth being so long. Longer sentences are more difficult to comprehend and require punctuation to read fluently. Each pause created by a comma, semi-colon, colon, or dash, should force you to question whether the sentence can be ended there, and the following words reformatted into a new sentence. Semi-colons and dashes must be applied with the precision of a surgeon’s scalpel. More often, they are applied when the sentence should have been split into two or more sentences. Use them when you have *no other choice*. The sentence must compel their use. Shorter sentences allow you to fire off successive bitesize pieces of information which are digestible. Their value diminishes when a sentence cannot convey its purpose without further explanation.

What are the connotations of the word, given the context of the rest of the writing?

Here tone, multiple possible meanings, the etymology (origin of the word) can all play a part. Some of the most evocative speeches that the English-speaking world has ever heard champions short, malleable, pithy, Germanic words. Here are some famous examples:

“We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...”

Winston Churchill, House of Commons (1940)

“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

John, F. Kennedy, Inaugural Speech (1961)

Specific, long, Romantic words (French and Latin), add detail and complexity.
Compare the following excerpts from speeches with the preceding examples.

“Furthermore, the enemy has begun to employ a new and cruel bomb, causing immense and indiscriminate destruction, the extent of which is beyond all estimation. Should we continue to fight, not only would it result in the ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but it would also lead to the total extinction of human civilization.”

Emperor Hirohito, Japanese surrender broadcast (1945)

“For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.”

William Wordsworth, (1800)

Which of the language above do you recognise and believe to be the most impactful, the first two, which used simply, pithy, Germanic words, or the latter two, which use complex Romantic language? Most of you will choose the former over the latter. They are strong and resonate when read. This does not mean that Romantic phrasing doesn't have its place, however, applying more complicated expression does not equate to better writing. Learn from this and apply it to your own work. Bigger words are not better by virtue of their length. Using verbose vocabulary does not indicate to your reader that you are intelligent nor have grasped the concepts that you are communicating. Almost always it achieves the opposite, and it appears like you are hiding behind the words. Incorporating vague conceptual terms (see Crib sheet) like ‘complex’ and ‘multifaceted’ does not mean you are a deep thinker but has the opposite effect, that you have failed to think. Prioritise clarity, common sense, logic, plausibility and precision.

Try removing the words and consider what it does to the sentence:

“Chinese block printing has a complex and meaningful history.”

“Chinese block printing has a history.”

Oh dear. What a stupid statement to make. It turns out that the sentence was never needed in the first place. Perhaps you are trying to be polite or to demonstrate that you care about the topic you are writing about. Nobody cares. An essay does not require this. Get to

the point. Choose the words that are appropriate and stand by them. Question your word choice.

Anything which does not aid in communication, i.e. the chaff, can be cut out. This provides the framework for editing and redrafting work.

A writer rarely executes a good piece of writing in single draft, without the need for any edits. Many writers and copyeditors consider editing and redrafting the most impactful part of composition. As you gain more experience identifying strengths and weaknesses in your writing, you begin to incorporate them into the first drafts. This, in turn, raises the standard expected of later drafts and streamlines the writing process, saving energy and time, and boosting confidence.

When editing, prioritise the following:

1. **Weak words:** replace with stronger alternatives. Try replacing three words in each of your paragraphs with more specific alternatives. Note the above: this does not mean more complex terms.
2. **Bracketing:** Using brackets to either highlight the purpose of the sentence/paragraph if it is present or write it in the margin as concisely as possible. This will help highlight the point of each paragraph. A paragraph should have a single point. Need more for the argument or point being made? Start a new paragraph.
3. **Cutting chaff:** Anything that is repetitive, obvious, or does not serve the purpose of the writing must go, never to be replaced. This is a process Oscar Wilde famously referred to as “killing one’s darlings”.

Word choice perplexes us all. Do you choose a basic word – **cut** – a more specific version – **carve** – or a verbose option – **incise**? To choose, ask yourself two key questions:

What does this word *mean*, specifically?

Cut: make an opening or divide into pieces with a sharp object.

Carve: cut a hard material to produce an object, design, or inscription.

Incise: cutting into a surface to mark or decorate.

Reflect on what the words you have chosen to mean and make sure they are appropriate. If in doubt, be specific! The following two sentences demonstrate the difference between a seemingly fine, yet unspecific, sentence and one which applies precise terms.

“My friends asked me to go out at the weekend”, can become:

“Sarah and Kai asked whether I wanted to drive to the Pennines on Saturday.”

SECTION 2: Research, reading & preparation

This guide does not explain approaches to research and planning in depth. That, I will leave as task for another time. Nevertheless, I know I will get emails about it so here's some practical tips to get you started and save me from copy and pasting the same generic responses. What follows is a practical guide for the lost and hopeless. Any academic that views it as limited should note that I agree. You are welcome to refine it throughout your course as it corresponds to your students.

Find out what to read. You do not know what to read. I highly doubt you do at least.

Go to your course's Reading List and hope the course leader has recommended somewhere to start. This may prove too much to hope for. Lacking that option, start with a generic recent book on the topic. This is typically scholarship written this century, although this is not set in stone. Recent means that, assuming it isn't awful, it will include the preceding major works on the topic. Do not become tempted to empty the library of all the material on the Reading List. Start with one, start early in the course, and don't move on until you are finished with it.

I designed the following instructions with legibility in mind and to give you a specific task list when you feel lost. It focuses on a strategy for historians, but you can adapt them to anything with the barest semblance of imagination.

Create a blank tally chart for primary and secondary sources. A column for each or their own tables will suffice. I recommend doing this on paper or an iPad as what I propose sounds hideous to attempt on a computer.

Open the document and do **not** read. Well, barely read. Task yourself with surveying the literature. Efficiency becomes the name of the game. Scan the work for the citations, primary and secondary and make a note of them in your tally chart. Again, **no reading!** You should not learn anything other than who the author cited. If they cite the same author/work more than once, then you add extra dashes to your chart. Do this until you reach the end. Take a hint. If the author has hundreds of cited sources, do not spend days trying to do this. That would defeat the objective of the task. Scan for repeated words or phrases as well as anything seemingly important (contextual, you're on your own here). Add these to your tally chart. Finish scanning the document. Count the results. I hope it the next step will surprise few of you. You proceed to the scholarship which appeared the most. Find it, by whatever means necessary, and repeat the steps above. Do this for three pieces of scholarship. You can do more if you are feeling particularly eager but diminishing returns kick in the more works you scan in this way.

Once you have completed the initial scanning, forget scholarship and look at the primary source tally. Prepare yourself. Time to read. Do not panic. Baby steps. You will read *one* piece of primary material. Top marks if you guessed you will begin with the work possessing the most notches in the primary material tally chart. Now, *read*. Nothing else. Do not make notes, highlight, underline, try to remember, copy and paste. What would you mark? How do you know what you are looking for? You don't. All marks distract from your

task. Most of you have had the ability to read, with varying degrees of success, since you were five. Trust in your ability to comprehend the words on the page without having to do anything else. Read fast. Read slow. But read.

The following question is the bane of anyone who has ever offered essay support to university students: *How many sources (primary and secondary) should I read?*

How long is a piece of string? Ideally long enough to serve the task of the person who needs the string. Whatever number I provide here will attract accusations regarding its limitations. However, with this caveat in place, given this work hopes to provide unambiguous guidance, I will throw all caution to the wind and supply a suggestion. Read the top 5 primary sources first. Then read the top 5 pieces of scholarship. If the scholarship was useful, you can now apply the ideas you found to guide a second reading of the primary material and you can start to make notes in whatever way you prefer. See my [Close Reading](#) guide for more detail on reading sources.

If you believe that you have discovered new evidence or conjured a ground-breaking theory, that has never been put to paper before, perhaps it worth pausing and reflecting. Is it more likely that the experts who know the material inside and out, who has forgotten more on the topic than you will likely ever know you are ignorant of, have misconstrued the material and reached conclusions that are farfetched, whereas you, you, with a few weeks of glancing over the top recommendations of a Reading List have struck gold? Who is more likely wrong?

Most publications do not reshape their field. Few make little more than ripples, never mind waves. Feel comfort from this. There is no expectation that you will add to the body of knowledge. You are not reshaping the field. You are not a researcher. You have a set task. An essay is a form of examination which tests your ability to understand the core ideas on a topic, prioritise them, add your thoughts, and communicate all of this effectively.

Do not psychoanalyse individuals you do not know, historically or otherwise. You do not know the minds of the people you are studying and never will. Would you really like to know the mind of Julius Caesar? This likely speaks more about your own psyche than his. While we on the topic, never make comparisons between the past and the present day. Have confidence to deal with the past without feeling the need to ‘make it relevant’ by dragging it kicking and screaming into the 21st century, where it does not belong. This applies for both primary and secondary sources. If the temptation raises its head, start a blog.

Be warned, fail to heed this and you might find sections of your work recomposed into a case study of dire takes. I cannot recommend the following essay enough. It is a lesson for all students and for a historian one of the funniest works composed. Treat yourself:

<https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/winter-2014-four-decades-of-classic-essays/history-past-life-reeked-with-joy>

I cannot confirm nor deny that I wish to one day replicate this.

I have read too many essays to count. I have forgotten the best essays. They were excellent. They did not break the mould. They understood the assignment and did it without

any bells and whistles. They were clear, concise, and specific. They were given stella grades, provided with feedback to improve further, and I moved onto the next in the pile. It is not these essays which make a marker stop, I can assure you. See [Constructing an Argument](#) for further clarification.

The time taken to plan an essay is always going to be worth the investment. Do not write an essay without a plan, even if it is not very detailed. It is a difficult task to understand how your evidence and methodology come together to form your core argument. Without a plan, you leave yourself open to repetition and difficult-to-follow logic. Give yourself the best chance possible by creating a clear structure for the arguments you will present. You should be able to encapsulate each paragraph, section, or argument with a single sentence. Change their order as you see fit, prioritising how they flow, by starting with the strongest argument. Larger concepts should preclude more niche and abstract explorations of a topic. A plan is not set in stone. The reader will only see the finished work, so be flexible in the meantime. Prioritise the key points that the reader must understand and save details which add nuance for those which are necessary for the argument.

