

How to Write an Essay¹

Guidelines

The following guidelines will help you structure your essay into a clear argument.

- State what your paper is going to explore. What is your paper about? Why do you have an interest in this subject? Some reasons can be directly related to the themes of the course, or it can simply be related to your more general interests, nonetheless state explicitly what these interests are. Use the “Guidelines for the analysis of a theoretical arguments” (see this as a separate memo) as your point of reference.
- Make sure that you address directly and explicitly the aims of the course for which you write the paper. Note also that the course material and the compulsory reading set for the course are expected to make up at least 75% of the bibliographical material and the references you use in your paper. This means that no more than 25% of material you refer to is allowed to come from sources outside the course reading material.
- State clearly what the general structure of your argument is going to be. In other words, map out the journey your reader is going to have to take with you. Note that this journey is expected to be linear and understandable, so do tell us how you get from point A to point B, with the conclusion as the final destination.
- Make sure you tell us what the name of your game is : how much of this paper is analytical ? How much of it is based on textual readings ? How much does it have to do with personal experience and story-telling ? Please note that in this course we prefer the analytical and textually-based type of argument.
- Note that descriptions are useful but it would be a mistake to just repeat what you read in the compulsory texts or heard in the lectures. Too many descriptive details can be distracting from your main point. Use them to enhance not derail your argument. .
- Make your conclusion as brief and synthetic as possible. A conclusion is intended to recapitulate all of the information you have gone through in the paper. Conclusions answer, in a more general way, the ideas or questions raised in the introduction. At this point you should be asking yourself: Did I answer the questions I sought to explore in my introduction statement ? Was I successful in going through examples or case studies to prove my point?
- A conclusion can never introduce totally new concepts. It is meant to bring an end to your research, not open up new questions that then need to be investigated and answered as well.

Referencing

Give credit when credit is due. Never borrow thoughts, quotes, or even paraphrase without properly crediting the original source. This is done through footnotes and through a list of references at the end of your paper, which is also known as bibliography. Accurate, clear referencing offers the reader the opportunity to engage in the process of your research, and to understand how your arguments and ideas have been initiated and developed. It is also, of

¹ I acknowledge my debt to Matthew Fuller in drafting these guidelines, which are adapted from the handbook of the MA courses at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam.

course, essential that you distinguish clearly between your own ideas and arguments, and those of other people.

Plagiarism

Not doing this is called plagiarism. Plagiarism is presenting work done by others as your own. Plagiarism invalidates your essay and may result in further disciplinary procedure, including possible expulsion from the course. Utrecht university is extremely strict on this issue and a special disciplinary procedure has been set up to fight against cases of plagiarism in essay writing.

Lay out for quotations

Short quotations can be written as part of the flow of the sentence, with quotation marks.

Longer quotations (three or more lines) should be separated from the main body of the text by means of indentation. In this case quotation marks are not needed. For example:

“I agree with Hal Foster when he says:

I supported a postmodernism that contested [...] reactionary cultural politics and advocated artistic practices not only critical of institutional modernism but suggestive of alternative forms of new ways to practice culture and politics. And we did not lose. In a sense the worse thing happened: treated as fashion postmodernism became *démodé*. (Foster, 1998, p.20)

Going further from this point, I would suggest that theory, a key feature of the postmodern enterprise, became *démodé* only after becoming convention...”

The Harvard System of referencing

We do not have a compulsory system of referencing essays. However, we do recommend that you follow the Harvard System.

The Harvard System of referencing works within the text itself and not in footnotes or endnotes. Whenever you quote, or refer to someone’s words (directly or indirectly), or use someone’s argument, or refer to a source, you should use the system described below.

Whenever you quote you write the surname and the date of publication in brackets. When you quote directly, you should also add the page number:

In studying the anatomy of brains of early man, some 19th century anthropologists came to a conclusion which one writer reminds us was ‘at the time considered highly provocative but which is now obvious to every anthropologist’ (Wendt, 1974, p.12).

If the name of the writer is part of the sentence itself, put the date in brackets after the name:

Wendt (1974, p.12) reminds us that the conclusions of some 19th century anthropologists were ‘at the time considered very provocative’.

The same applies when you are not quoting directly:

Wendt (1974) reminds us that the conclusions of some 19th century anthropologists were considered very provocative when they were published.

Sometimes, you find a useful quotation from one author in a book by another. In such cases, reference like this:

Johnson sweeps aside this argument: 'His expressed view of the world has more style in it than sense – or evidence' (quoted in Mason, 1990, p.44).

In this case, you are quoting Johnson from a book which you have not read and which you therefore cannot quote directly. So the reference is to Mason's book, which you have read.

You will sometimes need to refer to more than one book or article by the same author, each published in the same year. In this case, put a letter after the date to show which of the publications is referred to in this instance:

Peterson (1989b, p.45) was risking the wrath of her profession by suggesting that 'there is more to be gained by restraint than by rushing headlong into open debate'.

List of references

At the end of your text, you should list all sources you have used. They are normally set out as follows:

Surname, initials of author(s) (date) Title, place and name of publisher

Book

For example the complete reference for a book will look like this:

Gilbert, S and Gubar, S (1988) No Man's Land New Haven, Yale University Press

Article

When referring to an article in a journal, you should put the title of the article in quotation marks, and the journal title should be underlined:

Rollerton, F (1989) 'Wordsworth's Secret Dreams' in Citations Vol.12, No.4 (pp.113-124)

If you are citing an article from an author from a book edited by a different author, the reference works as follows:

Silvershum, P (1978) 'Fellowship Societies' in Donaghue, P. (ed.) The Roots of Masonry Sidney, Outback Books

The list of references or bibliography should be in alphabetical order.

When you refer to more than one work by the same author, these should be set out in chronological order.

When you refer to more than one work by the same author from the same year, they should be differentiated by adding 'a, b, c' to the dates: 1989a, 1989b, etc.

Bibliography

The reference list should include *only* those works you have cited in your text. There may, however, be reasons why you would wish to offer a list of works which have informed your general thinking and understanding. If you want to cite works in addition to your references, this should be done in a separate list headed 'bibliography'.

Illustrations

If you use illustrations of work by others or by yourself in your text, make sure you use accurate referencing. Referencing for illustrations will normally include (elements of) the following:

Name of the artist, title of the work, date, materials, size

For example:

Pierre Huyghe, Sleeptalking, 1998, 16mm film, 15 min.

You may add if appropriate:

Site, exhibition, collection or commissioner; place

For example:

Pierre Huyghe, Sleeptalking, 1998, 16mm film, 15 min. Installation at
Manifesta, Luxembourg, 1999.

Fiona Banner, Le Bar du Peuple, billboard, Marseille, 1995.