

ESSAY-WRITING

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE

In a subject like Communications Studies, much of your university work will be assessed by essay – whether that’s an essay you prepare in your own time over a period of days or weeks, or one you concoct in an examination hall in the space of an hour. It therefore follows that if you learn how to prepare, organise and present essays, you will do much better in your degree overall. So this document might also be called:

HOW TO GET BETTER MARKS WITHOUT (NECESSARILY) DOING MORE WORK

We’ll assume that you’ve read widely about the particular subject of your essay, and have a good understanding of the broader area within which that topic is located. Broad and deep research is the essential basis of an essay. You will have lots of notes on the subject – see the *ICS Study Skills Guide to Note-Making* for tips on how to do this.

So now it’s time to write the essay. You sit down in front of the keyboard and start typing: you put the title, you try to group some similar bits of information or argument together, and then you put a conclusion on the end saying that there are many interesting points of view on this subject, right?

No, of course you don’t. You’ve got to start off with an essay plan. By designing this you’ll come up with the **structure**. A well thought-out structure is at the heart of every good essay.

What is a good structure?

It isn’t enough to make sure that you have an introduction at the start, a conclusion at the end, and the other stuff in between. So what do you need?

1. You **do** need a solid introduction. It will probably contain something about how you have interpreted the question, and it is often a good idea to state a thesis (an argument) which you are going to illustrate or explore in the body of the essay – although you may prefer to save the ‘findings’ of your exploration to the end, in which case you have to introduce the question carefully at the start.

2. And you need a tight, powerful conclusion *which is the logical consequence of everything that has gone before*. The good essay has developed a number of related strands which the conclusion ties together. It may also contain an extra, surprising thing which you saved to throw in at the end with a flourish.

3. So what happens in between? Well...

Six really awful ways to begin the essay ‘Why have baked beans become so popular in twentieth century Britain?’:

“The question of why baked beans have become so popular in twentieth century Britain is an interesting...”

“The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘baked beans’ as...”

“In this essay I will explore the question of why baked beans have become so popular in twentieth...”

“The Penguin English Dictionary defines ‘popular’ as...”

“The twentieth century has been going for quite a while now and...”

“The Collins English Dictionary defines ‘twentieth century’ as...”

☆ *Why are these awful? Because they are so predictable, uninspiring and limp. What should you do instead? Something else.*

You need to organise your material so that it flows from one area, sub-section or argument to the next in a logical order. Each part should build upon, or at least reasonably follow on from, the previous parts, and the whole thing should be pulling the reader, clearly and inescapably, to your triumphant conclusion.

The box on the right shows unimaginative kinds of essay structure, which are likely to get low marks. But what can you do instead?

One good approach is to look through your notes and identify a handful of **themes** within the discussion, and to structure your essay around consideration of those. You should order the analysis of each theme so that the essay builds up towards the conclusion.

Two dull kinds of essay structure:

The one that's not well enough organised:

1. Definition of the thing
2. Some stuff about the thing
3. Summary

The one that's too formulaic:

1. Introduction, saying that we will discuss the thing
2. Three arguments in favour of the thing
3. Three arguments against the thing
4. Summary of the above

DON'T KNOW HOW TO START?

If you've got some notes but you don't know how to start the next stage, get a nice big clean sheet of paper and write down phrases which summarise all of your thoughts about the subject, the different questions and ideas you've had in your mind, and the areas and problems that have been covered in your reading. Then look for similarities, and related concerns, and group them together in whatever way makes sense to you. After that, see if you can number these areas into an order – the order in which you will weave your way through the material. And voila! You've accidentally created an essay structure. Now just check it, tweak it a bit to make it more coherent, and you're ready to go.

More analysis = more marks

You will often need to *describe* something before you give an *analysis* of it. But the more analysis the better. Only include as much description as is needed for the analysis to make sense. The analysis is what you will get the marks for. Of course, a muddled, illogical and unsubstantiated analysis can still leave you with no marks. We'll be looking for a **clear, coherent and consistent analysis**, supported by **evidence**.

Don't just repeat what some books (or your lecture notes) say – we want *your* analysis. However, you should also show your awareness of other people's analyses!

Don't wander off the subject

Answer the question, and only the question. And keep checking that you are remaining on track throughout the essay. If there's something interesting that you want to include, but which is of dubious relevance to the main argument or theme of the essay, put it in a *footnote*.