Some advice on scholarship

Broadly speaking, scholarship has two purposes for students:

1. The academic is an expert in the field and has spent a great deal of time and energy researching the topic. That is work you would struggle to replicate during a term and so it is useful to apply their hard work to your argument. This could be the stating of facts, figures, statistics, etc.
2. They have their own opinions and arguments for how a topic should be perceived. They are only that, opinions. How seriously should you take them? It is fair to assume that the scholar has not pulled their opinions out of thin air. They *should* be basing their opinions on a solid basis of relevant evidence and logical reasoning.

Is more recent scholarship better than older scholarship?

Not always. A lack any ideas in the field from the last twenty years will raise red flags. Google eases the process of discovering older scholarship, due to the lack of copyright restrictions, that does not mean you should be using it. It certainly doesn't mean that that work should take the place of more appropriate reading. Modern scholarship has the benefit of being able to build on what has come before. Recent scholarship should be aware of what has come before it and should only be contributing to the field if they believe there is a new and meaningful contribution to add, or something has been misunderstood in the past. You may notice that the caveat "should" is being applied liberally here.

Different fields and topics apply scholarship in diverse ways. If the nature of the primary evidence and the understanding of it haven't changed much, then do not presume that recent opinions on them automatically provides more substance. No rules exist which states reinterpreting for the sake of it and newer interpretations best older, however, everyone likes to think that their work is better than what has come before it. My advice is to evaluate the strength of an argument against the same metrics you are held to:

- Critical handling of primary material
- Use of logical reasoning and appropriate analytical methods

Scholars are human and can be mistaken in their views or could have missed supportive evidence which further bolsters their case. This provides fertile ground for you to offer your views on the matter.

Close reading of literary sources

Obligatory caveat: This guidance is intended as an introduction to close reading and is therefore not intended to be an exhaustive guide. It is intended to provide some direction of where to begin with analysing a piece of literature (a written source). The pointers start broad and become more focused, but feel free to deviate, especially if time is limited and you are becoming increasingly well-versed in close reading. This guide employs a three-stage system, to be followed in order: First Reading, Second Reading, Close Reading.

First reading

- **Before you begin, remind yourself of the context of the work you are about to read.** If it is a historical piece, find out when it was written, where, and by whom? This is the bare minimum. Do not proceed until this is known as it can change everything you might hope to learn about the piece! Are the characters, setting, or plot alluding to a cultural theme or historical event? How will this change how the piece is received?
- **Read the text in its entirety without stopping!** Do not look up words you do not know. If you are confused, persist. Make no notes. Do not rush, nor skim read. It is not a race. Go from the beginning and do not stop until you reach the end.
- **How does the piece make you feel?** Begin with positive/negative - texts often change from one to the other, so note this too.
- **What is the core message the author is trying to impart on their audience?** Practice summarising this in a single sentence.
- **Can you easily understand the work?** Does this tell you something about who was its intended audience, such as literacy levels or specific knowledge requirements?
- **Consider major themes characterised in the text.** You should not have returned to the text yet; this constitutes the first reading. Think about emotions: e.g. anger, deceit, awe, pride, etc. Consider dominant ideas and thoughts: liberty, home, human nature, the economy, etc. Does one dominate the other?
- What you have thought about up to this point is what we can call an immediate audience response. If we bear in mind whether the piece would have been repeated in its contemporary setting, this is perhaps all the original audience had the chance to work with. Now consider: what might the intended audience have known that I do not which adds crucial context, and likely added depth and nuance? What words and phrases are unfamiliar to you? Are there characters you have never heard of before? Do you know where mentioned places are? The trick here is to be as conscious of your ignorance as you can, before you undertake the second reading.

Second reading

The aim of the second reading is to understand the whole piece, but not to start analysing the text. Prioritise understanding above all.

- **Read slow, ideally.** If time does not allow, skimming can do the job in a seminar setting. Even better: read the text aloud (again, do not rush). A poetry or a play could be written in metre; practice reading it with the cadence of the metre to understand the melody of the piece and how this influences its performance.
- **Is the work a narrative with a plot?** Try summarising the beginning, middle, and end. This will inform you how well you have understood the main beats of the text.
- **Has your response to the piece changed?** Before, you reflected on how you felt after a first reading. Now reflect on what you believe you are ‘supposed to feel’. Do you think the author has a core message in mind? Is this subtle or overt?
- **Add keywords (fewer the better) next to each paragraph which convey the key themes and the purpose.** This will easily allow you to notice trends at a glance and summarise your points when it comes time for writing about the work.
- **Underline/Highlight any words you are unfamiliar with and look them up immediately.** If you are in a group, allocate words to make this more efficient.
- **What do you notice on a second reading regarding the tone and themes, which you did not pick up on in your first reading?**
- **Is the piece typical of its genre?** Reflect on what you would expect to encounter and whether the piece is consistent with this or diverges.
- **Are you aware of other works by the author?** Is this work similar or different? Is this explainable when you consider the chronology of composition and publication? What was happening in their life prior to composition? To what extent do you believe it influenced the work? Researching the author is an advanced approach to contextualising a work and starting to analyse in depth.
- **Are there clear cases of symbolism and metaphors that resonate throughout the piece?**

Close reading

Now you can feel free to skim the work and look out for language devices and structural features. Review the following in practically any order and serve as suggestions.

- **How does the piece begin and end?** What are the first and last words, and what do they evoke? Are you directed towards a character or an action? Is this consistent or different from beginning to end? Why might the author have placed the emphasis here? How a scene is set and resolved indicates the initial impression being communicated and what the author hopes you will meditate on upon finishing reading. Bear in mind that nothing else follows and therefore the end of a piece needs to have accomplished what it set out to do by this point.
- **What is/are the main subject(s) of the piece?** This includes characters, an object, or a concept. Do the ideas pertaining to them remain consistent, develop, or change?
- **Who is speaking?** Is the work written in first (I, me, we), second (you), third (he, she, they) person? Is the author corresponding with a narrator? Is there a dialogue or an indirect dialogue, as expected in a letter? If the characters are addressing each other, how do they interact and what does this tell us about their individual roles in the piece? Remember, characters are literary devices and no two are the same nor echo one another without cause; each is included for a reason.
- **Look for obvious structural features which stand out to the eye without reading them.** This could include one- or two-word lines, strange use of punctuation or formatting (italics, capitalisation, exclamation marks, etc.) This means the author is trying to catch your attention. Use the context to contemplate on why.
- **Are words or phrases repeated?** This means they are prioritised and reinforced. Why?
- **Look for breaks in the flow, such as parentheses (using commas, dashes, brackets, etc.) What does the pause linger on?** Does the pause unite the sections before/after the pause, or serve to highlight their differences? Does it make you read it in a different way?
- **What do words mean?** This might be an obvious point, but it opens an endless world of possibilities regarding interpreting a text. Why were these particular words chosen? What connotations do they have? Are there stylistic consistencies throughout the piece.
- **Is the work translated?** Do you know how it has been translated and what their motives were? There are generally two approaches, and a sliding scale in-between. Literal translations aim to reproduce the work word-for-word, whereas literary translation prioritises capturing the 'true' feeling and meaning of the text. In cases of translated works, tread carefully regarding how much emphasis you place on the connotations of specific words.
- **Consider the auditory impact of language choice.** How do the words sound when spoken? Is there alliteration (repeated sounds at beginning of words), sibilance (repeated 's' sounds at the beginning of words), assonance (repeated vowel sounds between syllables), or rhyming? Does this sharpen or soften the reading?
- **What symbolism is at play? Metaphors** (something is something else), similes (something is like/as something else), allusions (hinting at something with popular

connotations), and symbolic vocabulary (e.g. sacred terms, jargon, technicalities, etc.) all express a meaning not conveyed in plain terms. Why did the author believe it necessary to use them? Is the author invoking a specific context?

- **Are specific people, events, places mentioned?** Are they moving the plot forward or are they symbolically resonant? Do they evoke the past? Are they famous for something? Do they have positive or negative connotations?
- **Is speech included?** Who is the speech directed towards? Who is included and is anyone omitted? Is it reported or direct speech (quoted)? Do the characters have an equally allotted amount? Who speaks first? Is this a foil or point of contention for other characters or intended to stabilise the key messages.
- **Are there moral statements?** To what extent is the work moralising and who is the audience of the moralising? Is the audience meant to reflect on their morality, or is the work commenting on an outside group?
- **Are there political statements?** Does the context of when the work was written explain political allusions or outright decrees? How dogmatic are the statements?
- **Is there humour present?** Is it implicit or overt? Is sarcasm incorporated? Are you expected to laugh with the author, character, or at them? How does this change the tone of the section it appears in?
- **Is the piece drawing on, or is influenced by, other sources?** If so, does the source, corroborate, modify, or contradict that which it draws on?
- **Facts and figures are intended to create an air of authority and evidence claims. Are they being levied to educate or persuade (or both)?** Would these have been verifiable/falsifiable by their intended audience? Are they, to the best of your knowledge, true? Could they have been misleading?
- **Do you think your interpretation matches up with how the intended audience felt about the work?** What are the limitations of trying to put yourself in the position of someone else, especially if it was a historical audience?

Evaluating the quality of the evidence

The strength of evidence is fundamentally tied to its source and reliability. Some evidence and lines of reasoning have greater weight than others. Evidence can be evaluated for its strength and importance in an argument by assessing its **quality** (credibility, accuracy, and objectivity) and its **connection** to the claim (relevance, sufficiency, and coherence). A systematic evaluation helps distinguish strong arguments, which are supported by robust, well-linked evidence, from weak arguments that rely on flawed or irrelevant information.

Evaluation Criterion	Key Questions to Ask	Why It Matters
Credibility/Authority	Who is the source? Do they have the appropriate credentials (expertise, qualifications)? Is the source peer-reviewed or from a reputable institution?	Evidence from an expert or scholarly source (like a peer-reviewed journal) is generally considered stronger than anecdotal evidence or a general website.
Accuracy/Verifiability	Can the information be verified in other, independent, and reliable sources (consistency across sources)? Is the evidence presented as fact or opinion?	If the data or facts are demonstrably false or cannot be confirmed elsewhere, the evidence is unreliable and severely weakens the argument.
Objectivity/Bias	Who funded the research that produced the evidence? Does the source have a vested interest (e.g., commercial or political) in the claim? Are counter-arguments addressed fairly?	Evidence from a source with a clear conflict of interest is often viewed as biased, making it less persuasive unless the bias is openly acknowledged and accounted for.
Currency	When was the evidence published? Is the topic one (like science or technology) where information changes quickly?	Evidence may be weak if it's outdated. For historical arguments, older primary sources are essential, but older secondary interpretations might be superseded by new research.

