

ESSAY WRITING GUIDE

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The analysis of political life is largely based on the written word. In both academic and 'real world' debates on politics, the examination of texts – books, journal articles, official reports, declarations etc. – is central and highly prized. All of the great political speeches in history began life on a blank page before a word was even uttered. In your studies as a politics student, it should not be surprising, therefore, that the practice of writing will occupy a major proportion of your time. This will involve you doing different types of writing, including shorter presentation outlines in seminars, book reviews, examination answers and larger dissertations. This guide is focused on the art of essay writing, although many of the recommendations expressed below will be relevant to the other forms of writing you will conduct. At the outset, it is important to underscore that there is no single 'correct' way to write a great politics essay but, rather, many potential avenues that could be selected. However, this guide contains a series of suggestions and tips that, if acted upon in an effective manner, may increase the likelihood of you achieving higher marks and enjoying the essay writing experience.

I. WHY DO YOU WRITE ESSAYS?

A flippant answer would reply: 'because we're told to!'. But beyond this basic truth, there are three sets of very good reasons why you should continually work hard at improving your essay writing skills.

i. Writing is understanding

The mind can often be a horrendously confusing inner world, littered with clichés, falsehoods, and half-baked ideas. This is why you write. You write in an effort to separate bad ideas from good ones, as well as to polish decent notions into great constructions. Essay writing *is* learning: it enhances your understanding of political issues and debates. Through researching and absorbing different readings, before marshalling such ideas around a set question, you will improve your comprehension. In most circumstances, 'understanding' does not mean the definitive resolution of problems or quick answers but, rather, clarification of complex intellectual challenges. In other words, most debates in politics feature many shades of grey. Essays enable you to paint these patterns and explain why such variety or ambiguity exists. Above all, in an effort to find and develop your personal academic 'voice', writing is *an act of discovery that you own*. It enables you to see the political

world with fresh eyes, inviting new questions and, in the process, further demands for writing.

ii. **Writing enables critical and systematic thinking**

As elsewhere in the social sciences, good writing in politics reveals two essential properties. First, it has a critical bite. This desirable attribute can come in different forms, but tends to be marked by the author adopting a skeptical (but not pessimistic) view on how a persuasive argument is made. Critical writing involves a restless refusal to accept the conclusions of other authors without first evaluating the evidence offered. It also features a balanced examination of the relevant literature through which you craft your own argument and, potentially, challenge your own predispositions. By contrast, simplistic descriptive writing, such as the repetitive listing of dates and events, should be severely minimised in essays. Depending upon the type of question, more sophisticated descriptive writing, involving careful interpretation to support an argument, may be applicable. But on its own – when it fails to x-ray the body of an argument – descriptive writing can be very problematic. Second, essays present opportunities to practice the systematic organising of ideas. Confusion in explaining political issues is often the product of poor organisation within an argument. Essays invite chances to practice how to separate large themes from smaller points or more abstract theory from empirical examples. A systematic thinker is always concerned with finding clear and logical ways to divide up knowledge, as well as to establish informative connections and relations.

iii. **Writing enhances employability**

Writing essays also comes with a third major benefit that goes beyond your studies at SOAS: the prospect of enhancing your appeal to employers. Many surveys of employers express concern over the ability of graduates to analyse, interpret and communicate in the written form. The student who is able to demonstrate a more refined capacity to write crisply and cogently will likely appear more attractive to different organisations. However, although developing academic writing should be viewed as a set of adaptable skills to last a lifetime, the method of essay writing is not the same as authoring a corporate report or journalistic story.

II. **HOW CAN YOU WRITE GREAT ESSAYS?**

One learns to write by writing and *rewriting*. There are no easy shortcuts. The best writers may make their creations look effortless, but this is a surface appearance that conceals considerable labour. The work of writing a great politics essay can be divided into three major ‘moments’, each of which has its own objectives: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing.

i. Pre-writing

Pre-writing is everything you do before writing a first draft. It begins with closely reading the essay question and identifying what is being asked of you. Unpacking the question involves focusing on 'content' words that tell you what concepts, issues or subjects the essay will address. Of equal importance, you also need to examine the 'imperative' (or command) words that tell you *how* to answer the question (such as 'assess', 'debate', 'compare and contrast'). For instance, take the following illustration:

To what extent is nationalism created by government elites?

