



# Academic Writing Skills Guide

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(with accumulated  
contributions from  
colleagues)



## **1. Introduction**

Many people find essay writing extremely difficult; very few find it easy to do well. These notes are designed to give some useful tips and to help students understand what is expected in academic writing.

## **2. Background**

There is more to essay writing than putting words on paper. The form of writing that we now understand as acceptable for essays or academic papers has developed over several hundred years; there are certain conventions to follow, and these differ markedly from, say, journalism, business reports or fiction. The communication (and, of course, steady evolution) of these conventions is a major part of universities' role in the reproduction of culture. The educational process is not just about the transmission of information and knowledge, but also about initiating students in a particular way of thinking and communicating.

Learning how to write according to academic conventions is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, the skills are needed to participate in the educational process for essays and examinations questions. Secondly, in later life, many people are required both to produce and interpret written work that follows these conventions.

## **3. Some Misconceptions**

Unfortunately, many myths exist about the writing process, and some of these have serious consequences. Firstly, many people think that others find it easier than they do. In fact, nearly everybody finds academic writing extremely difficult; some find it highly stressful. Becker (1986) discusses how some people feel great shame and inadequacy when they sit down to write, wrongly thinking that they ought to be able to produce beautiful and cogent prose instantly. This may be true of great authors, and a very small number of highly gifted academics; for most of us, writing is not easy, and usually involves revisions and re-writes. Some people develop highly complex avoidance rituals (such as obsessively sharpening pencils or tidying their workspace) that they use to delay the start of the dreaded process.

A second misconception is that the purpose of an essay or article is just to recapitulate a series of facts and definitions. This is the approach used at many schools. Academic writing, on the other hand, seeks to make a point or take some position regarding an existing debate. Often this is to present some angle or 'spin' on a particular argument. Essays that mechanically reproduce information culled from other sources are dull to read and score low marks. Much better are essays which show evidence of the writer's own thoughts on the subject and which show that the source material has been read critically. This means that the best essays are the ones that tackle - explicitly or implicitly - the questions: "Why is this interesting?"; "What is the point here?"; "How do they know that?"

A third misconception is that good writing is necessarily flowery and uses many sophisticated allusions. This is rarely the case in the social sciences, where clarity and economy are virtues. Academic writing should be easy to read and unpretentious. Finally, sometimes writing essays is dismissed as being an artificial exercise of little relevance to the real world; on the contrary, developing a robust argument and accurately expressing ideas are valuable practical skills.

## **4. Writing and Thinking**

There is a great deal of practical advice around about the precise use of words and crafting of prose (some of this may be found in the books listed below). However, the starting point for any piece of academic writing is its intellectual content. It is possible (though not advisable) to write essays without reference to external sources; no amount of reading, however, can compensate for a lack of thought. The starting point of all good essays is an argument or a question.

The key problem is to decide what needs to be said, the overall shape of the argument and the way in which the component parts will link together. Many people find it helpful to start the process by producing a list of headings, or to construct schematic diagrams with boxes and arrows. One method which some find helpful is the idea of 'patterns' as developed by Buznan (1974) - see Figure One (Buznan claims this can reduce the time it takes to write an essay by two-thirds). Others write down key points on Post-It notes and rearrange ideas on a convenient wall, or make use of the automatic outlining facilities available in most modern word processors.

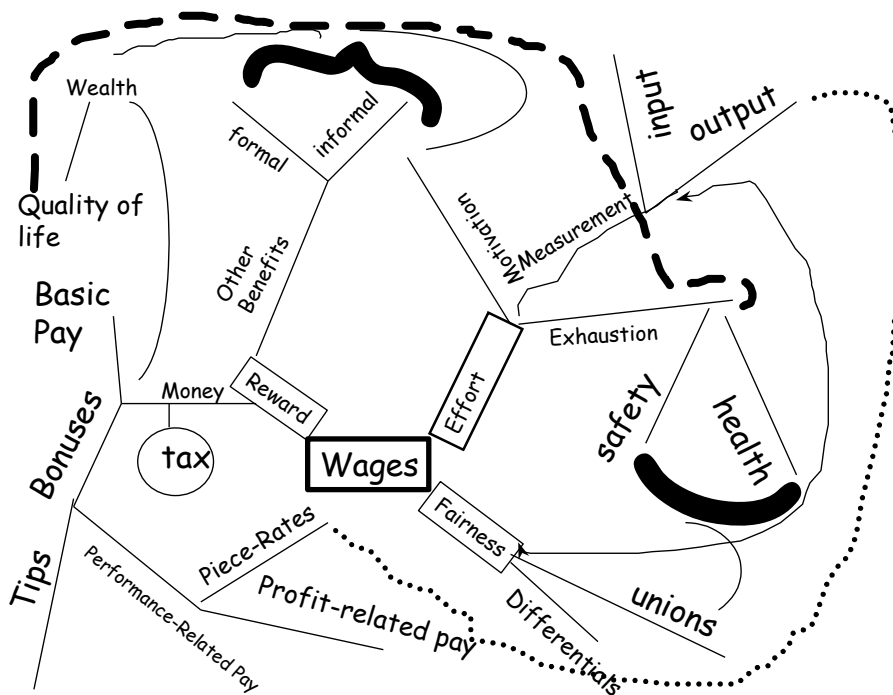


Figure 1: An Example 'Pattern' for an essay on the determination of wages

Some techniques focus on the hierarchies within the text, and sketch out the structure as in Figure Two. Whatever technique (if any) is used, there is no escaping the need for intellectual effort; the quality of an essay is highly dependent on the thought that is invested at this stage. Some key questions are:

- What is the purpose of the essay?
- What are the key facts?
- How do they connect together?
- What is the conclusion?
- What is the logical flow between the different parts of the argument?