Evaluating the connection to the claim

The importance of evidence is determined by how effectively it functions within the overall structure of the argument.

1. Relevance

- **Directness:** Is the evidence **specific** to the reason and the claim, or is it only tangentially related? Irrelevant evidence is a common sign of a weak argument.
 - *Example:* Citing a study on cat behavior is irrelevant to a claim about dog nutrition.
- **Addressing the Core Claim:** Does the evidence directly answer the *Why?* or *How?* of the main argument, or does it merely restate the claim?

2. Sufficiency (or Weight)

1. **Quantity:** Is there **enough evidence** to support the breadth of the claim? A strong argument shouldn't rely on a **single piece of evidence** (unless it's overwhelmingly conclusive).
2. **Representativeness:** Does the evidence represent a **fair cross-section** of the issue, or is it based on an isolated case or a small, non-representative sample (**hasty generalization**)? Evidence that represents a **weight of data** is stronger.
3. **Scope:** Does the evidence justify the claim's scope? Evidence from one city is rarely sufficient to support a universal claim about an entire country.

3. Logical Strength (Reasoning/Warrant)

- **Coherence:** Does the evidence integrate with the premises to form a **coherent story** or logical progression (**anchored narratives**)? There must be a clear link (*warrant*) explaining *how* the evidence proves the claim.
- **Causality:** If the argument establishes a cause-and-effect relationship, is it a **plausible link**? Could the perceived link be due to a third, unstated factor (**confounding variable**)? A strong argument identifies and controls for potential confounders.

Comparing types of evidence

Evidence can be ranked in terms of inherent strength, though this often depends on the academic discipline (e.g., empirical data is highly valued in science, while primary textual analysis is key in the humanities).

Type of Evidence	Strength Level	Key Characteristics
Empirical Research/Statistics	Highest	Data from large-scale studies, randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and verified statistical findings.
Expert Testimony	High	Statements, quotes, or findings from recognized, non-biased authorities in the specific field.
Primary Sources	Context-Dependent	Original documents, interviews, or firsthand data. Their strength relies on proper interpretation and corroboration.
Case Studies / Specific Instances	Moderate	Detailed examples or narratives. Useful for illustration, but weak if offered as the only support for a broad claim.
Anecdotal Evidence / Common Beliefs	Lowest	Personal stories or general public opinion. Useful for building empathy, but insufficient for rigorous proof.

Constructing an argument

What is an argument?

The basic answer is **a claim (conclusion) reached because of evidence and reason (premises)**. It is recommended to learn what “premises” and “claims” are as they come up a lot in the explanations which follow.

The elaborate answer: This opens a can of worms. Boiling argumentation down to a succinct set of instructions or general advice will always be open to dispute (ironically). Nevertheless, continuing the general philosophy of this guide, what follows will be a more detailed overview of how to construct and evaluate an argument.

The journey of constructing an argument looks something like this:

1. **Review your opinions on a topic or recognise your ignorance.**
2. **Decide your approach and goals.**
3. **Apply al Reasoning to formalise the argument.**
4. **Re-evaluate based on new evidence and stronger arguments.**

Review your opinions on a topic or recognise your ignorance

Depending on the topic, you might have come to it with preconceived opinions. You can be well-versed in the topic and come to it with a wealth of knowledge that supports your position. Else, you can know little about it but be biased towards one opinion. This can take the form of faith, which does not require any evidence and does not require the believer to utilise logical reasoning to reach their conclusions. Academic writing should never rely on faith so we should sideline this. The purpose of academia is to challenge everything and so we will continue in this way. You might not care one way or the other about a topic, or you can decide that you do not know enough to be qualified to hold an opinion.

The trap that students face when it comes to pre-held opinions is whether the question they are set challenges them to critically engage with it. This can be fraught for opinions which are intellectually, emotionally, morally, or politically charged. Relinquishing one’s position or even acknowledging that the other side can provide well-supported arguments takes an open mind and courage. Some conclusions can appear unlikely or be unsavoury. Here, it is worth dwelling on why you hold your opinion, where did it come from, and why you are invested in its validity.

Most opinions are held because people believe that others vouch for them, backed by popular support or a perceived authority on the topic. This then becomes the standard opinion and people go along with it. Agreement, whilst flattering, becomes boring in abundance and can result in counterviews for the sake of rebelling. Yet, agreement has a short-term allure for argumentation. The nodding kiss-ass in the corner, grinning with support of your every word, can provide a fleeting respite from self-doubt. You may also bunker in an echo chamber of your own or your community’s design. The greater the

consensus, the more that confidence in your sacred beliefs swells. This is a mistake, especially when passion, ethics, and morality capture the debate.

“Don’t take refuge in the false security of consensus and the feeling that, whatever you think, you are bound to be okay because you are in the safety of the moral majority.”

Christopher Hitchens

Learn to recognise the *ad populum* fallacy: an idea considered true because many people believe it. Like all fallacies, logic falters. Hitchens, quoted above, addressed a hidden danger of agreement. People change their minds. Popular views which offered safety in numbers one day can fall out of fashion the next. Consensus still counts. Much of our understanding and knowledge of the world are accepted as facts because experts have convinced one another using evidence and logic. People agree on more topics than they know. The *ad populum* fallacy instead reminds us truth is not intrinsically defined by the number of adherents to an idea. A healthy dose of scepticism and curiosity makes for a potent tonic against an unearned consensus. If something does not make sense or seems unlikely, question it. I find Occam's razor a strong heuristic from which to start: if there are multiple explanations for a phenomenon, favour the simplest as most likely correct. It does not guarantee the truth. That would be too good to be true. However, it speaks to a general observation that complexity is rarer than simplicity. This explains trends of agreement within scholarship. In general, the broad and simple ideas find agreement easier than the details, which are fought over. Few argue that ancient Greece was a paternalistic society. Try finding complete agreement amongst Classicists concerning what this meant in people’s daily lives.

Herein lies the lesson for the essay writer. If you find yourself dubious of the broad and simple ideas, held by a strong consensus, you hold the higher burden of proof to disprove it. However, contested details and complex ideas, which are reliant on hermeneutics (interpretation), are more fruitful grounds for disagreement.

The natural inclination to disagree often finds a home in essays. Of course it does. A work which agrees with all the views that have come before has little value. A new argument implicitly disagrees insofar as it makes the case that what came before was not enough or lacking key details. Also, people enjoy disagreeing more than agreeing. Online public forums, including social media, have made it clear that disagreement drives engagement. We want to see disagreement. It antagonises us and increases cortisol levels (the “stress” hormone). Disagreement triggers an addictive response.

Disagreement originates from disbelieving another’s views, lacking of empathy for their position, or disputing the exact phrasing of an argument. The refrain, “I would not use those words,” admits that the arguer shares an idea’s sentiment, but the exactness of communication lacks something. Details matter but strong arguments seek to understand the reasoning of another’s position. A generous framing of another’s argument can often result in common ground being found and reduce the likelihood of you talking past one another.

Intentions matter but communicating them well often proves difficult. Steel-manning can remove friction in this pursuit.

Decide your approach to arguing

Establish a foundation of agreement first. Agree on a shared set of values and definitions to establish both sides of the argument are conversing on the same topic. Have both parties agree with the phrasing of disagreements. Choose your opponent's strongest argument and bolster it. Aim to make the opposite case as well you can. If your argument remains more coherent and convincing, the best becomes clear. Essay writing precludes this as the writer cannot question the scholars with whom they disagree. The clarity of their argument rectifies this problem. A clear argument will allow a reader to comprehend their views and be confident concerning areas of disagreement. A convoluted argument should be criticised, and complexity is not an excuse. Readers who are well-versed in the topic must never have to struggle to understand an argument. Sometimes, although you might find yourself agreeing with the sentiment of an argument, you feel you can strengthen it in your own words.

A steel-man argument provides an alternative to the better-known strawman. A strawman argument chooses the weakest aspects of another's arguments and exaggerates its flaws. It punches down. It accepts that misrepresenting, discrediting, and maiming an idea before the discussion begins provides the pathway for victory. Many choose it as the easier option, often proving more effective to naïve eyes and ears (thanks to disagreement bias), and requires little more than fallacious arguments, such as *ad hominem* (personal insults).

When arguing, consider your motivation. Are you trying to uncover the truth or win? Both serve their purposes at different times. You don't reach a conclusion about the best football team when comparing favourites, put the topic to bed, and never discuss it again. Upon choosing winning, not truth, as the argument's goal, straw-manning your opponent's argument does the job well. Too many people try to win their arguments instead of aiming for truth. Essays always aim for truth. For this reason, you must resist the temptation to strawman an argument.

Here, we do well to remind ourselves not to confuse an essay with scholarship and an essay does not showcase novel research. You are allowed to only find areas of agreement with scholarship if you believe in the validity of their arguments.

Tackle the idea, not the speaker.

If a position seems entirely right or wrong, yet there appears to be no lack of adherents to both sides, you should hesitate before believing one is absolute. An uncritical argument has no teeth. If you can easily reach a conclusion, question the value in attaining it. Here is a little secret. I remember the worst essays I have ever read, not the best. The real stinkers. The ones which surprised me. Before them, I never truly appreciated how wrong it was possible to be while (mostly) using coherent English. For anyone who has ever spread the pernicious lie that "*there are no wrong answers*". There are. An essay can express many,

many, wrong ideas and inexact thoughts which on the surface appear to ‘critically engage’ with the material (see “[Close reading](#)”), but below the surface have made no attempt to aim for truth.

Apply Logical Reasoning to formalise the argument.

The best manner to achieve truth is through the application of logical reasoning. Every argument must be supported by logical reasoning, implicitly if obvious, and explicitly for bolder claims. Remember, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

The Toulmin Model is a framework developed by philosopher Stephen Toulmin to analyse and construct practical arguments by breaking them down into six key components. These are broken down below with some example sentences for each. It should be noted that you would not necessarily write these as separate sentences or feel the need to mention each component if it is well-known or understood to be the case.