In this instance, 'nationalism' and 'government elites' are the main content terms. Thus, evidence, theories and claims have to be mobilised around defining, and assessing the relationship between, 'nationalism' and 'government elites'. But the imperative of the question – 'to what extent' – is telling you to answer the problem in a particular way: that is, *how far* can one focus on government elites to persuasively explain nationalism. This command phrase is inviting attention to other factors, beyond privileged state agents, that could explain the making of nationalism. Based on the literature, you decide what those factors could be. In this example, you would need to arrive at a judgment on which conditions are more or less important.

The next step in the pre-writing stage is to research the relevant literature that will help you to formulate a convincing answer. Your module syllabus, supported by the course convener or seminar leader, will provide guidance on which readings to select. Many students agonise over how many references to read. A flippant answer from the lecturer might be: 'there is no limit!'. Try to nurture *a curious spirit of enquiry* through which the making of a persuasive argument is built gradually, sometimes with fits and starts, but always with a sense of critical and systematic engagement. You are being assessed on your ability to marshal and command the relevant academic literature. This involves going beyond introductory and core readings to *exhaust* all useful recommended sources. Remember: reading lists are designed by lecturers who have spent years sorting through the literature. Dismissing this effort will not win you any favours. Practice methods of exploring library resources, either directly in terms of bookshelf browsing or electronically via academic and popular search engines. At the same time, you are also being judged on your capability to assess the validity of truth claims within this literature, rather than accepting all propositions at face value. For instance, a shoddy newspaper story which may contain fabricated antidotes is clearly not in the same league as a peer-reviewed scholarly book.

The final step in this phase involves the construction of an essay outline that *ruthlessly addresses the question posed*. At the outset, there are limitations on space (the word count) that will structure how much you can argue.

Beyond this, you need to decide what material is relevant for inclusion and how you will crisply explain your case to the reader. *Think very carefully about these choices.* You may need more time than expected to reflect upon what goes in or out of the essay. Gather together the notes you have taken from your readings, as well as any relevant lectures and seminars. Begin the process of dividing the essay plan into manageable parts or themes that are built around your central argument. These parts must have a logical form and sequence. For instance, to recall our earlier example, one opening part could debate the links between nationalism and government elites, before second and third parts tackle other major themes. An essay plan also needs consideration of finer details, such as the selection of empirical examples and where they could be best located in the argument.

As a warning, many students fall down through not closely reading the question and interpreting its demands. You need a *laser-like focus* on the question at all times. Keep the question visible on your desk throughout the research process. Never wander away from the question.

ii. Writing

This is the moment for executing your plan and crafting your argument. The making of the essay is inspired by the plan set out in the pre-writing stage, but there will always be potential for revision of ideas during the actual writing process. As a broad guide, the structure of an essay can be considered in three sections: the introduction, the main body, and the conclusion. Each of these elements can be taken in turn.

First impressions count in life and essays are no different. The best essays have an introduction that starts in fifth gear by directly addressing the question and providing a plan of action for the reader. Weaker essays start in neutral, potentially hum towards third, before losing the reader's attention. Some pointers on sharpening your introductions:

- Within the opening two sentences, try to encapsulate the essence of your argument or at least a sense of what direction you are headed.
- Copy the precise language of the question, including command terms.
- Contrary to some teaching you may have received, the use of the first person is allowed and is often very positive. 'I will argue' sends a strong commitment that the reader will expect to see honoured. Think hard on the 'x' that follows 'I will argue'.
- Signpost for the reader how the essay will be divided and what your intentions are. Keep this organisation clear and simple, such as marked by the use of 'first', 'second', and 'third'. This makes for easier comprehension.
- Shape the expectations on what *cannot* be accomplished, often through the effective nod towards the word limit.

- Keep the prose tight. Every word earns its place. There is no space for waffle or confusion. As an approximate guide, the introduction is 10 to 15 per cent of the word length of any essay.

