

GENERAL TIPS FOR ESSAY WRITING

- Take ownership of your topic—the titles given to you are simply the starting point.
- Make sure you have an **argument** that you can state in one sentence. This argument encapsulates what your essay is about, what its conclusions are. The sentence describing the **argument** need not appear in your final essay, but you should keep it in mind at all times while writing to make sure you stay focused.
- FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS. Do not try to provide too much background information or to accomplish too much in your essay. Make your topic narrow as you think you can sustain, given the 2,500-word limit.
- SUPPORT YOUR IDEAS. Support means explaining, expounding, developing *with specific reference to the texts you are discussing*. You will want to practice **close reading** in your essay. That is, you will want to refer to specific passages in the text and detail how they fit in with your **argument**.
- LINK TOGETHER THE TEXTS, if you have chosen a title involving comparison. There are various ways to compare and contrast the works you are discussing in an essay, but you should make sure that the essay is structured so that texts play off one another. Do not produce two or three mini-essays that do not make a coherent whole.
- COVERAGE. Your essay should engage with critical concepts, where appropriate.
- QUOTATIONS. A good rule of thumb about *quotations* is as follows: your discussion of a quotation should take up as much, if not more, space than the quotation itself. Quotations do not make your argument for you. They need to be contextualized, examined, analyzed.
- CONCLUSIONS. A good conclusion is not a simple summary of your essay. You may want to pose a question, suggest an offshoot of your argument, propose how your reading of the texts opens up further areas of study, etc.
- USING CRITICISM. Always keep in mind that you are the author of your essay. Criticism and theory should be tools that you use to say what you want to say about the works under discussion.
- The key to good writing is revision. You may want to ask a peer to read a draft of your work to help you with this. You may also want to plan ahead and make an appointment ASAP to see the Royal Literary Fund tutor. Unlike your seminar tutors, they can read and provide feedback on drafts. They can also provide feedback on your prior work.

- It often is helpful to make a plan or outline of your essay after you have produced a draft. Such a plan will help you discover whether the structure of your essay is coherent and sharp. It will assist you with any reorganization you need to do, as well as with any cutting you may want to undertake.
- Edit and proofread your work carefully. Grammar and punctuation are very important. The “way you say it” is essential to what you say. **Make sure you know how to use possessives and commas in particular, as these are common problem areas for students. Use semicolons sparingly—their function is only to link independent clauses or complex items in a series.**
- *Do not assume that a computer spellcheck program will find all your typos and misspellings.*
- Avoid “run-on” sentences (where several clauses that should be separate sentences are linked together with commas).
- Avoid the passive voice (e.g. “is given,” “was thought”), wherever possible. Passive voice obscures agency and produces lack of clarity.
- **Many people find it helpful to read their work aloud to themselves. This technique allows the writer to hear how the language flows, to determine how smooth the transitions are, etc. It can also help decide how to punctuate a sentence: a long pause means a full stop, a short one a comma.**
- You are expected to produce a proper bibliography and to format footnotes/endnotes correctly, if you use them. The Modern Language Association (MLA) format and the MHRA format are the department’s preferred forms, although I recommend using the MLA style.

Good information on the MLA format can be found on the OWL at Purdue site:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>.

You can also purchase the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, with immediate online access, at:
http://www.mlahandbook.org/fragment/public_index.jsessionid=E06D8491EEDCD3FA725F9837AFDEA5C9

You can download the MHRA style guide at:
<http://www.mhra.org.uk/Publications/Books/StyleGuide/download.shtml>

- Parenthetical citations should be used for referencing, with a works cited section at the end of the essay. Reserve endnotes/footnotes for editorial comments.