1. Claim: The main assertion, position, or answer to a question. It is an arguable statement that is not an obvious fact.

- Caesar was a dangerous threat to the Roman Republic.
-

2. Grounds (Data/Evidence): The specific data, facts, observations, examples, or quotes that support the claim. This must be relevant and credible.

- He illegally crossed the Rubicon River with his army, a direct act of war against the state. His refusal to disband his legions upon returning from Gaul demonstrated his intent to seize power.
-

3. Warrant: The explanation that clearly links the evidence back to the claim. It justifies *why* the evidence is important and how it proves the claim. It often involves stating a scientific principle, rule, or logical connection.

- Any individual Roman who uses a standing army to defy the Senate and initiate civil war must be considered a threat to the established republican system of government.
-

4. Backing: Additional support for the warrant, proving the validity of the underlying principle itself.

- The *Lex Cornelia Majestatis* forbade generals from taking their armies across the Rubicon, specifically to prevent a military dictatorship and protect the civilian government's authority.
-

5. Qualifier: A statement that limits the scope of the claim, such as "most," "usually," "in most cases," or "probably."

- Historically speaking, Caesar was most certainly a threat to the Republic, though perhaps not to the welfare of the Roman people at large.
-

6. Rebuttal: An acknowledgement of potential counterarguments or limitations to the claim.

- Yang argues that Caesar was merely the culmination of built-up tensions between the popularis and optimates political factions, but this does not negate the fact that he used an illegal military action to undermine the institutions of the Republic.
-

There are three main kinds of logical reasoning which you can apply to reach a conclusion from a premises. All are valid and can be applied equally well. Do not worry too much about how to apply them, I have provided them for the sake of completeness so that you can review (briefly) what it means to make a logical statement. The use of illogical statements ([fallacies](#)) is covered later.

1. Deduction: Conclusion b is a result of premise a . Given that premise a are true, the conclusion (b) is also guaranteed to be true.

All even numbers are divisible by 2 without a remainder. 6 is divisible by 2. 6 is even.

2. Induction: A general principle b can be inferred from knowledge a .

95% of elephants are grey. Sara is an elephant. It is likely Sara is grey.

3. Abduction: inferring a as an explanation of b .

The ground outside is wet and the sky is dark. The best explanation of the observation is that it had been raining.

Re-evaluate based on new evidence and stronger arguments.

The gold standard for defending one's argument is the openness to the fact that your position can change if the premises supporting it are re-evaluated. A test for this is asking the question: what reasonable evidence would it take for me to change my opinion? There is always an answer to this, unless you are working on faith alone. No academic argument is sacrosanct and correct by virtue of your belief in its validity. If you have completed the argument and find out new evidence which heavily contradicts what you have stated, the only recourse is to rewrite the argument.

SECTION 3: How to write an essay

Basic guide to structure short essays

Introduction

An introduction presents the thesis statement and the points which contribute to it. The reader should be able to recreate the question after reading your essay without being beaten over the head with a rephrased version of the question. The thesis statement is the overall argument.

A basic introduction structure which will serve well for most essays is:

Thesis statement. An argument. Keep it short, simple, and clear. A reader must understand the overall argument you are putting forward:

“Plato’s *Republic*’s primary aim is to question the rationality of “Just” behaviour as it can clash against one’s self-interest.”

Following this up with the key arguments that will follow in the main body of the essay. These do not need explaining at this point. State them and get on to the main body of the essay.

“Book II makes the case that Justice is in itself good. The dialogue then states Just action is good, but that ruling introduces conflicting motivations, leading to disunity, poor leadership, and ignorance of better forms of governance. It is therefore rational to be unjust as this benefits one’s interests. The solution to this problem is the establishment of aristocratic system, led by reluctant philosopher-kings who view ruling as a necessary evil, thereby going against their self-interest for the greater pursuit of Justice.”

From this I would expect the essay to cover the following topics in order:

1. Justice is in itself good
2. Just action is good
3. conflicting motivations
4. disunity
5. poor leadership
6. ignorance of better forms of governance
7. philosopher-kings

This introduction is simple. Would it win awards for the best introduction to an essay? No. Does it provide a clear outline for the rest of the essay? Yes. It is a good starting point. Most definitely. Do not overcomplicate your introduction. Do not explain the points in the introduction. Provide the argument and the points needed to make it and move on. Most essays are not long enough to devote more words than necessary.

For those rebellious souls who feel compelled to break free of the stocks that the above structure has placed you in, try adding a quote at the beginning, which propels the essay towards its thesis statement. Some words of warning. This will be a trap for many. It

will lead to much waffling and distraction. The quote must inspire a talking point which naturally leads to the core argument. It must belong and not be shoehorned in for the sake of novelty. Quick tip: Never begin an essay with a dictionary definition (see [Don't...](#)).

It is often wise to leave writing the Introduction, alongside the Conclusion, until after you have drafted the main body. This will ensure it is in line with the arguments the essay presents, including knowing the order in which they appear.

Main body

Each paragraph must have a point. This should be stated at the start of each paragraph.

“The *Republic* interrogates the rationality of Justice by comparing good motivations and the consequences of people’s actions. These are split into three categories: those who are good but do not accomplish good, those who are both good and accomplish it, and those who should be avoided but achieve good.”

From here, each of the categories should be explained. The rationality applied within the dialogue could be analysed for its validity. There will be appropriate moments to introduce scholarship (see next page).

An essay is an opportunity to express your thoughts on a topic. Many are reluctant to do so when they are first learning to write. It is the reason you are writing an essay. You are not tasked with writing a report, full of quotes from primary and secondary sources. Think through these questions and write about them:

What thoughts do you have about the topic?

Why can I justify my ideas? This should be in reference to primary material first and foremost. Choose aspects of the evidence which you have deeper insights into and explain them.

It is better to choose fewer points which substantiate your argument and explore them in greater depth, than to try to cover all bases. Better to deliver a well than a large puddle.

Conclusion

This is simple. It is the inverse of the Introduction. Instead of mentioning the points which contribute to the argument, you summarise the findings from those points.

Like the Introduction, for short essays, it should be concise.

Never introduce new points in the conclusion. If it was so important, it should have been placed in the main body of the essay.

Editing an example essay

The following is an introduction from a History essay, submitted by a third-year student who has kindly sacrificed their hard work to the cause and granted permission for it to be critiqued. The work received outstanding grades and is therefore ideal for demonstrating good practice. Yet, as you will see, it can be improved. Read the introduction then see my feedback beneath. Immediately following each sentence, I rephrase as needed, then explain the choices.

To what extent was the Great Chicago Fire perceived as a turning point in class relations in the city?

In 1871, the Great Chicago Fire burnt its way across much of the city of Chicago, causing \$200 million of property damage and killing 300 people.¹ As it destroyed much of the physical city, so it made an impact on the social structure of the city. For some, this was an opportunity to build a new Chicago, and thus build a Chicago with new relations between classes and a new society.² For others, this posed a severe problem; the crisis that Chicago faced in the aftermath of the fire was partly a moral one, as the middle and upper class worried about the destruction of the society they lived in.³ Class was interwoven in the fire itself and in reaction and reconstruction after it, and for many this was a turning point in class relations, for better or for worse. In examining class during, and after, the Chicago Fire, a number of primary sources will be assessed, particularly fictional and non-fictional literary and written accounts of the fire. These will demonstrate that the Chicago Fire was perceived as a major turning point in class relations, and indeed the structure of society, although whether this was positive or negative depends on the source and the views of the author. The immediate responses to the fire, visions of the reconstructed Chicago, panic over the morals of the city, the problems posed by a 'breaking down' of class barriers and the desire for unity after the fire will all be examined and assessed, again demonstrating the perceptions of the fire in class relations in Chicago.

¹ Elias Colbert and Everett Chamberlain, *Chicago and the Great Conflagration* (Chicago: J.S. Goodman & Co., 1872), 9.

² Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 94-95.

³ Smith, 51.

Original version	Rewritten version	Explanation
<p>In 1871, the Great Chicago Fire burnt its way across much of the city of Chicago, causing \$200 million of property damage and killing 300 people.</p>	<p>In 1871, Chicago suffered what would become known as the Great Chicago Fire, causing \$200 million of property damage and killing 300 people.</p>	<p>This places the subject and main verb at the beginning.</p>
<p>As it destroyed much of the physical city, so it made an impact on the social structure of the city.</p>	<p>The fire destroyed much of the city and undermined social structures, including...</p>	<p>Active voice is stronger than passive. 'Impact' is a concept noun which has no clear meaning here. Better to say what happened and provide examples which will be explained in the main body.</p>
<p>For some, this was an opportunity to build a new Chicago and thus build a Chicago with new relations between classes and a new society.</p>	<p>For the disenfranchised, this provided an opportunity to build a new Chicago that could ease tensions between the socio-economic classes and allow greater upwards social mobility.</p>	<p>Remove vague words and be specific. 'Some' is vague. Who? 'Relations' is vague. 'Thus' is unnecessary. 'Class' and 'new society' are concept words that mean little without more refinement.</p>
<p>For others, this posed a severe problem; the crisis that Chicago faced in the aftermath of the fire was partly a moral one, as the middle and upper class worried about the destruction of the society they lived in.</p>	<p>Nevertheless, the middle and upper class perceived a different crisis. They were also worried the fire destroyed social structures, including a shared cultural ideal and local institutions which defined their role in the community. The concerns were partly grounded in a collective morality.</p>	<p>"Others" – who? State this at the beginning. The semi-colon makes the sentence choppy and hinders flow. More sentences clarify each point and allow specific terms to be applied.</p>
<p>Class was interwoven in the fire itself and in reaction and reconstruction after it, and for many this was a turning point in class relations, for better or for worse.</p>	<p>Class relations became interwoven with the fire and its consequences. For better or worse, this moment proved to be a turning point which instigated a notable change in entrenched class dynamics.</p>	<p>Reordering and splitting the sentence aids flow. I prioritise the argument.</p>

