

7 Writing assignments

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Ten years ago, this chapter would have been called ‘Essay writing’ but, while essays remain the apprentice historian’s core task, students today encounter a variety of assignments: reviews of books, films, websites or reports on fieldwork, for example.

Students can be remarkably conservative. The essay is a familiar sort of assignment and many students are wary of novel tasks. Take comfort: the underlying principles are the same. See variety as a bonus rather than a stumbling block: when you leave ‘the groves of academe’, you may well be asked to write a proposal, a report, an evaluation or an executive summary. Unless you become a columnist for, say, *The Guardian* or *The Spectator*, you will not be asked to write an essay. Adaptability is a selling point – be glad that your skills are transferable.

Assignments, whatever their form, are not burdens imposed on student victims as a cruel rite of initiation into the historian’s craft. They enable you (as well as your tutors) to test your understanding, judgement and application. They provide your tutor with opportunities to make constructive comments that should enable you to improve your performance and, ultimately, one hopes, achieve a ‘good degree’. What’s more, the skills acquired through writing assignments are skills in demand in the world of work: diligence, judgement, controlled imagination and the

capacity to persuade, which of course requires good communication skills.

The process

An assignment is, or should be, the outcome of a complex, intellectually demanding and time-consuming process involving a number of linked elements:

- investigation
- evaluation
- decoding the task
- planning an academic argument
- drafting
- presentation and editing

and, finally,

- digesting feedback from the person who has marked it.

Except for the final stages, the order is not immutable. There is a strong case for investigating or, as students often tag it, doing the ‘research’ before focusing down on the specific task. Pressure of time or the need to get through an unpalatable but unavoidable task can put ‘decoding the task’ at the head of the agenda.

Pace yourself. Given that few students are keen examinees, it is puzzling that so many students claim that they can only write assignments when they are working against the clock. This way of working is unwise. Whatever they did during their own apprenticeship, academics, in their judicial capacity, act on the premise that students work steadily through the term or semester. Having left yourself too little time to complete all your assignments is not an acceptable excuse.

Investigation

Students almost always receive guidance in the shape of a list of required or recommended resources, including reading. Many assignments require students to examine controversial issues. A good recent general book will provide you with grounding in the subject and a survey of the views of rival schools of interpretation. Thus briefed, you can dig deeper and tackle the specialists' contributions.

When reading for an assignment, it is generally wise to begin by skimming. At this stage, full notes are rarely a sound investment, but do take time to mark your trail: record the numbers of the pages along with a word or phrase to remind you of what caught your attention.

Note ideas as well as facts. Make sure that you can trace your notes back to their sources. Be scrupulous in your use of quotation marks and references to distinguish the words you have copied from your commentary on them. Plagiarism – the theft of other people's research, ideas or expressions (see Chapter 1, p. 9) – is perhaps the most serious academic crime and, if detected, is likely to be punished severely. Both crime and detection are much easier in our electronic age than in the days of print. Lazy, hasty and inarticulate students find downloading faster than composing and typing. Plagiarised passages often shine out like gems in the dross of a student's prose. Google can track stolen phrases down in seconds. Some universities routinely employ electronic detection systems.

STORAGE AND RETRIEVAL

It is worth experimenting with formats and methods of storage to discover what suits you best: it might be paper in a ring-binder, record cards in a box or electronic files on a disc. The word 'retrieval' is key. However you store your notes, the raw material for your assignment, you must be able to find your way around them. And you must be able to make sense of your notes when you come back to them after a gap. Notes should be significantly

shorter than the text on which they are based. If, for some reason, you need the whole text, photocopy or download it.

Evaluation

If you engage effectively with your material, you will weigh up the evidence as you gather it. It is, however, important to stand back and take careful stock of the material you have accumulated – to find the gaps. But, if you tend to be the kind of investigator who finds it hard to stop digging, beware. At every stage in the process, it is important to remind yourself that you have to do the best you can in the time you have.

Decoding the task

Tutors invariably mark down work that is poorly focused. Translating the task into your own words is a good way of testing whether you have grasped what it entails. And it may help you to structure your assignment.

Titles generally include a command:

- assess
- criticise
- discuss
- evaluate
- review.

Each of these imperatives could be replaced by the instruction: use your judgement. The second, unwritten command is ‘convince me’.

Planning an academic argument

The planning stage is one that you skimp at your peril. If you make a detailed plan, you free up all your energies for the vital and demanding task of translating your plan into continuous prose.