Answering these questions can help the writer craft an argument that has a clear development, and an identifiable beginning, middle and end.

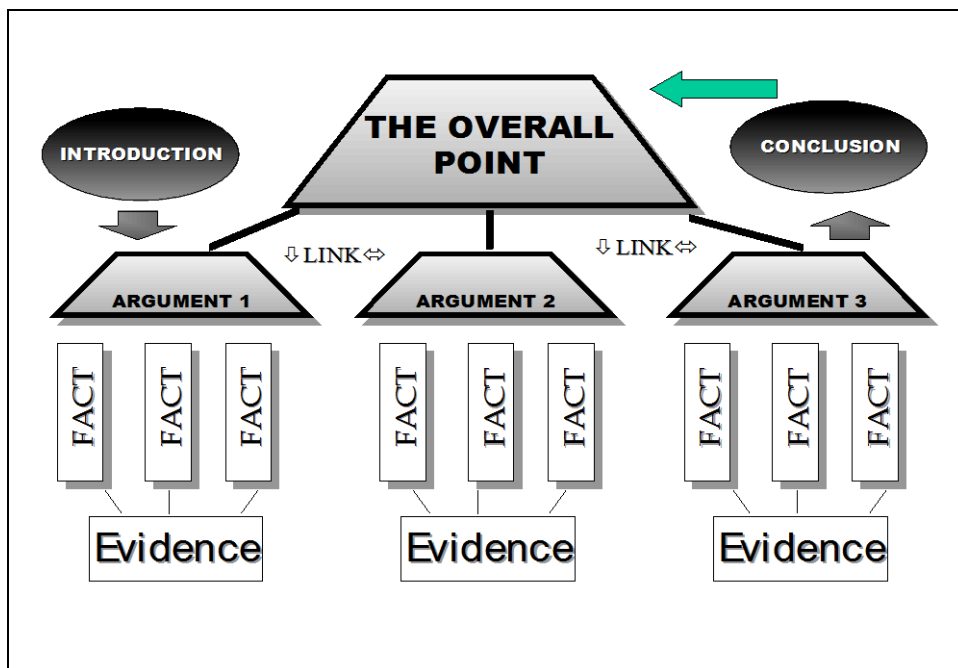


Figure 2: An approach to setting out the logical flow of an essay

### 5. Writing with a purpose

Developing a particular angle or a ‘spin’ generally requires a combination of imagination and mastery of the subject. The writer needs to understand the material sufficiently well so as to be able to persuade the reader that what he or she has to say is both convincing and interesting. The challenge is to present an argument which is true and non-obvious. Good essays demonstrate efforts by the writer on both of these fronts: the reader needs to know not just that something is or is not the case, but why it is interesting. Work which does this is easier to read, and - with practice - easier to write. Some examples of rhetorical structures that can be used to help cast an essay in this mould are:

- One might think that X would behave in the same way as Y, but in fact they are different.
- One might think that X and Y are fundamentally different, but in fact they are the same.
- Everyone has neglected factor Z, but it is actually very important.
- Everyone thinks Z is very important, but in fact it is irrelevant.
- X is assumed to have superseded Y, but X is really just Y with a new label.

Despite the importance of such frameworks, it is worth noting the danger of the ‘straw man’ argument; if you are going to argue that fact X disproves Y’s theory of Z, one should be able to show that Y really does think that about Z, and that you have done justice to Y’s position.

### 6. Answering the Question

Whether an essay is written to address a set question, or a question raised by the writer in the development of the rhetorical framework, it is always important to *answer the question*. This may seem too obvious to state, but most academics have long experience of reading essays (and, indeed, examination scripts) that fail to do what is requested. Failures seem to arise from two main problems: not reading the question with sufficient care, and simply getting carried away.

Care in reading the question cannot be over-emphasised. This should be done several times; it may be helpful to underline or highlight the key words and phrases. Special attention should be paid to the instructive words (e.g. Account for; Assess; Criticise; Give an account of; Examine; Compare and contrast; Discuss; Illustrate; Evaluate; Demonstrate; How far.../To what extent?; Trace). These all have distinctive meanings, and will demand different responses. A common error, for example, is to respond with two unconnected descriptions to a request for a comparison.

Simply forgetting to answer the problem (in all the excitement of the process of writing) is also common. The best safeguard against this is to ensure that essays end with a clear conclusion.

## **7. Logic and the Pattern of Argument**

An essential part of answering a question is to ensure that you are making a clear argument. This can only be done effectively if you think about the argument you are going to make before you start writing your essay. A very common fault is for students to insert information from the readings (all too frequently organised by author) and only to consider how this information might interrelate or assist in answering the question when it comes to time to conclude the essay. Avoid making this mistake. Think carefully about what argument you want to make and structure the material you have to assist you in doing so.

One of the key challenges in developing an argument is making convincing logical connections between the separate points. Three useful ways to clarify the logic of an argument are:

### *Thesis/Antithesis/Synthesis*

This works by contrasting one thing with its logical opposite, and using the tension (sometimes referred to in terms of the 'dialectic') between the two to generate some kind of third option. Examples of this kind of device would be an assessment of markets and hierarchies which led to the evaluation of hybrid forms of economic organisation, and an evaluation of collectivism and individualism which led to a discussion of democratic liberalism.

### *Proposition - proof*

Another style of argument is the presentation of a statement with the evidence that supports it (e.g. proposition: even in modern society, there is a gendered division of labour; proof: statistics which show that men do far less housework than women.) This straightforward pattern is undermined with surprising regularity by arguments that contain many propositions offered without support, and lots of evidence which fails to connect with any proposition.

