

Guidelines for Essay Writing

Introduction

Learning to research and write essays effectively is one of the key skills you will acquire at university. The following guidelines are presented for your consideration and should be carefully evaluated during your first year.

- Getting Critical
- Criteria for a Good Essay
- The Structure of an Essay
- Using References

Getting Critical

Before ever sitting down to research and write your essay, it is important to realise that at university level, it is not enough to repeat uncritically what you hear in lectures or read in books. You must learn to think for yourself and criticise others. You must learn how to build arguments using new concepts and theories. You must learn how to collect, use and evaluate evidence. You must learn how to communicate with clarity, accuracy and precision. These are all important skills, which you should endeavour to develop through your first year and the remainder of your degree.

When working through geographical problems, there are a range of standards which you should aim to reach to check the quality of your reasoning about a given problem or situation.

The following are the most significant questions you should ask yourself when you are asked to write an essay or a report or deliver a presentation.

CLARITY

Can I elaborate further on that point? Can I express that point in another way? Can I give an illustration? Can I give an example? Would a map or a table help in getting my point across?

Clarity is a key skill. If a statement is unclear, we cannot determine whether it is accurate or relevant. In fact, we cannot tell anything about it because we don't yet know what it is saying. For example, the question, "What can be done about the environment in Ireland?" is unclear. In order to address the question adequately, we would need to have a clearer understanding of what the person asking the question is considering the "problem" to be. A clearer question might be "What can policy makers do to ensure that effective strategies can be taken deal successfully with environmental management issues in Ireland?"

ACCURACY

Is what I am saying really true? Can I check it? How do I find out if that is true?

A statement can be clear but not accurate, as in "The population of Ireland is 300 million."

PRECISION

Could you give more details? Could you be more specific?

A statement can be both clear and accurate, but not precise, as in "The economy is growing." (From that statement we don't know how successful the economy is - has it grown by 5% or 20%?)

RELEVANCE

How is this statement that I am making connected to the question? How does what I am saying bear on the issue?

A statement can be clear, accurate, and precise, but not relevant to the question at issue. For example, students often think that by writing down everything they know about a given subject they will gain marks. But this is rarely the case. Always make sure statements and arguments are relevant to the question asked.

DEPTH

Does my answer address the complexities in the question? How am I taking into account the problems in the question? Am I dealing with the most significant factors?

A statement can be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant, but superficial (that is, lack depth). For example, the statement "We must save the planet," which is often used to encourage sustainable uses of the planet's resources, is clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. Nevertheless, it lacks depth because it treats an extremely complex issue superficially. It fails to deal with the complexities of the issue.

BREADTH

Do I need to consider another point of view? Is there another way to look at this question? What would this look like from a conservative standpoint? What would this look like from the point of view of...?

A line of reasoning may be clear accurate, precise, relevant, and deep, but lack breadth (as in an argument from either the conservative or liberal standpoint which gets deeply into an issue, but only recognises the insights of one side of the question.)

LOGIC

Am I really making sense? Does that follow from what I said before? How does that follow? Did I imply something else before and am I now saying something else - how can both be true?

When we think, we bring a variety of thoughts together into some order. When the combination of thoughts are mutually supporting and make sense in combination, the thinking is "logical." When the combination is not mutually supporting, is contradictory in some sense, or does not "make sense," the combination is not logical. Avoid contradicting yourself.

Criteria for a Good Essay

Relevance

Make sure you have read the question carefully and that everything you write actually answers it.

Arrangement of Material

The true quality of your work will be seen in the way you marshal facts and ideas and control them in your writing. You should be in command of all you write and should present your

reader with a carefully structured argument that shows you have not just knowledge and understanding, but also possess the ability to analyse, make judgments, and explain your position to others.

Knowledge

Although factual knowledge by itself will not make a good essay, no satisfactory argument can be presented without reference to the facts in question - you must support your ideas, not simply assert them. Be accurate, precise and use evidence carefully.

English

Since your standard of English will affect the clarity of your thought and argument, the way in which you use language will also be considered when allotting a grade. Our concern is not with 'style' as 'beauty of language,' but with clear and accurate expression. This involves: correct sentence structure, accurate grammar, accurate and precise use of words, correct use of paragraphs and correct spelling and punctuation.

A student who fails to achieve a reasonable standard in these basic essentials can expect to receive a reduction in his/her overall grade, and an excessive number of errors will result in a failing grade.

The Structure of an Essay

No matter what its length, a good essay should have an INTRODUCTION, a BODY, and a CONCLUSION. The introduction and conclusion may only require a couple of sentences each, particularly in the case of a short essay, but these sentences must be included.

An Introduction Should Contain One of the Following:

1. An explanation or summary which shows that you understand the question
2. An explanation of the problem(s) raised by the question
3. An explanation of the direction the essay will take: i.e. how you intend to answer the question
4. A summary or hint, if you are writing an argumentative essay, of the answer

The Body of the Essay

1. Answers the question in a way that the reader cannot miss - obviously!
2. Contains a clear development of your points or arguments
3. Contains evidence ('the facts') which support your position or explains the development you are describing

The Conclusion Can Be Any One (or More) of the Following:

1. A clear restatement of the answer to the question
2. A summary of the points made in the essay
3. A reiteration of the strongest arguments
4. A solution to the problem(s) raised by the question
5. Some other areas/questions which need to be researched

Answering the Question

1. Make sure that you understand the material that you will be using: i.e. get your facts straight
2. Make a list of all the points that are relevant to the question
3. Differentiate between assertions and facts: a fact is a piece of information (which generally is not disputed by scholars); an assertion is your, or another person's, analysis of a fact or a group of facts
4. Decide which are the best points to use: i.e. the ones which support the argument you are making or the development you are explaining.