Recognise that academic arguments rarely conclude with a clear-cut, incontrovertible verdict. Remind yourself that our evidence is patchy and often biased. Lack of certainty fuels debate; it is one of the things that make history fun.

It is important to set your argument in its historical context. To put this as simply as possible, locate your topic in time and space. This may mean commenting on the physical environment; beliefs and values; social, economic and political structures and institutions; or the technologies of the period in question. It also involves demonstrating an awareness of the historiography – the work of the academic historians on whose shoulders you stand.

Hindsight is a dubious asset: to assume outcomes were inevitable is a grave mistake; partisanship is to be avoided. Your personal sympathies with those whose opportunities, civil rights or material circumstances were adversely affected by race, rank or gender must not be allowed to colour your evaluation. A good student adopts a clinical objectivity; a partisan produces polemic – a rant. An educated scepticism is the hallmark of an historian. Yet well-founded speculation may not be out of place. It is an aspect of the hard-to-pinpoint flair that lifts work into the First Class.

There is no single winning formula for a successful academic argument. Originality, as I have said, is a mark of First Class work. But perhaps the most common – and safest – approach to an assignment on a controversial theme is to put both (or all) sides of the debate systematically and even-handedly and conclude that there is something to be said for each of the positions. Although the historiography – the debates that have taken place between the historians who have interpreted and reinterpreted the topic of your assignment – is likely to be a key component of most assignments, don't confine yourself to pitting one set of authorities against another. Provide evidence: give specific examples to illustrate your argument.

Even if you agree or disagree strongly with a proposition, and have the evidence to support your case, invest some words in demolishing the opposing point of view.

The way you lay out your plan, on paper or on screen, is a matter of personal preference. Many students feel most at home working towards a series of statements written one beneath the other, like the sub-headings that punctuate articles in a newspaper. Experts on study skills generally advocate an approach that produces a plan resembling a spider's web or the trunk, branches and twigs of a tree. This strategy makes it easier to group evidence and slot in additional points than a pen-and-paper list. Experiment to see what works best for you.

Drafting

Like anyone else who writes for a living – the academic, the advertising copywriter, the journalist – you should consider your target reader. In your case the reader to keep in mind is not your tutor but a novice as far as this topic is concerned, a novice who is interested, intelligent and sceptical. You should not take expert knowledge and understanding of the topic for granted or discount what you have learned from lectures and discussions in class.

It would, however, be foolish to ignore what you know about your tutor. Shrewd students soon become skilled judges of their tutors' characters. Is the tutor who is going to mark your assignment open to ideas, invariably eager to promote debate? Or do students get their heads bitten off if they challenge views set forth in lectures? Most tutors sit somewhere between these extremes.

Assignments should be written in formal, though not pompous, English. Getting on for 300 years ago, Daniel Defoe, better known as the author of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), offered excellent advice on writing in his *Complete English Tradesman* (1726). He urged his readers

to write a plain and easy style. If any man was to ask me which would be supposed to be a perfect style or language, I would answer that in which a man speaking to five hundred people, of all common and various capacities, idiots or lunatics excepted, should be understood by them all.

He warns against ‘ostentation’, ‘all exotic sayings, dark and ambiguous speakings, affected words . . . abridgements or words cut off’.

As you read, learn from the strengths and weaknesses of more practised writers. You will observe that some historians’ arguments are crystal clear, fluent and persuasive; other academics produce pretty impenetrable prose. Get into the habit of reading serious newspapers and magazines – especially the editorials and the work of columnists who offer ‘opinions’ in essay form; and the book reviews and obituaries with an eye to style and structure. Write. Assignments tend to be bunched towards the end of the term or semester; try to make writing a part of your regular routine: keep a journal; review the books and articles you read.

Although professional historians who appear on radio and television frequently use the historic present – ‘it is 1837, the young Victoria has just ascended her throne . . .’ assignments should be written in the past tense.

Presentation and editing

The computer makes it easy to produce a professional-looking text. Use 12 point and an unfussy font such as Arial or Times New Roman. Unless you are instructed to do otherwise, set wide margins and double-space your text. Indent and single-space long quotations. The computer’s spell-checker will help you to correct misspellings and eliminate ‘typos’, but keep an eye on it: the first word it selects may not be the one you want. It may not detect that you have typed ‘open’ when you intended to put ‘pen’ or ‘exerts’ when you meant ‘experts’ or even as gross an error as ‘grammar phone’. Defer to the older generation’s prejudices about punctuation: tutors find the omission and misuse of the apostrophe particularly vexing. Handing in work with mistakes of that kind is the academic equivalent of turning up for an interview with your flies undone or your skirt tucked into your knickers.