### *Disproof by counter-example and Popperian falsificationism*

A useful technique is to use a single case that disproves a general theory. It is impossible to prove any positive theory to be universally true: to check the statement "All swans are white" one would have to check all swans. The statement can be instantly disproved, however, by finding a single black swan. This means that a good way of evaluating theories in social science is to look for cases where the theory might break down. Unfortunately, many theories in social science are couched in vague terms, and in the language of tendencies rather than causes, so it is very difficult to show they are wrong by counter-example.

On the other hand, the philosopher Karl Popper has eloquently argued that theories which are devised in such a way to make them fundamentally immune from being falsified by evidence should not be counted as being 'scientific'. In other words, an idea is only scientific if, among other things, it could potentially be shown to be wrong but has not been so far. Your essay might not only question the truth of a theory, but also its 'scientific' status.

### *The 'Transcendental' Question*

This is nothing to do with meditation; it refers to a type of reasoning which says, "what must be true for X to be the case?" The philosopher Roy Bhaskar maintains that this is one of the fundamental scientific questions, and that it is the basis of most reasoning in experimental sciences. An alternative formulation is: what is the simplest and most elegant explanation of the phenomenon in question? What is the most convincing story out of all the possible stories that could be told?

### *The Deconstructionist Question*

This approach starts with the cynical questions: If X is held to be true, who stands to gain? Whose agenda is being served here? Lots of elements of management and economic thinking sound pristinely abstract and delightfully logical, but in fact may support particular constituencies (for example, rhetoric about the importance of 'leadership' may be rather convenient for reinforcing the position of those already in powerful positions in an organisation). Many students find that this approach is one of the most intellectually exciting strategies in formulating their ideas, not least because one can draw directly on ideas from political philosophy and interesting writers like Michel Foucault. However, it requires great care to avoid this approach degenerating into simplistic 'conspiracy theories' – so it needs to be applied with care and attention to detail.

## **8. Using material**

Essay writing involves preparation: perhaps the most significant element is doing the necessary reading. There is generally no limit to the extent of the material that could be read. This means that you need to prioritise your work, develop skills for dealing with large volumes of material, and manage your time effectively.

### **8.1 Reading Skills**

The vast quantities of information that are available mean that it is important that you read as intelligently as possible. For most social science literature, this means 'skim reading' a document or book before reading line-by-line. It is advisable to pay particular attention to the introduction and conclusion to articles or chapters to understand the thrust of the argument that is being made. Having a feel for where the argument is going makes it easier to understand when you read it carefully. It can also help you identify those parts which merit detailed analysis and those which can be left.

### **8.2 Note Taking**

When reading, it is always useful to make notes (even if they are rather sketchy) and to keep a systematic record of the full reference (see below). This saves a great deal of time re-checking bibliographic details later. However, you need to think carefully about your approach to note-taking. Many students start with the habit of making extensive notes on everything they read. However, this is usually impracticable. Instead, you should focus on the principal arguments that the author is making, together with the main supporting evidence. You may well find it best to read the whole article or chapter first before making notes: this allows you to understand more fully the argument and to concentrate your notes on those. You should also be aware whether you are drawing direct quotes from the material, paraphrasing it, or summarising the argument in your own words.

### **8.3 Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's work as your own, and includes copying part or all of someone else's essay, or simply copying material from a published source.

**You should never simply copy material.**

Note that changing the occasional word or grammatical construction is not acceptable, and is no substitute for formulating your own thoughts. It is theft. Plagiarism not only breaks academic convention, but also is treated as an offence within universities and may lead to disciplinary action.

The University defines plagiarism as:

- the copying or paraphrasing of other people's work or ideas into your own work without full acknowledgement. All published and unpublished material, whether in manuscript, printed or electronic form, is covered under this definition.
- Collusion is another form of plagiarism involving the unauthorized collaboration of students (or others) in a piece of work.

Plagiarism can take many forms.

- These include verbatim quotations of other people's work without due referencing;
- Paraphrasing and altering a few words, again without due referencing (so that you give the impression that the ideas or arguments are your own);
- Cutting and pasting from the internet;
- Collusion;
- Inaccurate citation;
- Failure to acknowledge the assistance of others;
- Copying from the essays written by other students (or professional agencies)

An Example:

### **Source Text**

"In order to benefit from the cost advantages of these new, high-volume technologies or production, entrepreneurs had to make three sets of interrelated investments. The first was an investment in production facilities large enough to exploit a technology's potential economies of scale or scope. The second was an investment in a national and international marketing and distributing network, so that the volume of sales might keep pace with the new volume of production. Finally, to benefit fully from these two kinds of investment the entrepreneurs also had to invest in management: they had to recruit and train managers not only to administer the enlarged facilities and increased personnel in both production and distribution, but also to monitor and coordinate those two basic functional activities and to plan and allocate resources for future production and distribution. It was this three-pronged investment in production, distribution, and management that brought the modern industrial enterprise into being."

(Chandler, Alfred D.. 1990. *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism*, p.8)

Some Examples of Plagiarism

1. Entrepreneurs had to make three interrelated sets of investments. It was the three pronged investment in production, distribution, and management that brought the modern industrial enterprise into being. Managers had to allocate resources for future production and distribution.

(This includes verbatim quotations with no acknowledgement that they are such and no reference to Chandler.)

2. The creation of the modern industrial enterprise resulted from three related

investments which entrepreneurs need to make to gain cost advantages. These were in production facilities, distribution networks and managerial capability.

(The paraphrasing still requires careful referencing to Chandler.)