Don't rush

You might remember that you 'did all right' last time you stayed up all night on pharmaceuticals, the day before the deadline, to research and write an essay. But this most likely means that you would have done much *better* if you had started reading and researching, and then writing, days or weeks before that. It is always obvious to your tutors when an essay is rushed.

Don't cheat

Plagiarism – using other people's words and ideas without acknowledging where you got them from – is regarded as an enormous sin, the penalties for which are actually *worse* than just getting zero for the essay. Just say no. Or more specifically, make sure that you have got perfect references: see pages 4–5.

Style as well as substance

Whilst it would seem 'nice' if the ideas of a genius would be appreciated even when written in horrible prose, you should not bank on this. The good student not only has good ideas to write about, but can write about them *well*. And it seems particularly wasteful to be losing marks just because you didn't spend a little bit of time learning a few style tips.

WAFFLE AND PADDING: NOT THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

Don't use superfluous words, phrases or sentences. If a sentence means the same thing with a word taken out, take it out. The same applies to whole phrases and sentences within the wider context of a paragraph. Using words and phrases which don't add anything to what you're saying will mean that your examiners will conclude that (a) you don't have enough to say to meet the required essay length, and that (b) you are trying to hide this by means of a slow, repetitive and boring writing style. Which is not clever.

| For example — <i>don't</i> write: | When you could write: |
|--|---|
| Greg Dyke transformed the BBC, changing it so that it was altogether different from what it had been like before. Some people feel that he is a megalomaniac who wants to take over the world, whilst at the same time other people feel that he is a fundamentally weak man who lacks strength. Nevertheless, we can certainly see that he clearly wields a considerable and substantial degree of direct power, influence and the ability to change things around within the organisation. | Greg Dyke transformed the BBC. Some people feel he is a megalomaniac; others contend that he is fundamentally weak. Nevertheless, he clearly has a considerable degree of direct power within the organisation. |

The left hand column contains 250 per cent more words than the right-hand column, but it contains zero per cent more information. Your examiners spot this kind of thing.

Furthermore, by not inflating her essay with space-filling nonsense, the pithy writer of the right-hand column has got room to show her understanding of the subject by expanding on all of these points: *what* did Dyke do? *Why* might he be seen as power-crazed, or weak? *How* has he demonstrated his personal power? In other words, she has got room for lots of *analysis*, which, as we established above, is good news.

CAN I SAY "I FEEL THIS ARGUMENT IS WRONG BECAUSE...?"

There are different preferences about whether you should say "I" in an essay or not. Sometimes it can look really good if you confidently say "Rather, I would argue that...". But saying "I feel this argument is wrong because..." can look a bit ponderous, and some tutors don't like it. A solution to this is to be even more assertive and say "However, this argument is weak, since...". It will still be clear to your examiners that you are making your own argument – and we definitely *do* like you to make your own argument. Whatever you are saying, make sure you back it up with *argument* and *evidence*.

SURELY THIS STUFF ABOUT 'STYLE' IS JUST SUPERFICIAL AND ISN'T VERY IMPORTANT?

Wrong. If your essay is badly-written, you will be losing marks. And, in the outside world, you would be losing readers (whether you are writing books and screenplays, or company reports and letters... or even job applications!). It is very important to write in a crisp, clear style, with good sentence construction and proper punctuation. Needless to say, spelling mistakes also fail to impress.

| TWO MORE EXAMPLES OF BAD WRITING | |
|---|---|
| Bad thing: | What's wrong with it?: |
| The film was criticised for it's drug-taking, violence, etc. | <p>☆ You only put an apostrophe in "it's" where you are using it as an abbreviation of "it is" (e.g. "it's a great film").</p> <p>☆ The writer should really have put "...criticised for its <u>depictions</u> of drug-taking..." – otherwise the reader might wrongly infer that the <i>production</i> of the film involved actual drug-taking and violence, for example.</p> <p>☆ The use of 'etc.' shows that the writer wanted to suggest that the film had been criticised for other things, but hadn't got a clue what these were. It's better to simply say: "The film was criticised for its depictions of drug-taking and violence".</p> |
| The theory was very popular, Foucault was said to be 'more popular than the Beatles'. | <p>☆ Two units of meaning – parts that could stand alone as sentences, such as "The theory was very popular" – cannot just be strung together with a comma in the middle. In this case, the comma could be replaced with a full stop, or a semi-colon (which represents a more emphatic pause than a comma, and suggests a connection between the material before and after it). Or add a connecting word: "The theory was very popular, and Foucault was said to be 'more popular than the Beatles'".</p> <p>☆ You want a reference for that quote, of course, too.</p> |

References

As you may know, there are a range of different ways of writing references. Some of them involve using footnotes, or having separate lists called 'References' and 'Bibliography', and generally give you a headache. We therefore recommend the 'Harvard' system of referencing, which is straightforward, and widely-used by publishers and academics.