If you illustrate an assignment with maps, images or tables, put them where their impact will be greatest, not in an appendix but facing the text they complement. If you use material made by someone else, you must acknowledge this in the form required by your institution. You can use your own sketches, as long as they are clear and neat.

This is the moment at which you step out of the role of writer and into the shoes of your imaginary ideal reader – open-minded and responsive but alert and critical. It is hard to be thoroughly self-critical when you are struggling to meet a deadline. Indeed it could make a difficult situation worse. So try to manage your time so that you can return to your draft after a few days to review the structure of your argument, the robustness of the evidence you have used to support it and the clarity of your expression with a fresh eye. The computer has revolutionised our capacity to cut, insert and rejig text. Make use of it.

Does the evidence stand up to scrutiny? Do the links in the chain of argument bear the weight of your conclusion? Is it easy to follow? (Think how annoying poor signposting on an unfamiliar road or campus can be.) Make sure that you have flagged your key points and indicated what you plan to do next:

- *for instance* introduces evidence;
- *similarly* flags corroboration;
- *but, however* and *on the other hand* signal qualifications;
- *thus* and *in consequence* tell your reader that you are coming to the end of a section of your argument.

The finished product

- Introduction
- Conclusion
- Referencing

Introduction

Now is the time to write your introduction. Follow the example of the journalist rather than the writer of a whodunit. Use the introduction to summarise your argument and to explain why you have tackled the question in the way you have, for example why you have stressed some aspects at the expense of others.

Conclusion

The essential job of the conclusion is to remind your readers that you have done what was asked of you, weighed up the evidence and, very often, come up with a tentative, provisional answer. The conclusion offers the confident and well-informed student a chance to end with a flourish to open the question up and suggest that, given the opportunity, she could develop the argument to embrace a wider timescale or a bigger geographical area.

Referencing

Adhere scrupulously to the guidelines issued by your institution.

Feedback

Feedback comes in at least two varieties: marks and comments. Marks are banded into classes: First, Second – generally divided into Upper Second (2.1) and Lower Second (2.2), and Third. A First Class mark is 70 or above; a 2.1 between 60 and 69; a 2.2 between 50 and 59; a Third between 40 and 49. Work awarded fewer than 40 marks has failed to achieve Honours standard.

There is general agreement about the characteristics associated with degree classification in history. Anonymous submission, internal moderation and the scrutiny of External Examiners help to ensure that marking is fair.

First Class work

First Class work is characterised by some, or all, of the following qualities:

- wide and adventurous reading and, where appropriate, use of visual or material evidence;
- a sophisticated grasp of issues;
- a confident command of context;
- penetrating analysis;
- originality;
- cogent, cumulative argument, fully supported and documented;
- fluent writing style;
- comprehensive and accurate referencing.

Marks above 80 are awarded very sparingly indeed.

Upper Second Class work

Like a First, a 2.1 is a good degree. Upper Second Class work often has some First Class qualities but they are displayed only intermittently. It is marked by some or all of the following qualities:

- thorough familiarity with a wide range of source material;
- a sound grasp of context;
- a good focus on the question;
- good analysis;
- a well-developed argument;
- an array of detailed, relevant evidence;
- a good level of literacy;
- accurate referencing.

Lower Second Class work

Though not what an employer would call a 'good degree', a 2.2 is far from a bare pass. It is characterised by some, or all, of the following characteristics:

- dependence on a restricted range of materials;
- a limited understanding of context;
- adequate analysis;
- a good but incomplete response;
- an adequate argument;
- a patchy array of evidence;
- an adequate writing style;
- accurate referencing.

Third Class work

Third Class work is weak but still of Honours standard. It demonstrates some, or all, of the following characteristics:

- use of a limited range of materials;
- a poor understanding of context;
- limited analysis;
- a lack of focus on the task;
- a weak argument;
- inadequate evidence;
- poor use of English.

Failed work

Work fails for a variety of reasons. A mark of zero is normally awarded only to students who fail to submit an assignment or for plagiarism.

Assignments rarely display indicators of Class consistently. Even a failing assignment can display First Class quality – in, say, wide and adventurous reading. Remember that marks are an indication of current achievement. Most first-year students perform well below their true potential. Your tutor’s comments will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of your work. It is particularly galling to receive the comment: ‘This is one draft away from a 2.1’.

Your work on an assignment is not complete until you have digested your marker’s feedback. If you don’t understand it, arrange a meeting. Take constructive criticism on board and your marks should improve. Many universities employ study skills specialists. Seek them out.