3. Gaining the benefit of cost advantages from new technologies was key to the development of the modern business organisation. Chandler argues that three interrelated investments were required: in production, distribution and management.

(By placing Chandler only in the second sentence, the impression is given that the first sentence is the author's own argument. In fact, all of this material is drawn from Chandler and needs to be referenced accordingly.)

#### **8.4 References**

When using any source of information in preparing your work, you should give clear references, listed at the end. For most academic writing, it is not acceptable to rely on a bibliography (although in some cases you may wish to include one): you must provide a link between what you say and from where the material is drawn. There are a number of common conventions for this. If referencing material from journals, then volume number, issue number (if there is one), date and page numbers are essential. Books should be given with their date, publisher and place of publication. If you are referring to an item with more than two authors, you may use the form 'Bloggs et al.' in the text, but the reference list should give all the authors, with initials. Appendix One gives you an exercise which should help you get the hang of this.

Two possible formats for references are given below. The first (which is commonly termed 'Harvard style') includes the names of the author(s) in the text itself, together with the date. An alphabetical list of references (by author surname) is then included after the main text. This is by far the best method of referencing for essays, because it is easy to use and check, and – more importantly – it makes it easy to engage critically with the sources being used.

#### Example 1

Perry (2001) claims that all major car manufacturers have now adopted lean production. Three main criticisms can be made of this position. Firstly, Perry's claim is not supported by systematic data, but relies on an incomplete set of rather lame anecdotes. Secondly, he does not distinguish between the rhetoric of 'lean' and actual practice. As Hodge (2002) points out, firms have an incentive to present themselves as being in step with accepted notions of best practice, especially to key audiences (for example, industry analysts and journalists – see Huckelthaw and Prentis 1984). Furthermore, individual managers also have incentives to present their actions as being consistent with management fads (a point also made by Stevens and Chutzpah 1992). Thirdly, as McWilliams (1998) points out, there is no clear empirical measure of what constitutes 'lean' other than comparison with other, worse performing companies. As McWilliams has it: "If everyone is lean, no-one is lean!" (p.277).

#### References

- Hodge, L. (2002) "How can we know what firms are doing?" *The Governance Report*. May. Available on-line at [www.Hodgereports.com/Mayrep.htm](http://www.Hodgereports.com/Mayrep.htm).
- Huckelthaw, P.J. jnr and Prentis, K.(1984) "Why managers lie to everyone – including themselves" *International Journal of Management Mendacity* 26:3 pp.3-12.
- McWilliams, H.K. (1998) "Lean production: what a load of old tripe." In: *Management Paradigms and Fantasies*, Second Edition. (Grosz, H. and Fingleton, D., eds.), Spitfire



Publications, San Francisco. pp.255-288.  
Perry, J.H. (1991) "Lean production: the conqueror of the world". *Production and Quality Management Journal*. 32:3. pp.270-279.  
Stevens H. and Chutzpah H. (1992) *Management Motivations*. The Free Press, New York.

An alternative is to use footnotes or endnotes:

### Example 2

Some consultants have claimed that Just-in-Time (JIT) without Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) will normally raise costs, due to increased paperwork<sup>1</sup>. However, this does not appear to be the case for the Japanese originators of the technique<sup>2</sup>.

1. "EDI is Just-in-time" Report in *Manufacturing Systems*, February 1990, p.8.
2. Ohno. T. *Toyota Production System: beyond large scale production*. Productivity Press, Cambridge, MA (1988).

This second approach is not recommended for essays. You will often use your essays for revision and it this style makes it easy to pay insufficient attention to where the arguments are drawn from.

Remember that it is not only the arguments of other authors which require references. As a rule, whenever you state something as a fact it should be supported by a reference which supports that. This could be the source of the data you have cited or it could a reference to the authority from which you have drawn the fact. This latter use can be a useful shorthand. However, remember that you should be considering all information critically.

There are many conventions for the precise order and format of names and dates and other bibliographic information for the list of references at the end of an essay. Whatever system is used, it is important that it includes all the required information, and is consistent. Being consistent makes it easier to check that you have all the information needed. A good idea is to copy the pattern of the use of capitals, italics, order, and so on, from a particular book or paper (or even the examples above) and stick to it.

### **8.5 What material?**

Writing academic essays means you must do **a lot** of reading. In your courses you will be presented with reading lists which are a good starting point, but if you want to do well you will have to go beyond them. Sometimes – although not very often – there are key readings which you simply must have read; in many other cases, there are many alternatives that would be just as good. An example of the first category would be *The Communist Manifesto* – if you want to write about Marx, then you really should have read this. Similarly, it is difficult to get the flavour of F.W. Taylor's writings if you have not read at least some of *Scientific Management*. Even if the course lecturer or your tutor does not spell out whether a reading is one of the absolutely crucial ones, you will soon be able to make that sort of judgement yourself. On the other hand, there are large numbers of fairly interchangeable materials on introductory economic treatments of price/demand curves, or on Oliver Williamson's approach to transaction cost economics. It is worth mentioning that you will not impress your tutors by asking what the minimum acceptable amount of reading would be; they will constantly be encouraging you to read more and deeper.