THE HARVARD REFERENCE SYSTEM

It's quite simple. When you quote or paraphrase something, you cite the author's last name, the year of publication, and the page reference, in brackets. For example:

The popularity of baked beans soared when Elvis Presley was seen to eat six whole tins on *Entertainment Tonight* in 1959 (Heinz, 2000: 34).

At the end of the essay you then include a 'References' section which must include every item you've referred to in the essay. If there are two or more works by an author published in the same year, distinguish them as 2000a, 2000b, and so on. References are written in the following style:

| Type of reference: | Example of reference: |
|---------------------------|---|
| Book | Heinz, Edward (2000) <i>A History of Baked Beans</i> , London: Arnold. |
| Article in book | Johnson, Sarah (1998a) 'The Cornflake in History' in Norman Jennings (ed.) <i>Food for Thought</i> , Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. |
| Article in journal | Johnson, Sarah (1998b) 'Deconstructing the pre-millennial diet: Special K and postmodernism', <i>Cultural Studies</i> 11, 1: 32–44. Explanation: This means that an article by Sarah Johnson called 'Deconstructing the pre-millennial diet: Special K and postmodernism' was published in the journal <i>Cultural Studies</i> , volume 11, number 1, on pages 32 to 44. This issue of the journal was published in 1998. The piece is listed here as '(1998b)' since it's the second of two articles by Sarah Johnson, which we are referring to, published in 1998. |
| Article in newspaper | Ratner, Clifford (2000) 'Magazine sparks love feud', <i>The Independent</i> , 10 October 2000, <i>Thursday Review</i> section: 14. |
| Article from the internet | Wherever possible, identify the author, so you can have a reference like this: Holmes, Amy (2000), 'Greenpeace wins media war', at http://www.independent.co.uk/international/green25.htm (accessed: 25 November 2000). Always state the date you visited the site. If you can't state the author, have a reference like this: BBC Online (2000) 'Radical autumn shake-up', at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10276.htm (accessed: 8 December 2000). |

And that's it. The Harvard system is easy to use, relatively simple to produce, and the reader doesn't need to keep stopping to look up references in footnotes. Instead, as you write your essay you can use **footnotes** for extra bits of information which are surplus to requirements in the main body of the essay, such as extra details about the subject, or interesting quotes. However, remember that when writing footnotes, just as when you are writing the main body of the essay, you should draw out the *relevance* of the material you are using. Use them to enhance the impact of your argument.

The complete short tips collection...

The tips below (like all of this guide) are based on an informal survey of ICS teaching staff which established what they do and don't like in essays. Each point has been kept brief, so that you can write each tip on a piece of coloured card and turn them into a lovely mobile to hang above your bed.

| | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| Answer the question. | A clear, logical structure is essential. | Give your own analysis, not mere description. | We want to see a fresh, original approach. |
| Clear, consistent references are essential. | Base your essay on extensive relevant reading and research. | Indecisive 'It's a bit of both' essays are disappointing. | Argue your case, with your own point of view. |
| Use commas properly. Learn how to deploy semi-colons. | We want to see evidence of independent thought. | Try to avoid formulas, clichés, and the obvious approaches. | Have a clear, relevant introduction and conclusion. |
| It's important to know the difference between "It's" and its alter ego, "its". | Don't allude to anything you've read without giving a reference for it. | Avoid a purely 'journalistic' style, in academic essays. | Don't waffle. It's not cunning, it just suggests you've got little to say. |
| Illustrate your points with up-to-date examples. | Construct your sentences carefully. | Use the internet – but with care and discrimination. | Don't fill an essay with irrelevant historical detail. |
| Use electronic resources to find material (see library website). | Check your spelling and punctuation. Seriously. | Ensure your essay is the required length. | Bring the subject to <i>life!</i> |

This guide by David Gauntlett (1998, revised 2000, 2001).

Is there anything else about essays that you think the next edition of this document should cover? All feedback is very welcome – e-mail david@theory.org.uk.

Visit the Institute's extensive website at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ics/> where you can view all of the *Study Skills* material, as well as other useful documents, in the 'Undergraduate' section.