

SOME BRIEF GUIDELINES FOR THE WRITING OF GOOD ESSAYS

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1. 'Essential Data' on the top of the first page

Name

Course name, class

Tutor

Date

2. Format A4

Typed essays, 12p Times New Roman©

Double spaced (no copyright)

Suitable straight margins to the left and right. (A marvellous invention!).

3. Title

The essay must have a centred title. For example:

Man's Inherent Evil Revealed in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

No full stop at the end of a title.

4. Names

The name of the author is written in full (William Golding) or just the surname (Golding).

The name of a work of art is written in italics: *War of the Worlds*.

The title of a poem, short story, chapter in a book, or a magazine article is presented in quotation marks.

Smith's poem, 'The Fish That Got Away', explores a boy's desire for acceptance in an overly aquatic world.

5. Avoid:

The words *get, a lot, lots, think, guess, suppose, maybe, wish, believe, hope, etc,* and *things*.

Strings of rhetorical questions. (Who needs them?)

Exclamation marks!

Unnecessary repetition. (Who needs it?)

Exclamation marks!!!!

6. Quotations

Short quotations can be integrated into the body of your text, marked off with quotation marks without creating ungrammaticality (elastic bands, glue, or paper clips are neither recommended nor necessary at this stage):

The boys wished for a sign from the outside adult world. Ironically, their wish was granted since ‘a sign came down from the world of grown-ups, though at the time there was no child awake to read it.’ (p. 118).

Use [...] to indicate that you have left out some part of the original text. If you need modify the original quotation in some way (to ensure grammaticality or clarity), you may add information within square brackets, [].

As the writer of an academic essay, you do your reader a disservice if you incorrectly quote the source text. This includes spelling and punctuation. Quotes must be a 100% accurate rendering of the original source text.

Longer quotations should be indented throughout and double-spaced from the surrounding text. The quotation itself should be single-spaced. The sentence which introduces a long quotation should be grammatically complete and followed by a colon.

The narrator describes the boys’ island-environment with an acute sense of detail:

Here the beach was interrupted abruptly by the square motif of the landscape; a great platform of pink granite thrust up uncompromisingly through forest and terrace and sand and lagoon to make a raised jetty four feet high. The top of this was covered with a thin layer of soil and coarse grass and shaded with young palm trees. There was not enough soil for them to grow to any height and when they reached perhaps twenty feet they fell and dried, forming a criss-cross pattern of trunks, very convenient to sit on. (p. 17).

The particular spot described above plays venue to a number of meetings where the boys discuss the rules and regulations according to which they are to live. However,

the rules that the boys agree on are as short lived as the palms under which they sit.

7. Secondary sources

Your own literary criticism can be enhanced by making reference to other scholars. We should never pretend or create the impression that the ideas, comments, or arguments of others are our own, when in fact they are not. The horrors of plagiarism and academic courtesy demand that we make due reference to the scholars who have ‘come before us’. You can either quote directly from the secondary source as shown above (under ‘Quotations’) or you can insert a footnote so as to acknowledge your reference.

Building motorcars out of used brown-paper bags in the torrential downpour of an Indian monsoon might strike one as being a good enough senseless waste of human life as any other. But since the august literary critic Sir Puncheon ‘Physhboone’ Picklesworth-Smythe has repeatedly pointed out in his indomitably illuminating way that we can never avoid the inevitable¹, we come to a closer understanding of this rather bizarre practice. People will do the most absurd things with brown paper bags once they have got their hands on enough of them. What the novel under consideration reveals to the sensitive reader are the horrors of a post-apocalyptic world where brown-paper bags are considered to be the only post-industrial objects that are worth the time and effort to recycle. An economy based on brown-paper bags would seem flimsy at best, but given the fact that regular monsoon rains caused flooding in most of the region during the pre-dawn rush-hour, the decision to manufacture motorcars out of the same was short-sighted and a guaranteed source of embarrassment for the Minister for Transport.

8. Matters of Style

Academic essays are to be written in *formal* English. It is more often easier to say what is *not* formal than what is. Unnecessary slang, abbreviations and trite colloquialisms should be avoided. Vulgar language may have its uses in a crowded fish market, but hardly ever in an academic text.

Clarity and simplicity are two goals you might do well to aim at in your writing. Humour your reader, but never patronize him. Assume that he, too, is as well read as you. Inspire enthusiasm for your analyses. Show that they are both creative yet well-supported (textually). Do not succumb to subjectivity, but

¹ Puncheon Picklesworth-Smythe, ‘Seven and a Half Things You Always Knew, and Were Inclined to Ask Why’, *The International Scientific Journal of Idiots and Fools*, 57.4 (1999) 23-256.

Believe it or not, there are limitations on what one can justifiably say on a particular topic. Most clearly, we are bound by the limitations, or boundaries, imposed by the text. Speculation on the ‘subsequent lives’ of characters, authors and the like, lie beyond the reach or perspective of the text. Don’t go there!

A further limitation that the literary critic is subject to (or rather subjects *himself* to) falls out from the particular theoretical/critical stance adopted in the essay. Thus, after claiming to adopt a constructivist viewpoint in your analysis, it makes no sense to present a set of arguments/observations that are essentialist. Note, too, that it is not acceptable to attribute opinions or views to other critics that they have not actually expressed. Don’t put *your* own words in other people’s mouths. Unless you are a dentist, you shouldn’t put *anything* in other people’s mouths.

Assume that your reader is familiar with the text being analysed. A mere repetition of the story-line or plot is a sure-fire way of sending her off into a boredom-induced coma, and does little in the way of bringing together related ideas, themes, motifs in a *meaningful way*. Clarify the relevance of the observations that you make. Ask yourself: What observations *have* I made? In what way are they relevant to the construction of the interpretation of the text that I wish to share with my reader? Does any of this make any sense? (Not *this*, your essay! Duh.)

Even though you can assume that your reader is familiar with the text that you are analysing, you should provide brief, yet adequate, contextual information regarding your observations. No reader wants to continually break off his reading of an essay to refer to the source texts.

An essay should be a presentation of a particular standpoint on a subject, i.e. there must be some ‘point’ to the essay. It is your job to argue for the point(s) that you make. How are you to ‘prove’ that the points you make are ‘correct’? By *showing* them to be true. By *presenting* concrete textual evidence that illustrate your point(s). Simply *stating* the same point again and again and again and again does not help to make it more convincing – on the contrary, why the need to repeat something over and over again if it is so obviously ‘true’?

Your essay should have some identifiable structure. Writing an essay that has a clear beginning, middle and end has been a tried and tested formula for generations of writers, but is sadly neglected by far too many university students. Unless you have won the Booker Prize or you are a Nobel laureate, avoid writing critical essays which employ post-modernist, stream-of-consciousness techniques. Very early on in your essay, introduce the central

opposition or theme that emerges in the primary text and establish some relationship between this and the controlling idea/main point of your essay. After the reader has been introduced to the main point of the essay, provide evidence and argumentation that support your views. At the end of the essay, reflect on how your observations relate to the central opposition in the text; how the details of particular events or descriptions can be integrated into making more explicit your interpretation of the general theme/opposition in the text. A mere listing of observations, quotes and comments does not a structured essay make.