Writing about management and economics comes in a variety of forms, and you should be aware that the way you handle different material will depend on its status. Some of the main categories are:

### *Articles in academic refereed journals.*

These are the building blocks of contemporary social science. They are written for academics by academics, and are the main mechanism by which academic research and thought is reported and debated. In reputable journals, academics write material that is expected to conform to standards of academic rigour; you would expect to see an argument placed in the context of prior work and within the stream of particular debates. Thus, you would expect there to be references to previous work. In most cases, you would also expect to see discussion of some data and/or the presentation of some mathematical or logical argument. There is also usually some discussion of the methodology used, explaining how and why the conclusions can be trusted. 'Refereed' articles are so called because the editors of the journal ask independent experts in the field (normally between two and four for each paper) to decide if the work is of an acceptably high standard for publication. Often this process takes a long time, and papers go through many cycles of comment and revision. Journals have different levels of reputation, and – because authors generally want to publish their work in the most prestigious places – these are the journals with the most demanding standards. In management studies, many of the 'top' journals are US-based, and these include *Administrative Science Quarterly* and the *Academy of Management Review*. There are also many specialist journals about very specific areas, such as the *Journal of Finance* and *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*.

Just because something is published in a highly-regarded journal does not mean that it is true. But it often does mean that it is worth reading, and that probably that it has been written very carefully and thoughtfully.

### *High quality practitioner-oriented journals*

There are some journals that are very highly regarded, often edited and largely written by academics, but targeted at thoughtful practitioners (i.e. real managers). The best examples are *Harvard Business Review* and the *Sloan Management Review*. These are designed to be easy to read, and the articles are more oriented to the practical application of ideas rather than ideas for their own sake. They often employ very talented sub-editors to translate academics' leaden prose into a livelier read. Articles in these journals are often user-friendly accounts of work that might also appear in refereed journals, but not all pieces will necessarily be subject to academic research standards.

### *Academic Books*

Often written in a style similar to refereed journals, academic books are used for more lengthy expositions of ideas and research than is possible in journal articles. In general academic esteem, books often come a little lower than refereed journal articles, as the refereeing process is often less rigorous. On the other hand, influential books are often seen as key intellectual landmarks. If you read some books carefully you will see that they are essentially several refereed articles knitted together; and sometimes books are simply edited collections of articles which have been or could be journal articles presented as a single volume for convenience. However, the key distinction for essay writing is to understand the difference between books that conform to academic standards and practitioner-oriented books...

### *General practitioner-oriented material (including books, magazines, consultants' 'white papers', newspaper reports)*

There is lots of this stuff. Management 'magazines', newspaper journalism and 'popular' management books are very useful resources for essays, but need to be interpreted carefully. Often descriptions of management practices, for example, are written to present a particular bias (often favourable) to serve the interests of a

particular interest group. In many cases, the material will be simplistic and normative, and often based on unsupported assertions rather than reasoned argument. Sometimes these books are interesting, and tell you a lot about the nature of management practice and discourse. Some may contain genuine wisdom about the world and important insights – but many do not.

When using this sort of material, especially newspaper and magazine journalism, it is particularly useful to think about how the story comes to be on the page. A useful statistic to remember is that for every financial journalist working in the UK there are about three people working in financial public relations. In other words, every time you see a story in the paper that tells a particularly flattering story about a company or an executive it is likely that people have gone to a lot of effort (from simple cunning up to and including – in some cases – bribery and blackmail) to persuade the journalist to present a story in a particular way.

**Whatever** sources you use, it is important to remember:

1. Just because it is written down (or someone famous said it) does not mean that it is true;
2. Everything anyone writes (including this Guide!) is open to the question: *how do they know that?*
3. Everything anyone writes (again, including this Guide) is open to the challenge: *where are they coming from? What ideology underpins this? What unspoken assumptions lurk beneath the surface?*

### **8.6 Quoting Material**

Sometimes it may be appropriate to quote directly from another source (i.e. use the actual words). If this is done - *even for a single sentence* - then quotation marks must be used and the source plainly identified, including the page numbers. Normally a quote of more than a single phrase is indented. For example, although one might cite Livingstone (1999: p.34) as claiming “the key to retail success is location” within the text, a longer quote would be presented as:

“It is clear from these studies that the key to retail success is location. Whereas the issue of store branding and discount regimes may provide temporary advantage, no-one has yet discovered a way of overcoming geography in the longer run” (Livingstone 1999, p.34).

### **8.7 Critically Evaluating Information**

Another vital point is that all source material is treated with a healthy critical distance. This does not mean that an essay writer must disagree with everyone else, but that truth claims are examined and assumptions evaluated. The most powerful question in all intellectual work is the question “how do I know if this is true?”: in much writing on social and economic issues (particularly in management) much is written that is not based on logic or evidence - it is just made up. Therefore, writing an essay in the social sciences necessarily means making judgements about the material you are using. Three headings which are useful for this purpose are the critically evaluation of statements for their a) truth; b) meaning; and, c) underlying ideology.

In the physical sciences, there exists a large core of foundational material that is accepted by just about everybody to be true, and this affects the style of writing in these subjects. For example, there is normally no need to provide a reference when referring to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In social sciences, the body of knowledge that can be treated in this way is much smaller; truth claims are contested, and so material often cannot be presented as fact. For example, it is common to talk about Michael Porter’s ‘Five Forces Model’ that helps explain

the nature of competition in an industry; it is essentially a list of five factors that are important to think about when considering certain kinds of questions in corporate strategy. Although this model is widely used and is generally highly regarded, many people find things about it with which they disagree. So it is quite wrong to assert that ‘there are five forces which determine the nature of competition in an industry and they are....’, even if this list is followed by a ‘Porter (1990)’. The important point is that Porter *claims* that this is the case, and his claim should be subject to questioning.