The body of the essay is the main space to express and prosecute your argument. There are different ways to organise this structure, but your promise made in the introduction has to be executed in the main body. The social scientific method of writing is driven by *worries about justifications* or, in other words, about explaining why you have made certain choices and not others. You need to give reasons for why your essay takes its twists and turns. The better essays tend to be clearly organised into two or three parts. The use of sub-headings may improve readability, but such labels need to be inserted *sparingly and thoughtfully*. Overall, the argument needs to follow a logical progression of points that, once again, helps to express a systematic mind. This logic flows both across and within the justified parts. Your claims need to be supported by evidence, including empirical examples that illuminate larger remarks. Such evidence needs to be judiciously selected and deployed; for instance, ‘real world’ illustrations are not needed for every single point you make. All this activity within the text helps to lend your writing gravitas and enhance its persuasive power. Above all else, in composing your argument, *you never, ever lose sight of the question*. Every word contributes, in some small way, to answering the question.

The quoting of authors within the essay is a particular issue that is worthy of attention. Direct quotes, when used occasionally and not excessively, can help to build a critical argument. However, you always need to explain the reasons behind such selections. Do you endorse the opinion of the quoted writer? Do you quote in order to unpick problems in their argument? Or do you quote to illustrate a certain strand of thinking which can be compared to other perspectives? Explaining your choice of quotes through the use of decisive analytical terms can help to strengthen the essay. For instance, take the following examples:

- ‘As Jones (1993) *rightly notes* in this passage...’
- ‘However, in this quote, I would *dispute Walter’s (2007) logic...*’
- ‘Here, the *revealing use of language* by Bourdieu (1996) helps...’

There are many other techniques involved in good writing, but the single most valuable tool in a stylish writer’s toolbox is *concrete language*. Within a sentence composed largely of concrete nouns, the reader can quickly visualise its objects, actions and relationships. By contrast, a sentence packed only with abstract nouns offers nothing tangible to hold on to, creating potential confusion in the process. Experiment with the use of distinctive analytical language and interesting metaphors that add vitality to your argument. Keep dipping into the *Oxford English Dictionary* or a good thesaurus for inspiration. For instance, consider these:

- ‘we need to *uncover* the ideologies at work here...’
- ‘through *dissecting* this evidence, I will...’

- ‘with this new *lens* of analysis, scholars can *visualise*...’
- ‘this theory *rebuffs* the common sense...’
- ‘such ideas are *taxing*, yet potentially *exhilarating*...’
- ‘diplomacy is like a *theatre* where the players *put on masks*’

The end of an essay always needs a conclusion. The main objective of the conclusion is to summarise the entire argument. In this sense, you marry together the declared aims set out in the introduction with the main body. A conclusion should never incorporate brand new ideas or literature. It is a space to tie the strings together, not add further strings. Broadly speaking, the length of the conclusion should mirror the introduction: approximately 10 to 15 per cent of the entire word length of the essay.

iii. Post-writing

Having a draft completed does not mean the end. The final moment in the essay writing process should not be lightly discounted as lacking substance. On the contrary, this is where many students throw away easy marks that could mean the difference between crossing grade boundaries. Post-writing involves reading, re-reading and re-re-reading your essay. Errors related to grammar, style or referencing should be caught and corrected here. You may also find problems in the evaluation of the evidence, such as improvements needed on connecting theory with the empirics. Often, the work of post-writing is best accomplished after leaving the essay alone for a few days. When you return, problems rise to the surface and are more easily identifiable. Another method is to show the essay to a friend or family member to ask for a second opinion. Such processes are aimed at detaching yourself from the essay in order to check its health. No essay is ever perfect. There will always be scope for improvement.

Appendix

Intellectual integrity demands that all of us acknowledge the sources of our data and ideas. For the purpose of essay writing, you should master the conventions of documenting intellectual debts. Failure to do so is an act of plagiarism. Plagiarism by any student is a serious offence which can lead to your deregistration from SOAS. There are two major referencing systems: ‘Harvard’ and ‘Oxford’. Institutionally, there is no major preference for which one you adopt. But following your selection, you must adhere to the rules of the designated system.

For the ‘Harvard’ system, otherwise known as the ‘author-date’ scheme, please consult this guide here:

<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/library/public/Harvard.pdf>

For the ‘Oxford’ system, otherwise known as the ‘documentary-note’ scheme, please consult this guide here:

<https://guides.library.uwa.edu.au/Oxford>

For further clarification between the two systems, please see *The Chicago Manual of Style* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), see here:

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

FURTHER READING

Garrison, R., *How a Writer Works* (London: Longman, 1997).

Greetham, B., *How to Write Better Essays* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Manser, M. and Curtis, S., *The Penguin Writer's Manual* (London: Penguin, 2002).

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