<p>In examining class during, and after, the Chicago Fire, a number of primary sources will be assessed, particularly fictional and non-fictional literary and written accounts of the fire.</p>	<p>These changes are visible in fictional and non-fiction contemporary accounts of the fire and its aftermath.</p>	<p>Simplify. Remove the prepositional phrase and get to the point. You should not need to state you are using sources – I would be troubled if you didn't.</p>
<p>These will demonstrate that the Chicago Fire was perceived as a major turning point in class relations, and indeed the structure of society, although whether this was positive or negative depends on the source and the views of the author.</p>	<p>These will demonstrate that the Chicago Fire was perceived as a major turning point in class relations, and indeed the structure of society.</p>	<p>The first part of the sentence is good. The secondary part is obvious and is but an attempt to show 'nuance' (see crib sheet) but is applicable to every written source ever composed.</p>
<p>The immediate responses to the fire, visions of the reconstructed Chicago, panic over the morals of the city, the problems posed by a 'breaking down' of class barriers and the desire for unity after the fire will all be examined and assessed, again demonstrating the perceptions of the fire in class relations in Chicago.</p>	<p>Attention will be given to immediate responses to the fire, visions of the reconstructed Chicago, panic over the morals of the city, the problems posed by a 'breaking down' of class barriers, and the desire for unity.</p>	<p>Verb at the beginning. Oxford comma helps readability of the list. The last clause is too repetitive.</p>

The main flaw of the original version is its legibility. It overuses clauses in an attempt to add detail. Complex sentences do not necessarily aid comprehension. Simplifying and breaking down the points into individual sentences makes the argument easier to read. Concept nouns and adjectives, again aiming for 'nuance', are too vague. Specific vocabulary (not necessarily more sophisticated) fixes this. Passive sentences make the phrasing weaker. Active voice, placing the subject and main verb at the beginning of the sentence, clarifies what the writer wishes to prioritise. Not to flog a dead horse, but the improvements are clear, concise, and specific. There is an attempt to write with flair, but this is restraining readability, not adding to it.

SECTION 3: Writing rules

PEEL revisited

Essays often suffer from a poor application of PEEL. The acronym stands for Point, Evidence, Explain, Link. It offers a simple one-size-fits-all approach and so most schools teach a version of it to their students. If your school didn't use it, they likely substituted an alternative which claimed more depth. PEEL itself is a simplified version of the Toulmin Model (see [Constructing an argument](#)). In truth PEEL has its place as long as you don't let it become a cookie-cutter template that results in shallow analysis.

Point State the point early. This clarifies the purpose of the writing.

“Current students believe their mental health requires greater attention by researchers than previous generations.”

Short points deliver a succinct point. Above all, they need to be clear. If you told your point to another person, you should be confident they could paraphrase your opinion in their own words.

Evidence Evidence can be paraphrased, summarised, or quoted. Evidence constitutes anything that justifies the point being made. In school, we often use sections of passages as the Evidence part of PEEL.

“More than 60% of teenagers report they are aware of negative global issues like global warming.”

When should we paraphrase the information or quote it? The general rule applies: *only quote the language that you will be analysing*. By using a quote, you are implying that the language must be preserved as any change would alter the meaning and something would be lost. For this reason, short essays benefit from short quotes, say fewer than 5-or-so words. Remember, quoting means you intend to explain something about the language. Doing this for 5 words reduces the likelihood of distraction compared to 20. Always cite your sources appropriately. The University library (or Google) will provide a guide on the referencing style needed for your course.

Most of your quotes should be primary evidence. There is little need to preserve the exact words of a scholar's argument – paraphrase it instead. Paraphrasing has the additional benefit of demonstrating that you understood the ideas well enough to state them in your own words.

Explain State why you are writing an essay. Explain why the evidence you used supports the point and overall argument.

“Social media, political news, and podcasts are making it increasingly difficult to ignore societal problems. It should be no surprise that students acknowledge the constant bombardment of negativity affecting them and their loved ones. Awareness of mental health must gain recognition and support, especially for those who struggle to make sense of it all.”

Note that explanations are longer than the Point or Evidence. The explanation expresses not only what you think (Point) but *why* you think it.

Another example can clarify this point. Imagine you must name your favourite sports person. You respond with a name (e.g. Serena Williams) – not many words. Why did their name to mind? The following discussion (Explanation) could last for a long time. If you find your Point and Evidence longer than your Explanation, this indicates that you have not expanded on your ideas enough.

The explanation also provides opportunities to bring in scholarship on the topic and reflect on their opinions. What did others think? Do they align or disagree with your views of the evidence?

Link Link the idea with the next. This can be done with a single word (also, moreover, but, however, etc.) or with a sentence which explains why the two things are connected. Linking becomes optional if the next point obviously follows from the current.

E.g. **However, it is not all doom and gloom.** There is less of a taboo about mental health than there was 20 years ago, never mind 50. (**Bold** is Link; Underline is the next Point... and so the cycle continues.)

Linking helps readability and flow. It stops your writing reading like a list. However, if you overuse linking words, your writing can still read like a list and make the work sounds choppy. Find the balance. Reading aloud can help with this.

Linking also offers opportunities to mention the question and core argument. Every argument must answer the question at hand and it is rarely detrimental to remind your reader of it.

Don't...

Argument and Structure

This section covers how to approach the essay question and structure your overall argument.

Don't...

- **Choose an essay question that you believe is more challenging and therefore will make you look smarter.** No one cares which question you choose, only the quality of the answer.
 - **Answer the question you wanted to answer, not the one supplied.**
 - **Rephrase the question in your answer, especially in the introduction.** We are aware which question you are answering as it should be written at the beginning of the essay.
 - **“This essay will argue...” Obviously... Cut it and the sentence will remain the same.**
 - **“In order to understanding Event/Concept X, we must first...” Get to the point.**
 - **Go on tangents because you believe that the question begets the answering of other questions first.**
 - **Write a ‘balanced argument’ which does not have a clear conclusion.** An essay rarely requires a balanced argument. How many arguments in life are balanced?
-

Research and Engaging with Scholarship

This advice focuses on how to find, use, and cite sources correctly.

Don't...

- **Focus on secondary sources more than primary sources.**
- **Cite and reference anything that is not peer-reviewed for your arguments,** including websites and documentaries. Your library or a Google search will state if a work is peer-reviewed.
- **Use quotations without introducing nor explaining them.**
- **Write an ode to a scholar in a paragraph.** You might love the work and want to share your enthusiasm for it, but we want to read your thoughts, not theirs.
- **Tear an academic’s work to pieces because you believe that is being “critical”.** If it was so bad, why mention it?

Academic Integrity

These points concern originality and honesty in your work.

Don't...

- **Plagiarise.** Overquoting, citing lectures and seminars, amounts to plagiarism.
 - **Borrow material from another essay which you have written.** If you have two questions to answer and you are using the same material, you are doing half the work.
 - **Use AI to generate anything for the essay.** This includes some services like Grammarly.
-

Historical Analysis and Mindset

This section relates to the specific challenges of thinking and writing about the past.

Don't...

- **Use modern terminology to refer to historical concepts...** The Vikings were not capitalists.
 - **Psychoanalyse or draw modern comparisons with the past.** Whether Napoleon had “little man syndrome” is not for you to decide.
 - **Moralise the past.** The past was to all intents and purpose a grim place. This is not news to anyone living in the 21st century and makes you appear judgemental.
 - **Use historical terms imprecisely.** Look up the words you are using if you are not sure.
 - **Use “contemporary” when you mean “modern”.**
-

Language and Tone

This advice covers word choice and maintaining a formal, academic voice.

Don't...

- **Write in a casual tone for a formal academic essay.** This includes using contractions (couldn't, would've, it's, etc.).
- **Write as if you are auditioning to be the next History Channel script writer.** “Rome, the greatest city of the ancient world...” Stop.
- **Use dictionary definitions.** The way you approach your argument will make it obvious how you are defining words and phrases. Never define anything unless critical for the essay, and it almost certainly isn't.
- **“It could be argued...”** Are you arguing it or not?

- **“Scholars/historians say that...”** Who?
- **Use vague nouns and pronouns.** “Everyone, someone, people, groups, sometime, etc.”.
- **Include two words that share meaning.** “It looks like a stunning, beautiful example...”.
- **Use synonyms for words because you are worried about repeating them.**
- **Use conceptual words that have no relevance,** e.g. “liminal”. Often, you achieve the desired effect by using an active verb in the sentence.
- **State it is “difficult” to understand a concept.** If it were simple, you would not have been tasked to understand it.
- The following quote illustrates your objective:

“I found it consoling after all these years to learn that writers are up against nothing less than the fundamental anarchy of the universe; entropy, prince of disorder, is sprinkling noise on everything we write. Ambiguity is noise. Redundancy is noise. Misuse of words is noise. Vagueness is noise. Jargon is noise. Pomposity is noise. Clutter is noise: all those unnecessary adjectives (“ongoing progress”), all those unnecessary adverbs (“successfully avoided”), all those unnecessary prepositions draped onto verbs (“order up”), all those unnecessary phrases (“in a very real sense”). Information is your sacred product, and noise is its pollutant. Guard the message with your life.”

William Zinsser

Grammar and Punctuation

These points focus on the technical mechanics of writing sentences correctly.

Don't...

- **Begin a sentence with a connective phrase or conjunction after the previous completed its point.**
- **Begin sentences with participles** (words ending in -ing).
- **Include a subordinate clause in a sentence without an accompanying main clause.**
- **End sentences with prepositions.**
- **Use the future tense for the present.** “The argument will...”.
- **Use incorrect homophones.** It's = it is. There, their, and they're.

- **Overuse punctuation such as colons, semi-colons, and em dashes.** Most 2,000-word essays will never need them and often you should have just started a new sentence.
-

Formatting and Presentation

This final section covers the visual layout of your essay.

Don't...