As regards the meaning of statements, it is worth noting that social scientists often use a ‘shorthand’ that means they present useful ideas *as if* they were a true statement about the nature of the world, when really they are being more modest. They may say, “There are two types of organisation, X and Y”, but what they normally mean is “For the purposes of this argument let’s cluster together some important ideas about organisations under two convenient headings”. For example, if pressed, it is quite likely that Porter himself would concede that with some nifty re-wording his five forces could be presented as four or six forces: there are other issues which might sometimes be relevant but which just get in the way of saying something useful. A list of ninety-seven competitive forces might be more complete but would not end up being very helpful. To make sense of social science, you need to work out what is being talked about. An extreme case of this is the so-called ‘Ideal Type’-kind of argument used by, amongst others, the sociologist Max Weber.

Finally, far more than in physical science, social scientists have the opportunity to colour their writings with unstated assumptions about matters of philosophy, ethics and politics. As mentioned above, ‘deconstruction’ is a valuable tool in crafting an essay. For example, lurking beneath much writing in some types of economics is the notion that people’s behaviour is ultimately driven by selfish motives. In some kinds of management writing, it is common to find assumptions about leadership that might privilege certain (archetypically) male personality traits. Although it is not usually appropriate to try to ‘deconstruct’ rigorously *all* the materials that inform an essay in an *explicit* way, it is always important to bear in mind the questions: what world-view is behind these claims, and, what are the motivations and interests of the authors?

### **8.5. Honesty, integrity and references**

By making a reference to some material in an essay, you are not making a claim to have read the whole thing. For example, many students will end up citing Alfred Chandler’s seminal work of business history *Strategy and Structure* and listing it in their references without having ploughed through every page. This does not constitute a fib and does not make them bad people. However, in citing someone’s work you are making a claim to be familiar enough with it to be able to be sure that what you say about it is right, and that are deploying the citation with integrity. So you are always safer citing material you are confidently knowledgeable about.

Sometimes you will be tempted to cite material purely on the basis that someone else has mentioned it. For example, suppose Bloggs (2001 p.45) writes, “The crucial insight from Beer (1966) was the realisation that the impact of the accounting systems on corporate planning methods was relatively independent of the detail of the systems themselves”. Is it permissible for you to use this piece of information without first hand familiarity with Beer’s work? The answer is “sometimes” – and it depends on a) how crucial is the citation to your argument? (If ‘a lot’, then you ought to read the original); b) is Blogg’s interpretation or account likely to be contentious or suspect? (If ‘yes’, again, read the original); and c) are you phrasing your second-hand citation in way that is pretending to be more familiar than you really are? (Again, if yes, read the original). A good way out of this problem is to explicitly bring Bloggs into your reference to Beer: “Bloggs claims that Beer (1966) made an important insight...” Note: it would be plagiarism to simply cite Beer when you have taken the information from Bloggs. You therefore need to cite Bloggs as the source for this information.

### **8.6 Referring to lectures**

There are occasions when it is appropriate to cite the material that has come from a lecture. Indeed, the information in lectures can be original ideas that are being developed for the first time by the lecturer. However, you should not simply cite lecturers without considering the appropriateness of doing so.

### **8.7 Using experience**

Students often ask if they can discuss their own experiences within essays; for example, illustrating a point with an anecdote about a firm where they have worked. This can sometimes be appropriate though it is essential that it is handled with the same critical awareness as one would use if the example was taken from the literature, and is handled intelligently. It can be highly misleading to extrapolate from a single example (especially when not rigorously evaluated). Such examples also frequently sound clumsy. Note also that examples given by managers often suffer from the same problem – they may be more myth and opinion than tested hypothesis.

### **9. Agency, precision and voice.**

It is tempting to write about issues in the social sciences without paying proper regard to the accuracy of what is being implicitly claimed. This is because social systems are very complicated, and because common-sense statements are sometimes misleading. An obvious example is the difficulty about describing organisations; it is very easy to slip into loose anthropomorphism (“the company decided that...”) that ascribes to organisations the same powers to do things that are normally associated with people. Sometimes this way of writing is acceptable shorthand that saves repetitively using convoluted and ugly phrases (such as “the group of senior managers in office at the time took a decision”). However, often there are important assumptions lurking behind convenience, and it may be important to bring these to the surface. For example, there is an implication that there was unanimity within the organisation whereas typically there is substantial political disagreement and the exercise of power. Other examples of this general type of problem include statements about the relative merits of different systems (for example, capitalism may work, but for whom?) and of measures of success (company X may be outperforming company Y - but on what criteria?).

Popular writing (such as newspapers) about social and economic issues often uses language very loosely, and sometimes inaccurately. The same words are often used to describe different things; a good example is the use of the term “supply chain”, defined in many textbooks as the chain of organisations or processes that connect a source of raw material with a final consumer. An analysis of the use of this label in the highly-regarded Financial Times and Economist newspapers found eight distinct meanings, which included, for example, the supply chain as a collection of firms in a given industrial sector and as a synonym for ‘chain store’.

In addition to loose terminology, popular writing is often prone to grand sweeping statements and characterisations: “in today’s environment of ever-increasing competition...”, “business is turning to co-operation rather than competition”, “the future of business is the Internet”. These all have some grain of truth in them, but are all strictly wrong. The statements require significant clarification (how is competition measured? Which businesses? What aspect of the Internet?). An important skill in essay writing is the use of the appropriate degree of qualification, which avoids both inaccuracy and verbosity.

A further issue in writing about complicated social phenomena is that it is easy to use the ‘passive voice’ to disguise ambiguity and imprecision. For example, the phrase “it was decided that” dodges the question as to who did the deciding. Be wary of the passive voice and use it sparingly.

## 10. An Incomplete A-Z of hints and tips

### *Argument and Answer*

Be clear on what your argument is to help you answer the question that has been asked. Do not try to answer the question you would like to have been asked. It is surprising how frequently this happens – and it is a theme mentioned almost every year by examiners.

