

## Dos and Don'ts in Essay Writing: Dr Michael Tsang

### **In terms of content...**

- **Do** develop a strong **thesis statement**, or argument. A thesis should be **specific, arguable** (that is, open to debate) and **non-obvious** to the reader. It is NOT an explanation of what you will do in the essay, often found in the introduction, such as “In this essay, I will examine ... Second, I will look at ...” I strongly urge you to read through this handout from the Writing Centre of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/thesis-statements/>, especially the step-by-step improvement of a sample thesis statement on *Huckleberry Finn* under the “Examples” section.
- **Don't** focus exclusively on issues (or “message,” or “theme”) or background at the expense of a work's specific form and language in your discussions. Make note of the patterns of literary devices in a work, and analyse the (social, cultural) implications of these devices as well as genre, structure etc.
- **Don't** be obvious. This applies both to statements of fact and to rudimentary points of interpretation. Stating the obvious gets you (and the reader) nowhere. Instead, question the obvious. What makes it so? Has something in the received wisdom (or the wisdom of tutors) been overlooked? Why? Push past the easy observation that anybody could make and give us, your readers, a new take.
- **Don't** spend too much of the paper writing in the *descriptive* or *narrative* modes (plot summaries, character identification, paraphrase, etc.). Remember, **don't** waste space telling us what the book says. Keep the focus *analytic* (asking: What are this text's main concerns? How does it fit together, or not? How do its parts relate to each other, to the whole, to other texts on the same topic?).
- When you are analysing your evidence, **do** take your observations to the “next level” of sophistication. For example, if you notice the recurrence of certain motifs or tendencies in a text, a first step would be to draw the reader's attention to their presence, and then you should push this observation further by considering what the implications of these recurrences are, etc.
- **Do** try to say things in your essays that we haven't covered in discussion. It's okay to restate a few points established in seminar or lecture, but try to use these points as a springboard for what *you* want to explore further. Go boldly where no classmate or tutor has gone before, etc.
- **Do** be sensitive to alternative interpretations. You should carefully consider all interpretations possible, and rebut specific interpretations with sound analysis.

### **In terms of presentation...**

#### ---ON STRUCTURE---

- **Don't** clutter up your opening paragraphs with platitudes, generalizations, pious observations, nervous small-talk, or empty statements that (again) get the reader nowhere: “Globalisation greatly affects our lives nowadays.” “Gender is an important issue in history.” “There are many different views on sex roles.” Sentences like these are unhelpful. Jump right in and start with the good stuff.
- **Don't** use concluding paragraphs to simply restate what you've already established. **Do** push your observations forward into new territory. The conclusion is a good time to branch out a little, speculate on the general significance of what you've done, consider the larger implications of the topic, etc.
- **Do** write your introduction last. Too often we find in essays that the conclusion is more suitable than the introduction itself. You should go through your paper once you have finished, summarising your main points along the way. Then, use the summary points for your introduction.

---ON MECHANICS OF WRITING---

- **Don't** overuse rhetorical questions as discursive devices. It wastes word count and is distracting. Just articulate your point directly.
- **Don't** make extreme arguments, or use any of these words: *clearly, ultimately, surely, simply, very, obviously, evidently, absolutely, completely, utterly, basically, true, good, bad, sadly* etc.
- **Don't** use contractions, e.g. I'm, we're, they're, didn't, hadn't, can't, wouldn't. Be formal.
- **Do** learn how to use the semicolon properly. A semicolon puts two **logically connected sentences** together in one sentence, either with or without a conjunction. Make sure the second part (i.e. the part after semicolon) is a complete, grammatical sentence, with a subject and a verb. **Don't** use the semicolon to introduce a quote.
- **Do** put book titles, journal titles, magazine titles, and long poem titles in *italics*. **Do** put essay/article titles and short poem titles in "quotation marks."  
    ✗ "Frankenstein"    ✗ *The Swan*                      ✓ *Frankenstein*    ✓ "The Swan"
- **Don't** get in the habit of using the passive voice. The passive voice stops the reader from telling who's doing what. For this reason, it's often used by politicians and bureaucrats to avoid responsibility for their (non-) actions: "Mistakes were made." When writing about something that's being done somewhere, specify who or what is doing it, up front.
- **Do** proofread and revise your essay before submitting it. Proofread at least three times.
- **Do** check out the Essay section in the undergraduate handbook, especially the key points on formatting:  
    double spacing, font size 12, wide margins, page number on every page,  
    student number in header/footer on each page,  
    NEVER INCLUDE YOUR NAME ANYWHERE ON THE ESSAY.  
You will enjoy a +/- 10% margin for your word count, and we will deduct marks outside this range.  
    Late essays are given a penalty of 5 marks per day late.  
Essays are submitted online via Tabula at 12:00:00 noon (12:00:01 will be counted as 1 day late).  
For extensions of assessed essays you must contact the Director of Undergraduate Studies.

---ON QUOTATION---

- **Don't** quote too much. Quote only that portion of the text you need to support the point you're making, instead of chunks of complete sentences. Extract maximum utility from each passage you do cite.
- **Do** contextualise, explain and analyse a quote. A golden rule is that you should write as much about the quote as the length of the quote itself, i.e. **if you quote three lines of text, you should write three lines of analysis on it.**
- If a quote starts with a capital letter, **do** correct it into a small letter using a square bracket:  
    ✗ The narrator states that "She had always wanted to be married" (Carter 3).  
    ✓ The narrator states that "[s]he had always wanted to be married" (Carter 3).
- When a quotation is more than four lines long, **do** make it into a block quote. Start the quote on a new line, indent one inch from the left margin, align on the left, without quotation marks (remember it should be double-spaced!). Example:  
    ✓ Furthermore, Walton writes that

I write a few lines [...] to say that I am safe, and well advanced on my voyage. This letter will reach England by a merchant-man now on its homeward voyage from Archangel; more fortunate than I, who *may not see my native land*, perhaps, for many years. (Shelley 13, my italics)

- **Do** use an ellipsis to indicate words omitted from the original, and **do** emphasise important words or phrases in the quote with italics (see the example above). In this case, you must indicate in the MLA citation bracket that the changes made are yours (see example above). Conversely, if the original text comes with a particular style, you should also indicate it clearly in the bracket:
  - ✓ This is shown for example by Mad-Eye Moody's signature mantra, "CONSTANT VIGILANCE" (127, capitalisation original).
- **Do** learn how to use a professional citation style; the most common ones in literature are MHRA and MLA. Be consistent with the style throughout your essay. If you are using the MLA, learn the difference between the commonly-used **7<sup>th</sup> edition** and the newly-released **8<sup>th</sup> edition**. For example, in the 8<sup>th</sup> edition you do not need to provide the place of publication for a book. The best online guide to the MLA, hands down, is the Writing Centre at Purdue University: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