- **Change font format or size throughout the essay.** Use Times New Roman, doubled spaced, size 12 font.
- **Use Centre Text or Justify Text alignment.** Use Left Alignment for the body of your text.
- **Use images or figures without citing where you found them.**

Crib Sheet of generic problem words

Problem words	Alternative	Example
Really, very	Use a stronger verb.	“He ran very quickly along the really long field.” can be, “He sprinted across the vast field.”
That	Sometimes not needed.	“This is the most amazing blog post that I’ve ever read.” can be, “This is the most amazing blog post I’ve ever read.”
Just	Only keep for dialogue.	“It is just that easy.” can be, “It is that easy.”
Honestly	Remove.	“Honestly, I’d rather watch a Netflix show than go to the movies” is exactly like saying “I’d rather watch a Netflix show than go to the movies.”
Went	Walked, drove, jogged, etc.	“She went to the shops” you could write “she drove to the shops.”
Then	Often ‘and’ is better.	“I shut the car door, then tripped.” can be, “I shut the car door and tripped.”
All/All of	Remove.	“All of the apples were in the basket”, you can just write “the apples were in the basket”.
Dialogue words (yelled, screamed, shouted, etc.)	Use ‘said’ and describe how the dialogue happens.	“Be quiet,” I yelled - can be, “Be quiet,” I said with a thunderous tone.
Amazing	Fascinating, incredible, marvellous, stunning, surprising, unbelievable.	“The food was amazing,” can be, “The food was delicious.”
Always, never	Remove.	“The meeting always happens on Tuesdays,” can be, “The meeting happens on Tuesdays.”

Literally, actually	Remove.	“That literally scared me to death!” could be, “That scared me to death!”
Adverbs, words ending in -ly	Remove. Use a better verb.	“She ran quickly,” could be, “She sprinted.”
‘Important’ and ‘interesting’	If it was not important or interesting, you would not be saying it.	“This is an interesting point,” could be, “This point explores...”
Like	Choose between ‘similar to’ for comparing, or ‘appreciate, enjoy, love, value’ for enjoying.	“A hamster is like a gerbil,” could be, “A hamster is similar to a gerbil”. Or: “I like my friends” could be, “I value my friends.”
This shows/ portrays/ conveys/ reveals/ etc.	Remove. Make the point directly.	“This shows the author wants the reader to emphasise with the protagonist,” can be “the reader is invited to emphasise with the protagonist.”
Connectives, such as ‘thus, however, therefore.’	Use them to change the meaning of the paragraph, not to list sentences.	“Thus, the poem inspires awe,” can be, “Here the poem inspires awe.”
Vague words: it, some, someone, thing.	Use the specific word or name the person.	“The text says some people do things,” can be, “The extract states teenagers keep busy by socialising.”
‘I’ for essays.	Only use if something is a personal belief.	“I think the statement means,” can be “The statement means,”
Modals: Could, might, should, may.	Remove them. They make your writing weak.	“It could be said,” can be “It is the case that.”
Complicated language (overusing the thesaurus)	Simplify your language so it can be easily understood.	“Furthermore, it is preposterously incomprehensible that,” can be “Also, it is difficult to imagine.”
Semi-colons	Very rarely needed. If you can remove it, do so.	“The horse raced; she was majestic,” can be “The horse raced. She was majestic.”

Rhetorical questions	Only use these for effect, not to construct an argument.	“Can you believe it? The holiday was free,” can be “Although hard to believe, the holiday was free.”
Word in capital letters	Use an exclamation mark.	“HELLO,” becomes, “Hello!”
Split infinitives, “to easily go”	Put the adverb after the verb.	“To easily go”, should be “to go easily”
“My own” (repeated meaning)	Lose one of the words.	“I use my own pen,” should be “I use my pen.”
Nuance	Everything is at some level. Remove.	“This topic is very nuanced,” should be deleted.
Biased	Remove.	“The source is biased,” should be something akin to “Cato’s conservatism embitters him against the reformers.”
“The scholar/historian”	Who?	“Scholars have concluded,” should be “Meehan claims...”
In order to	To.	“She read in order to learn,” should be “She read to learn.”
Will be able to	Can.	“They will be able to choose the best option,” should be “They can choose the best option.”
Wigglers: be able to, start, attempt, try, begin	Remove.	“We can attempt to understand...” should “We understand...”

Tense and Person

Always ensure that the tense and person remain consistent throughout your writing. If you begin writing about an event using the third person (it, he, she) in the past tense, then ensure the writing remains that way.

Bad: “It was a cold winter day when they began writing...”

Better: “It was a cold winter day when the Beatles wrote...”

Some are a fan of the historical present when writing history, e.g. “Churchill writes in his diary...” This can be correct and allows the past and its artefacts to exist in a present context. My general advise is, if in doubt, use the past tense for past events no matter what. This saves any confusion.

Which vs that

Use “which” plus commas to set off non-restrictive (unnecessary) clauses; use “that” to introduce a restrictive (necessary) clause. In other words, use “which” if you can remove that part of the sentence and it will still make sense. Sentences that require the information will use “that.”

All advice that is included in this guide was written by Jordan Poole.

The advice, which was written by Jordan Poole, has proven useful.

In British English, it is also permissible to use “which” restrictively as long as no commas are involved.

This guide which includes useless writing support was written by Jordan Poole.

Logical fallacies

Fallacies are the enemy of reason, logic, and therefore arguments. You must learn to recognise them, whether they are your own or someone else's. They are the best tool in one's arsenal for detecting bullshit.

A logical fallacy is an error in reasoning that makes an argument logically flawed or invalid, even if the argument sounds persuasive. They are leaps of logic where the premises (the evidence and reasons) fail to sufficiently support the conclusion. Importantly, they are mistakes in *how* you construct your argument, as opposed to simply making a factual mistake. They result in unreliable, distracting, and often manipulative arguments.

1. Fallacies of Relevance

The premises are logically irrelevant to the conclusion; they distract from the issue.

Fallacy	Description	Example
Ad Hominem	Attacking the person instead of the argument.	Only an idiot would think that is true.
Red Herring	Introducing an irrelevant topic to divert attention away from the original subject.	When a politician is asked about a recent scandal, they change the subject to talk about the great success of a new public program.
Straw Man	Distorting an opponent's nuanced historical argument to make it easier to attack.	<i>Historian A</i> : "The French Revolution was driven by Enlightenment ideals and social inequality." <i>Straw Man</i> : "So, Historian A thinks the Revolution was simply a plot by a few wealthy intellectuals to overthrow the King for personal power."
Appeal to Emotion	Manipulating an emotional response (pity, outrage, sympathy) instead of presenting historical evidence.	"You can't blame Tsar Nicholas II for the political instability leading up to the Russian Revolution; think of his innocent children who were later executed."
Appeal to Authority	Asserting a historical claim is true <i>only</i> because a perceived authority or famous person (who isn't a historian) says it is.	"The Pope said in 1940 that the war was a moral struggle against godlessness, so that must be the true historical cause of World War II."

Appeal to Popularity (<i>Ad Populum/ Bandwagon</i>)	Claiming a historical interpretation is correct because it has been widely or popularly believed for a long time.	“Everyone knows that the Fall of the Western Roman Empire was caused by barbarians; it's the simplest explanation, and people have believed it for centuries.”
Genetic Fallacy	Discrediting a historical fact or interpretation solely because of the source's origin or the context in which it emerged.	“We should dismiss that account of the Punic Wars because the only surviving records were written by Roman historians, who were naturally biased against Carthage.”
Tu Quoque (<i>You Also</i>)	Deflecting criticism of a historical figure's actions by pointing out that an accuser (or another figure) did something similar.	“You can't criticize Stalin for his purges; even Churchill authorized the bombing of German civilian cities, so all wartime leaders are equally ruthless.”

2. Fallacies of Insufficiency

The evidence provided is too weak or limited to support the conclusion.

Fallacy	Description	Example
Hasty Generalization	Drawing a sweeping conclusion about a whole historical period or group based on a minimal, non-representative sample.	“I read three letters written by peasants in medieval France who supported their local lord. Therefore, the entire peasant class felt loyal and content with the feudal system.”
False Cause (<i>Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc</i>)	Assuming that because one historical event followed another, the first event must have caused the second.	“After the new Gregorian calendar was adopted in the 16th century, the witch trials increased. The calendar reform must have caused the hysteria.”
Argument from Ignorance	A proposition is claimed to be true or false simply because there is no evidence to the contrary.	“Language did not exist 20,000 years ago since we have not found any examples of it.”

3. Fallacies of Presumption

The argument relies on unproven or questionable assumptions that beg the question.

Fallacy	Description	Example
Begging the Question	The conclusion being argued for is already assumed in the premise, creating a circular argument about history.	“The British Empire was a force for good in the world because every true Englishman knows we had a moral obligation to govern weaker nations.”
False Dilemma	Oversimplifying a historical situation into only two exclusive choices when other options existed.	The Meiji Restoration leaders were either modernizing geniuses who saved Japan, or feudal tyrants who betrayed tradition.
Slippery Slope	Claiming that one historical event inevitably led to an extreme, disastrous outcome without proving the necessary causal chain.	“If the Treaty of Versailles hadn't been so harsh on Germany, World War II would never have happened, and the world would have enjoyed lasting peace from 1919 onward.”

4. Fallacies of Ambiguity

The argument relies on the misleading use of language due to unclear phrasing or shifting definitions, confusing the historical reasoning.

Fallacy	Description	Example
Equivocation	Using a key term with two or more different meanings within the same historical argument.	“The glory of the ancient Greek philosophers was their discovery of rational thought. Any true hero seeks glory. Therefore, seeking rational thought is the greatest heroic deed.” (“Glory” shifts from meaning “achievement” to “renown.”)
Amphiboly	Relying on a conclusion drawn from a grammatically confusing or awkward historical source or quote.	<i>Ambiguous Quote:</i> “The oracle proclaimed that the king who would lead his men to war would be defeated by the end of the year.” <i>Fallacious Conclusion:</i> “The oracle clearly meant the king would be defeated by his own army.”

Composition	Arguing that because the individual members of a historical group or army had a certain quality, the group as a whole had that quality.	Every single soldier in the 17th-century Spanish Tercios was renowned for his individual fighting prowess. Therefore, the Spanish army was unbeatable in every battle of the era." (Ignores strategy, logistics, and command failures.)
Division	Arguing that because a historical entity has a certain characteristic, every individual part of it must also share that characteristic.	"The Ming Dynasty was a period of isolationism. Therefore, every Chinese citizen during the Ming era must have been completely isolated and ignorant of the outside world."