### *Beginnings and Endings*

Try to avoid bland restatements of the title in the opening section of the essay. For longer or more complicated pieces, write the full introduction last. Conclusions should: avoid abrupt endings; draw together the previous points; make clear that the question has been addressed.

### *Cliché*

It is very tempting to reproduce figures of speech (e.g. ‘back to square one’, ‘a level playing field’) which emerge in everyday conversation and the media, but which detract from the tone and accuracy of the essay. They tend to signal a lack of original thought. Management has its own set of irksome clichés: ‘people are our greatest asset’, ‘you can’t buck the market’.

### *Conversational contractions and slang*

Try to avoid casual contractions (e.g. can’t, won’t, shouldn’t, weren’t, I’ll) unless you are using them for particular stylistic effect. Slang is also only appropriate if you are deliberately seeking a particular comic or dramatic tone.

### *Copies*

Always keep a hard copy of any essay you hand in. Do not rely on having an electronic version.

### *Dilbertisms*

After the cartoon by Scott Adams, this refers to the use of dishonest euphemisms to make management ideas sound impressive. Examples are ‘restructuring’ for sacking people, ‘financial re-engineering’ for taking out a bigger loan, and ‘empowerment’ for delegation.

### *Exaggeration*

“The Taylor system was infinitely more efficient than its predecessors”; “Ford threw all his energies into defeating the unions”. There is little to be gained by overstatement of this kind.

### *Figures and Diagrams*

Where figures and diagrams are used, it is generally easier to have them collected together at the back of the document. All figures should be properly labelled, and - if taken from another source - should be clearly referenced.

### *First Person*

It is fine to use the direct authorial voice (“I intend to demonstrate...”); but don’t overdo it. Also, be wary of writing too sloppily (“It seems to me...”; “What I cannot understand is how ...”). Remember, it is your essay so you generally do not need to use the personal pronoun.

### *Gender*

It is a good idea to avoid gender-specificity in writing. ‘S/he’ or ‘he/she’ is acceptable for an unidentified person; alternatively he and she can be used randomly. It is very important to avoid gender stereotypes, because they are often misleading and inaccurate.

### *Information*

Always put your name, the date and a page number on every page of written work, unless explicitly instructed otherwise (for example, in an exam).

### *Internet*

There are sites from which students can download pre-written essays. Three facts are relevant here: a) this is plagiarism; b) the essays are in most cases terrible; c) students who do this are highly likely to be caught (and have been, and then thrown out of Oxford University). On the other hand, when used correctly, the internet is an amazingly useful source of information, and material should be cited as normal, giving the URL, the author(s) and the date of its publication (which if not on the page itself can often be gleaned by looking at the 'Properties' item on the browser menu for the page in question).

### *Jargon*

Most academic subjects have their own set of technical terms; this becomes jargon when a simpler and less pretentious word would do the same job.

### *Jokes*

It takes a great deal of skill to use a joke effectively within a formal essay – if in doubt, leave it out.

### *Length*

Essays are often set with a specified length; where this is so, it is important to keep to it. Most completed first drafts can, with careful editing, be significantly reduced (often by 30% or so); this can often greatly increase the quality of the prose.

### *Metaphors and Similes*

For essays in the social sciences, these are usually only appropriate when the meaning they convey could not be communicated by other means.

### *Numbers*

In general, numbers less than and including one hundred should be written out in full; greater (e.g. 145) should be written as numerals.

### *Ongoing*

The FT Style Guide (Inman 1993): “*ongoing* is a vile word” (p.86).

### *Opinions*

Good essays express the authors' opinions clearly and unambiguously – and defend those opinions with facts and logic.

### *Ornament*

Do not bother to dress up an essay with unnecessary clip art, colour diagrams, or fancy plastic wallets.

### *Paragraphs*

In general, the rule is that a paragraph should embody one particular idea or set of ideas. It is sometimes useful to write a first draft of an essay with numbered paragraphs with titles; this helps keep the flow of argument easily visible. These can be removed if necessary for the final version.

### *Punctuation*

Many people find punctuation difficult; the pocket and concise versions of the Oxford English Dictionary contains a brief and clear guide. Pay particular attention to apostrophes.

### *Quotations*

Nigel Gould-Davis (1997) writes:

“Use quotations sparingly, and always to illustrate a point. Do not use them to make your argument for you: the fact that an author, even an eminent one, believes something is not evidence that it is true; it is certainly no substitute for making the case yourself. Avoid name-dropping.”

### *Re-reading*

It is always sensible to re-read essays carefully to eliminate simple errors. Computer-based spell-checkers and grammar-checkers are useful, but do not remove the need for proof

reading. Reading aloud is a good idea.

### *Sentences*

Essays should be written entirely in full sentences; 'bullet-point' lists may have a limited role in certain circumstances. Unless you are seeking a particular dramatic effect (to be used sparingly), avoid writing prose that reads like a Tony Blair speech: ("Clipped sentences. No Verbs. A very annoying style").

### *Spelling*

Learn to spell correctly – or learn to use a dictionary effectively. If you do not do so, people will make adverse judgements about you for the rest of your life, although they may well be too polite to tell you. See *Re-Reading*.

### *Staples*

Unless directed otherwise by your tutor, neatly staple your essay before handing it in.

### *Subheadings*

Sometimes it is useful to use subheadings, and – occasionally, and particularly for long documents – it is useful to number them. Be consistent with your formatting decisions, so that the hierarchy of the different sections is immediately obvious.

### *Tautologies*

These are statements that include redundant repetition; they should be avoided.