Always edit your essay: i.e. check the completed version at least twice or ask someone else to read it over. It makes a big difference to the quality of your essay, and the final grade.

How to cite references within the text: The Harvard System

We recommend the **Harvard System** for citation and referencing.

References in the text (in-text citations) give the author's surname, the date of publication and, if a quote or specific fact is referred to, the page number as well. For example:

The first plan for the city of Cork was made in 1926 (O Hare, 1975).

It is important to distinguish between process and pattern and to realise that "pattern development in many communities can be studied effectively by an experimental approach" (Wilbur and Travis, 1984, p.122).

Thrift (1988) argues that geography has increasingly been influenced by the cultural turn. There are now a range of cultural geography interests including landscape studies (Cosgrove, 1991; Daniels et al., 1992), studies of the social construction of race (Jackson and Penrose, 1993) and geographies of consumption (Thrift, 1992). It is estimated that some 80% of British universities teach in the New Cultural Geography (Smith, 1995, p. 22). In the North American context, it is more likely that the Cultural Geography taught is based on the approach inaugurated by the Berkeley School (Smith, 1992, pp. 105-6).

Where reference is made in the essay to more than one work by the same author that was published in the same year, the distinction is shown by using letters (both within the text and in the reference list), as follows:

Harlan (1975b) has gone so far as to write ...

The abbreviation 'et al.' may be used where there are more than three authors, as follows:

Strong et al. (1984) believe that....

When citing several references to support a particular point, list them chronologically and separate them with semi-colons:

The pattern of higher biodiversity in tropical compared with temperate regions has

been observed frequently (Abele, 1976; Patten and Dawkins, 1983; Smith et al., 1992; Janson et al., 1995).

How to cite references in the Reference List/Bibliography

The reference citations presented here are as used in the Harvard system. Note that there are some minor variations in use in some books and periodicals, but these are the most widely acceptable forms.

BOOKS

The following information should be provided in the order and format shown.

- Author/Editor Last name, Initials. - Authors are cited in the order used on the title page. All authors should be shown in the bibliographic/reference citation. In the text, the name of the first author and 'et al.' can be used where there are more than three authors.
- (Year) - date of publication
- *Title*. - initial letters of first word and of proper nouns should be in capitals
- Place of publication:
- Publisher.

Examples:

Andrews W., and Fien J. (1981) *The Urban Environment*. Sydney: Prentice Hall.

Williams M. (1974) *The Making of the South Australian Landscape*. Sydney: Academic Press.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

The format for referring to journals and periodicals is as follows:

- First Author Last name, Initials and Second Author Last name, Initials.
- (Year)
- 'Article title',
- *Journal Title*,
- Volume(Issue),
- pp. - page numbers.

Example:

Carter, R.W., Devoy, R.J. and Shaw, J. (1989) 'Late Holocene sea levels in Ireland', *Journal of Quaternary Science*, 4(1), pp.7-24.

ARTICLES OR CHAPTERS IN BOOKS

The following information should be provided in the order and format shown.

- Chapter Author(s) Last name, Initials
- (Year)
- 'Chapter title',
- in Editor(s) Last name, Initials (eds.)
- *Title*.

- Place of publication:
- Publisher,
- page range.

Examples:

Davies J.L. (1971) 'Tasmanian landforms and Quaternary climates', in Jennings, J.N. and Mabbutt, J.A. (ed.) *Landform Studies from Australia and New Guinea*. Canberra: A.N.U. Press, pp 20-50.

Jackson, P. (1992) 'The concept of "race"', in Jackson P. and Penrose, J. (eds.) *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation*. London: UCL Press. pp 12-20.

GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

The following information should be provided in the order and format shown.

- Government of Country.
- Title
- (Year)
- Place of Publication:
- Publisher.

Example:

Government of Ireland. Human Rights Commission Act. (2000)
Dublin: Stationery Office.

MAPS AND CHARTS

The following information should be provided in the order and format shown.

- Map maker/author,
- Year of publication.
- Title of map.
- *Map series*,
- Sheet number, scale,
- Place of publication:
- Publisher.

Example:

Ordnance Survey, 2006. Chester and North Wales. *Landranger series*,
Sheet 106, 1:50000, Southampton: Ordnance Survey.

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

The following information should be provided in the order and format shown.

- Author(s) Last name, Initials.
- (Year)
- 'Article title',
- Newspaper Title,
- date,
- page numbers.

Example:

O'Dea, W. (2006) 'Irish role in battle group concept will help to bolster UN', Irish Times, 10 January, p.16.

PAGE ON A WEBSITE

The following information should be provided in the order and format shown.

- Webpage Author(s) Last name, Initials.
- (Year)
- *Page title.*
- Available at: URL
- (Accessed Day Month Year).

Example:

Kelly, M. (2004) Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours: Ireland in Comparative European Perspective. Available at: <http://www.ucd.ie/environ/home.htm> (Accessed 8 February 2009).

WEBSITE

The following information should be provided in the order and format shown.

- Website author.
- (Year published/Last updated)
- Title of internet site.
- Available at: URL
- (Accessed Day Month Year).

ExampleS:

International tourism partnership (2004) International tourism partnership. Available at: <http://www.internationaltourismpartnership.org/> (Accessed 8 February 2009).

Met Eireann (2016) Climate of Ireland. Available at: <http://www.met.ie/climate/climate-of-ireland.asp> (Accessed 19 October 2016).

There will always be awkward references that do not seem to fit any of the above examples. If you are in doubt:

- Here is an excellent guide: <http://libguides.ucd.ie/academicintegrity/harvardstyle>
- Consult a published work which cites similar material and follow its examples.
- Check with a librarian.
- Check with members of the Geography and Environmental Studies Department.