SECTION 4: Style

Writing with “flair”

The self-appointed arbiters of quality and flair can rarely put their finger on what they deem to meet their standards. They spark frustration when pointing out what they dislike, only to fail in providing actionable feedback on how to improve. We must accept as an unfortunate truth that criticism comes easy, doing does not. Despite my livelihood, the maxim “those who can’t do, teach” hits too close to home on a regular basis. Still, you cannot dismiss a critic’s feedback because they cannot meet their own discerning standards and are incapable of achieving that which they hold against you. Indeed, their lack of talent in the craft they hold strong opinions about make it frustrating to hear every idiosyncrasy they pick up on, but they may indeed know what they are talking about. This, I appreciate, seems ironic in a writing guide. Think of a manager of a football team. Once upon a time, their talent kicking a ball might have been most impressive. Or not. It is not a requirement that a manager have once been a paragon of the sport. They need to know what excellence should look like, not embody the capability themselves. This becomes obvious when you consider other examples. The alternative is to imagine that the leaders of their field are beyond criticism and can only improve further through holding themselves to a self-defined ideal. Possible, I suppose, but hardly a sure way to raise quality and standards.

Those who criticise and fail to explain how to improve often parrot the lie that writing is subjective. By this, they imply a need for freedom or else lose a certain *je ne sais quoi*. I disagree. You know the difference between good and bad writing. Only their extremes harbour the domain of subjectivity. Thankfully, writing has not quite succumbed to the fate of other art forms whereby the extremes have merged so that the worst and best require an advanced decree to parse. Even then, doubt remains. I once saw graph paper on the wall of the Tate Modern. A speechless moment, for all the wrong reasons. Books like *50 Shades of Grey* may come to mind as proof to the contrary, but at least someone copyedited it to ensure an engaging read, or so I hear. Dwell in wonder that a five-year-old can identify a quality story with the same aptitude as they can distinguish merited art in a gallery. This ability weakens precipitously with age as our brains absorb ridiculous notions. You may or might not like the style or content of *50 Shades of Grey*, but a child can read it thanks to the rules of grammar and punctuation, as irresponsible and cruel as that would be. The absence of coherency defines bad writing. I’d like to say that children produce bad writing, but I have taught too many adults to permit such scapegoating. In a perfect world, schools would teach children all the rules and most would enter adulthood as competent writers. They do not, so here we are.

I hold to a simple scale of literary quality: bad, competent, good, beautiful. A stretching chasm exists between each standard. Few people ever attain the milestone of moving from bad to competent. Fewer of those proceed to good. Good writing makes you think or feel something that captures you in that moment and has the potential to stay with you. Beautiful writing changes you, however great or small. It has an elusive equality, empowered by its rarity. If you ever come across it, pause and wonder.

The line between good, great, and those classified as a ‘classic’, divides into *somewhat* subjective delineations. It pains me to concede the *somewhat* here. Let me clarify. Writing is a craft and must be learnt like any other. Think of the development of an apprentice carpenter. The lowly apprentice, after being accepted into their master’s tutelage is not allowed to touch any tools when they begin their journey. They maintain the shop. They receive no direct lessons, nor shadow the carpenter. It is accepted they would not know what they are looking for if they did. They hang around, make tea and coffee, and sweep floors. Passively, they will come to an understanding of what it means to maintain a good shop. They find their place and understand their role.

If you did not figure out that you are the apprentice in this analogy, I would keep that to yourself.

An apprentice writer understands they must stay busy in the shop but not shadow the writer. This means reading. Luckily, this should have been something that was maintained throughout your life, and you might have made good progress here without meaning to. I could wax lyrical about the benefits of reading but then I wouldn’t stop. Take this as a given. Read. Read a lot. Read good quality material. Read bad material. You will passively pick up on the difference by being in that world. If you do not know what constitutes writing which has been deemed good, you are in luck as the category of ‘classics’ exists in every respectable bookstore. Don’t ‘like’ them? Keep looking and find one you do like. If you cannot, you will forever hold yourself back on your journey to becoming good.

After some time in the shop the carpenter will deem that you are ready to pick up your first tool. The day you have been waiting for. You are handed a rubber mallet. We wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself. You are given some basic repetitive tasks, tasks that will not bring the shop to a screeching halt if you screw up. Bang away at some pegs for a while and prove yourself consistent. Bit by bit, you will earn more of the basic toolkit needed to accomplish the mundane, but necessary, tasks needed to progress a project. At some point the master will invite you to shadow them. Look and ask stupid questions. Take note, learn, and the frequency of times when stupid questions are posited will decrease. Stupid questions should never go away. They are the sign of curiosity and an admission of ignorance, something universal.

This stage includes learning grammar, punctuation, vocabulary and structure. Too many people reach higher education while at this stage and have been forcefully moved onto the advanced toolkit, which they are, of no fault of their own, using to make a mess of themselves and the craft. If you recognise yourself in this, cease and desist. You are running before you can walk. You are not ready for the advanced tools and trying to use them is hindering, not helping. It is only once you have mastered, and I do mean mastered, all the basic tools in the shop that you can call yourself competent. You cannot become good without mastering competence. A carpenter would feel embarrassed to brag about their abilities if they did not know how to use a chisel, plane, and saw.

Once the apprentice has mastered all the basics tools, they begin to complete projects of their own to prove their capability. Sound familiar? Competency proven, they can learn the advanced techniques. Perhaps in time they will come to excel at some of them. They

may, in time, surpass the master. This is every good teacher's hope. They may learn techniques the master never knew themselves. They may invent new techniques, craft their own set of tools, and produce work of exceptional quality.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I won't labour the analogy any more than I already have by explaining the last stage. You should assume that you are trying to learn how to use the basic tools and reach competency. Do not feel disheartened. Consider it a lofty goal that most will struggle to achieve in their lifetime. This guide advises on reaching competency and offers a direction to point yourself towards if you aim for good. Flair belongs in the realm of good writing. You can only consciously achieve it when you know why you are manipulating language in a controlled and specific manner – you have mastered the tools.

Flair is adapting your style to achieve a goal.

This could convey humour, wit, instruction, etc., or more specific. The range of goals are near limitless. This explains why flair eludes definition and why you can barely grasp at it until after you have mastered the foundations of competent writing.

This guide does not, in any way shape or form, pretend that essays achieve beauty. Beautiful writing somehow manages to capture a unicorn. I doubt one can aim to achieve it. Academic writing does not evoke beauty. Poets, musicians, novelists, and playwrights bare that cross. These people create art. Art is in the eye of the beholder, and what people mean when they say, "writing is subjective". Fine. Once you get to this stage, opinions become extreme, and you are likely either put into the 'awful' box or the 'you made me feel feelings' box. What an enticing prospect. Still, art inspires a reaction, I guess. An essay informs and persuades. Never confuse art and an essay. You should hold the compliment of clarity as the greatest praise an essay can receive. If anything, flair can entrap you. Sophists can mask bad ideas with beautiful words. Bad ideas can find refuges behind a mask of gripping prose and persuasive ideas. A good idea will stand on its own two feet without the need for bells and whistles. There is no shortage of essays, written by students who believe they are narrating a documentary. "The Romans once ruled the greatest empire the world has ever witnessed..." Save me. Do not expect it to receive any praise. Such statements have as much depth as the remnants of a puddle on a humid day. This sometimes leads to the reaction that 'my genius is not appreciated.' I have little say to anyone who takes this attitude other than to reconsider. Either everyone else is wrong or you are a lone genius amongst idiots. If you fancy yourself a spurned artist, the Van Gogh of modern literature, do remember he was mad and cut off his ear, and only became world-famous after living a miserable life. Continue to invite those comparisons at your own discretion. It is my hope that you, dear reader, are not so delusional and the very act of seeking a writing guide precludes you from that mindset – a naïve assumption, perhaps.

To be or not to be... E-Prime is the question

Before diving in, understand this section conveys more advanced methods of adapting to restrictions of language. I have applied E-Prime as a guiding rudder within this section.

E-prime (English-Prime) denotes a style that excludes all forms of the copula *to be* (the 'is of identity'), including tense present and past forms and contractions. Imagine speaking or writing without using *be, being, been, am, is, are, was, were, isn't, aren't, wasn't, weren't, I'm, we're, you're, he's, she's, it's, they're, there's, here's, where's, when's, why's, how's, who's, and what's*. Give it a go. You will find the task challenging. A basic example illustrates the transformation.

“He is intelligent.” This takes the structure: Subject – subject linking verb – subject compliment

Turn the subject compliment into a direct object.

“He acknowledges his intelligent.”

Staunch advocates of E-prime argue the imposed restrictions strengthen writing by forcing action to be viewed as operations. I parry with Hamlet. “To be or not to be, that is the question.” Shakespeare used three forms of “to be” in a single line. An E-Prime acolyte must tar and feather him as a poor writer. What nonsense. The mind of anyone who deems Hamlet in need of rewriting can only be explained by a recent lobotomy. Recent, of course, as if any time had passed enough for the brain to start to heal, they would once more become incapable of uttering such an egregiously mistaken statement. Although less prevalent in the humanities as the sciences, E-Prime has no shortage of snake-oil salesmen who advocate for its efficacy in curing all that ails your writing. This hyperbolic claim deserves attention before dismissing it out of hand.

Some argue the verb, in all its forms, weaken fluency and expression by withholding information. “The cat is called Pablo.” Who named it so? “I named the cat Pablo.” E-prime has a point here. The case strengthens for statements conveying technical detail. “The photon is a wave and a particle” How can one imagine it as both? “The photon behaves as a wave when constrained by certain instruments and a particle when constrained by other instruments.” Not the briefest description, but more accurate.

Laziness tends to creep into writers work and instead of stating explicit actions and intentions, they hide behind a bland and vague verb. E-Prime offers a solution. Verbs transform into precise forms. The subject and main verb of the sentence gain a solid presence on the page. Yet, it can prove too restrictive. I find myself, in lieu of *to be* grasping as synonyms to act as placeholders. It feels forced in excess. If followed, Shakespeare could not have composed the most famous soliloquy in English, to say nothing of other great works. E-Prime prompts writers to consider their word choices with care. It will teach you how sentences rely on basic verb forms to sneak past the quality radar and permit mediocrity to permeate clauses. Still, thanks to the degree to which *to be* embeds itself within our language, omitting it entirely feels like placing an arbitrary limitation on the full possibilities

of expression. I realise including a list of Don't and a Crib Sheet of problematic expressions invites accusations of hypocrisy. Consider this an exemption from the stricter rules found elsewhere in the guide. More than anything else, *to be* allows brevity. Sentences can *be* short.