Examples:

*"He declined to accept the offer of promotion."*

*"The report contains true facts about our organisation."*

*"We will proceed onward with the changes."*

*"We were all unanimous."*

*"The ideas are modern and up-to-date."*

## **References**

Becker, H. (1986) *Writing for Social Scientists : How to Start and Finish your Thesis, Book, or Article*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Buznan, T. (1974) *Use Your Head*. BBC Publications, London.

Gould-Davis, N. (1997) *Writing Politics Essays*. Mimeo.

Inman, C. (1993) *Financial Times Style Guide*. Financial Times Books, London.

Porter, M. (1990) *Competitive Strategy*. The Free Press, New York.

## **Other Useful Books**

(The Concise Oxford English Dictionary and Roget's Thesaurus are indispensable).

Bailie, J. and Kitchin, M. (1979) *The Hamlyn Guide to English Usage*. Hamlyn, London.

Cuba, L. and Cocking, J. (1994) *How to Write About the Social Sciences*. Harper-Collins, London.

Gowers, E. (1962) *The Complete Plain Words*. Pelican, Harmondsworth (First published 1948).

Harris, J.S. and Blake, R.H. (1976) *Technical Writing for the Social Sciences*. Nelson-Hall, Chicago.

Johnson, R. (1994) *Writing Essays: Guidance Notes for Students*. (Fifth Edition). Clifton Press, Manchester.

Pirie, D.B. (1985) *How to Write Critical Essays*. Routledge, London. (N.B. a guide principally about essays in the humanities).

## **Acknowledgements**

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IF YOU LIKED THIS DOCUMENT, YOU'LL ALSO ENJOY:

<http://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/Writing/Fussy.htm#First>

<http://fox.maths.strath.ac.uk/~aas96106/tips.html>

## Appendix: REFERENCING EXERCISE

*The following passage and its associated reference list contains 18 errors in the use of references. Can you identify them? A list of the errors (and a corrected version) are shown overleaf.*

More recent texts are often less candid about the conceptual difficulties which lie behind the elegant curves of standard theories. Sloman (1994) defines consumption as ‘the act of using goods and services to satisfy wants’ which ‘will normally involve purchasing the goods and services’, but fails to give a clear explanation of the consumer. This is not untypical: in a straw poll of seven dictionaries of economics, six (Eatwell 1987; Knopf [1991]; Bannock and Baxter et al., 1992; Rutherford, D. 1992; Livesey, Dictionary of Economics, 1993; Greenwald, ‘94) omit an entry for consumer; Pearce (1992:4) is an exception, offering:

“Any economic agent responsible for the act of consuming final goods and services. Typically, the consumer is thought of as an individual, but in practice will consist of institutes, individuals and groups of individuals...”

However, the rest of his description concerns households only. This is a tricky but significant problem, as theories of consumption play a major role in several branches of economics. Hollander S. (1986) points out that the development of the subject as a mathematically-oriented discipline was crucially affected by the development of the theory of consumption, and this rests on the need for differentiating economic actors into categories of shared behaviour.

### REFERENCES

- Pearce, D. (ed.) Macmillan Dictionary of Modern Economics, (Fourth Edition) London: Macmillan. 1992.
- Eatwell, J., Milgate, M. and Newman P. (eds) (1987), *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics* (Volume One).
- Bannock, G., Baxter, R.E. and Davis, E. (1992), *The Penguin Dictionary of Economics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Greenwald, D. (ed.) (1994), *The McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Economics*. (Second Edition) New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hollander, S. (1986), ‘The relevance of John Stuart Mill’ in: Collison Black, R.D. (ed.) *Ideas in Economics*, London: The Macmillan Press, pp.129-159.
- Knopf, K.A. (1991), *A lexicon of economics*, Academic Press.
- Rutherford, D. (1992), *Dictionary of Economics*, London: Routledge.
- Livesey, (1993), *Dictionary of Economics*, London: Pitman.
- Economics* (Second Edition) by Sloeman, J. (1994) New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

## PROBLEMS

1. Page number missing for Sloman citation in text.
2. Eatwell 1987 should be Eatwell et al 1987.
3. Spurious square brackets for Knopf dates.
4. 'Bannock and Baxter et al' should just be 'Bannock et al.'
5. No need for initial in Rutherford citation.
6. Title for Livesey citation included unnecessarily and inconsistently in citation.
7. Greenwald '94 should be Greenwald 1994.
8. No need for initial in Hollander citation.
9. References not in alphabetical order
10. Date for Pearce reference inconsistently at end.
11. No publication location for Eatwell et al.
12. No publisher for Eatwell et al.
13. Title for Bannock et al. reference inconsistently italicised.
14. Inconsistent lower case title for Knopf.
15. No publication location for Knopf.
16. No initial for Livesey
17. Inconsistent spelling Sloman/Sloeman
18. Inconsistent format for Sloman reference.

## CORRECTED VERSION

More recent texts are often less candid about the conceptual difficulties which lie behind the elegant curves of standard theories. Sloman (1994:1) defines consumption as 'the act of using goods and services to satisfy wants' which 'will normally involve purchasing the goods and services', but fails to give a clear explanation of the consumer. This is not untypical: in a straw poll of seven dictionaries of economics, six (Eatwell et al., 1987; Knopf, 1991; Bannock et al., 1992; Rutherford, 1992; Livesey, 1993; Greenwald, 1994) omit an entry for consumer; Pearce (1992:4) is an exception, offering:

"Any economic agent responsible for the act of consuming final goods and services. Typically, the consumer is thought of as an individual, but in practice will consist of institutes, individuals and groups of individuals..."

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- Bannock, G., Baxter, R.E. and Davis, E. (1992), *The Penguin Dictionary of Economics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
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