I recommend applying E-Prime selectively and wherever you can without forcing your writing to struggle to remain fluent and comprehensible. Don't allow frameworks like E-Prime to sap the fun out of writing.

Bullshit and your work

Believe it or not, “bullshit” is a real academic term. It is believed to have been first coined to be “nonsense” by T.S. Eliot in 1910 (OED). Since, it has become widely recognised. In 2005, Harry Frankfurt’s essay “On Bullshit” was printed by Princeton University Press no less (an important publisher), to much fanfare. Frankfurt defined “bullshit” as a lack of care for the truth. A bullshitter is not necessarily lying but rather is indifferent to whether whatever they are saying is true or false. A statement can be factually correct but still be bullshit if the person uttering it has no concern for its truthfulness. For example, a politician might deliver a speech filled with accurate statistics, but if their sole intention is to manipulate public opinion and they haven't bothered to verify the data themselves, they are bullshitting. They are a phoney. Frankfurt argues that bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are. This may seem counterintuitive, as lying is often seen as a more serious moral transgression. However, Frankfurt's reasoning is that the liar, by engaging with the truth (even in a negative way), still operates within the framework of truth and falsehood. The bullshitter, by their complete disregard for this distinction, erodes the very foundation upon which communication and knowledge are built.

What does bullshit have to do with you and your writing? Surely you can sniff it out easily enough and avoid it. Not so fast, argue Eubanks and Schaeffer in “A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing.” They believe bullshit is part of a student’s academic journey, and categorise three subtypes of proto-bullshit:

1. **Cynical Bullshit:** One type is what William Perry called “bull,” where a student writes intelligently about a text they haven't read. This is a cynical attempt to subvert the system.
2. **Insincere Cooperation:** A more dangerous form is what Jasper Neel termed “anti-writing,” where a student follows all the rules but is completely disengaged, conveying the sentiment “I care nothing about the truth”.
3. **Productive Bullshit:** The authors suggest there is a “benign bullshit” that is part of the learning process. When students try to adopt the voice and conventions of a new academic community, they are essentially creating a persona they hope to grow into, much like the students of the ancient rhetorician Isocrates. This is a necessary step toward gaining “genre knowledge” and becoming a competent writer.

Increasingly, as the public, and even other academics, view some of the work being produced in universities as bullshit, it is important for the sake of the reputation of your education and the degrees you will attain to be resilient against the accusation. Academic writing, especially in certain field in the humanities, as a performance filled with obscure jargon, with little clear purpose or impact, designed only to further the professional reputation (ethos) of its author to game the system, attain esteemed positions and be recommended to promotions. In a world of ever more bullshit, you should view your job as a student of writing to learn how to recognise it, produce productive bullshit, then aim at leaving it behind in the pursuit of truth.

SECTION 5: Not essays

Writing a Commentary or Critical Appreciation

Commentaries or critical appreciations are effectively identical and treated as such here. Do not confused a commentary with an essay. An essay presents an argument, usually prompted by a question or statement. A commentary unsurprisingly comments on a text. It reacts to a work and highlights your thoughts and feelings towards a work. This guide will assume you have been tasked with writing a commentary without any prompts or questions. The example answers that follow comment on the passage below.

There were three elements controlling the state ...and everything was organised and administered so equally and so fittingly through these elements that no one – not even one of the Romans themselves – could say definitely whether the whole constitution was aristocratic, democratic or monarchical. This was reasonable, for if one looked at the powers of the consuls, the system seemed completely monarchical and regal; if one looked at those of the senate, however, it appeared to be aristocratic; and if one examined the powers of the masses, it seemed clearly to be democratic.

(Polybius 6.11)

There are three broad categories that you can discuss within a commentary: language, structure, and context. Language refers to the choice of vocabulary, its meaning and connotations. Structure means the placement of language and how it comes together to create a holistic piece. Context constitutes background information which provides direction for understanding. These aspects of a text should not be separated and discussed in isolation. Ideally, you should consider how a section of interest uses all three to accomplish its purpose.

A commentary should begin with a summary of the work, prioritising its key message. Write no more than two sentences. This not the place for analysis nor explanation. *What does the extract say?*

Polybius stated there were three systems of government that worked together to form the Roman constitution: aristocracy, democracy, and monarchy.

Providing a summary demonstrates that you understood the passage. Do not spend your commentary paraphrasing the content of the passage. Analysis must comprise the bulk of the discussion.

What interests you about the passage?

Stronger commentaries present select aspects of the passage of note and explore them in depth and do not try to summarise many points. Pay attention to the beginning and end of a passage, assuming the passage preserves the structure of the original work if it has been translated. Translated works, such as historical documents from other cultures, can

create problems. Connotations change upon the translation of a word. This means you cannot choose words and extract specific meanings from them without checking that the original language conveyed the same. Taken all together, translated work captures the overall gist of a passage, allowing appropriate analysis. If in doubt, try to find other translations for comparison.

Always use your knowledge about context to relate points back to the specific passage at hand. With the passage provided, students often fall for trap of mentioning that Polybius was Greek, not Roman, as if that contextualises the passage. It barely does so. Such a statement contextualises all of Polybius, not just the passage. It would not comment on the passage. Ask yourself when discussing context, *could I say this about any passage from this author?* “Yes” means your analysis ignores specific details and prioritises generalisations. Instead, if the context is a relevant discussion point for an aspect of the passage, relate it back to the work.

Polybius moulded Greek terms, known to his readers, for types of government onto the Roman constitution. These balance one another, and result was a system, a Republic, that could not be identified, even by the Romans themselves, as being any single classification. These analogies prioritised the comprehension of Polybius’ readers over preserving the Roman’s conceptualisation of their government. Instead of transliterating and explaining the *cursus honorum*, Polybius saw it as a combination of systems that had been famously analysed within famous works, such as Plato’s *Republic*.

For guidance on how to approach a source, read the [Close Reading of Literary Sources](#) section.

A commentary does not need an elaborate or lengthy conclusion. Comment on its contribution to a particular topic or how it influences modern discourse.

Writing a Literature Review

A literature review aims to provide an overview of the pertinent ideas in the field and is not just a summary of everything you've read on a topic.

Literature reviews are usually chronological, beginning with the earliest views written on the topic and ending with the modern day. Weave the sources together to tell a story about the scholarly conversation. The review can comprise of sections, mirroring the topics of your essay. This approach can often result in a list of publications that are loosely linked together by summaries of the methods and findings. A literature review must not be descriptive. Instead, aim to be critical by evaluating strengths, weaknesses, and patterns across the works.

You must only utilise appropriate peer-reviewed sources, such as journals, chapters, and books. Look for gold, not brass. Mention only good quality works of substance. Do not analyse poor work, no matter how limited the size of the field, only to note everything wrong with it. If there was nothing to gain from a work, unless it is often misrepresented, then it should be ignored.

Note the works foundational to the field, indicated by the consistency of their appearance in other scholars' work.

There are two primary focuses for a literature review, methodology and argument. Often a work attempts to innovate in one of these areas, sometimes both.

If you include a literature review at the start of an essay, not as its own stand-alone exercise, it must demonstrate that you understand the current state of the field. It must prove you conducted quality research, deemed appropriate, and possibly add to the body of knowledge. The last being the aim of research students. In general, essays do not require a literature review. If in doubt, ask your course lead or supervisor.

Despite how one can choose to receive criticism, an objective approach can ease the sting. Students rarely know the scholars they criticise and therefore lack the personal prejudice to either lambast or praise them. Review the work itself, not the author. Do not conflate appropriate criticism with tearing a work to shreds. Few peer-reviewed works deserve a dire review. Academics work within limited timeframes and restricted budgets. All criticism within a literature review should promote purposeful intent and not note common limitations, such as a sample size that is already statistically significant. The absence of a notable piece of evidence deserves criticism, even if recently discovered. Do not blame a scholar for this, but it is still a limitation of the work as it currently stands and requires attention.

Stylistic considerations, such as phrasing or formatting should be ignored as they do not speak to the methodology nor argument. Although there are exceptions, most peer-reviewed pieces are not so awfully composed as to make them illegible. If that is the case, it is unlikely there is something so redeemable as to make it worth including in your review.

SECTION 6: Some tips on citations

Citations, Footnotes and Endnotes

Depending on the style guide for your department, you must use either in line citations, footnotes, or endnotes. Enough style guides already exist so look to your department for those.

I will say a few notes here to ensure you apply correct phrasing and the information you include remains relevant.

First and foremost, citations must remain consistent throughout a piece. Do not fix and match, placing in line Harvard citations in a footnote. If permitted to choose, I advise Harvard in line citations as they require less space, and readers can check them at a glance. Endnotes are common for book publications. Unless told otherwise, never use them for an essay.

What should I include in a footnote other than the citation?

An essay's argument belongs in the main body of the work, not in the footnote. Additional, supplementary notes can find their home here. They might not support the argument directly but were deemed worthy of including for the sake of completeness. The best candidates for footnotes include similar studies that do not have findings directly relevant to your own but offer possibilities for comparison. Uncertainty regarding details which do not bear any notable weight on the outcome of the argument, such as disagreements of dating, likewise apply. A footnote also affords writers the opportunity to move details that break up the flow of a work to one side, aiding comprehension.

Translations or the original language of a text can be placed in a footnote.

I advise first year undergraduates to avoid expressing ideas in footnotes and focus on argument constructions. From second year, where appropriate, include some as you see fit.

Glossary of footnote abbreviations

Found in footnotes

e.g.	“For example.”
cf.	“We may compare.”
i.e.	“That is to say.”
f.	“The following page.”
ff.	“The following pages.”
§	Denotes a section.
pp.	Page numbers.
ibid.	“In the same place.”
idem. /eadem.	Nearly obsolete. Used for repeated names.
loc. cit.	Refers back to both a work and a specific page number that were already cited somewhere in the text.
op. cit.	Refers to a previous citation, but a different page number.
et al.	Too many authors to list.
sic.	A quote contains a spelling or grammar error which is preserved and not a mistake.
NB	Note well/pay attention.