

ESSAY TROUBLE SHOOTING: A HANDOUT FOR STUDENTS

Linda Briskin, Foundations Co-ordinator

August 2005

This handout addresses the essay-writing concerns most frequently raised by students, identifies the most common problems found in student essays, and recommends some solutions. It should be used in conjunction with your essay assignment.

1. WHAT MAKES AN ESSAY ORIGINAL?

Many students are unclear about what makes a research essay original, given that so much of the substantive content is taken from scholarly sources. Although you do rely on the research materials of others, a research essay is not just descriptive and it is not just a summary of what other people have said. You make an original contribution to your essay in the following ways:

- i) selection of appropriate materials/sources;
- ii) identification of key themes in the source material and presentation of the ideas of others in a coherent, clear and accurate way;
- iii) comparison and contrast of various writers on same subject which reveals your grasp of their ideas;
- iv) creation of a structure and organization within which to present the material;
- v) judgement and evaluation of the material;
- vi) development of your own informed point of view, that is, a reasoned conclusion based on research.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF TIME MANAGEMENT

Too often students begin writing their essay before they are ready. This is usually very frustrating and can lead to writers' block, because they don't really know what they want to say and they have not yet developed a clear structure in which to say it. Often the problems that students have writing essays have little to do with their ability to write and more to do with fuzzy thinking. Do your thinking work before you begin to write.

Since poor time management is often the reason students begin to write before they are ready, you should prepare a 'time schedule' as soon as you are given an essay assignment. This involves making a list of all the steps necessary to complete the assignment with an estimate of how long each step will take. You should then block out the time necessary over all the weeks available to you. Do not try to do all the work in a short period of time. This reduces the time available to synthesize the material.

You should always try to have your assignments completed one week ahead of time. This gives you time for revisions and for unforeseen personal crises. The gap in time allows you to read your assignment as a stranger, identify weaknesses and correct them.

A key to student success is effective time management skills; in fact, research shows that good time managers get one grade point higher, so an A instead of a B. For more information, see "Time Management for University Students: Tips to help you make the grade!" <<http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/index.htm>> and scroll down to time management, and "Time Management for University Students" <http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/tmonline/time.htm>. Also see "Essay Troubleshooting" (#2).

If your skills in this area are very weak, you might want to sign up for a workshop with the Counselling and Development Centre, 145 Behavioural Sciences Bldg, 736-5297 or for more information, go to <<http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/>>.

3. OUTLINES

i) AN OUTLINE BASED ON THE QUESTION

Not answering what the question asks, or addressing only parts of the question is a serious flaw in many student essays. In order to avoid this problem, develop an outline based on the question.

Read your question carefully. Identify the central question that you need to answer through research and analysis. Then break the question down into its constituent parts and create an initial essay outline. This outline helps you unpack what the question is asking and identify the 'hidden' questions you will need to answer/research in order to write a good essay. See example below.

ii) A RESEARCH OUTLINE

A research outline is a device for putting your ideas and research into a logical order. Think of it as a blueprint. It helps you to work out, before you begin to write, how the thesis will be developed, the topic divided into manageable sections, and the material presented in a logical and appropriate order. Keep your reader in mind. Will the logic of your essay and your point of view be clear to her? See example below.

As you work with the material, the outline will become increasingly sophisticated and detailed. You will move beyond the 'outline based on the question' which has no content in it (an initial organizational tool) to an outline based on themes, concepts and arguments that emerge from your reading. As you do your research and learn about the issues, more thematic ways of organizing the material will suggest themselves to you. New questions will be raised. You should continually be reshaping your outline as you read the sources.

Eventually the outline will provide the foundation to write a first draft. Although an outline takes time, it can also save a lot of time. Once you have an effective working outline, you will find it considerably easier to write your essay.

iii) DEVELOPING YOUR OUTLINE BY STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUSNESS WRITING

Often students are overwhelmed by the amount of material they have read and find it difficult to develop an outline from their notes. Rather than moving from notes to the development of outlines, some writers use an alternative strategy for developing some coherency of ideas. They set aside their notes and simply begin to write. It may mean beginning to write a middle section of the essay which seems clearer than the beginning. Such 'stream of consciousness' writing without structure or focus allows thoughts to become more coherent by writing them down. This material then becomes the basis for developing some coherency of ideas and an effective outline.

iv) REVERSE OUTLINE

A reverse outline is generated from the draft of your paper (in contrast to a research outline which is based on your notes). This outline will help you to check that you have developed an effective organization for your essay. For a reverse outline, you list the main idea of each paragraph (each paragraph should have only one main idea) and then check that the order of the main ideas flows logically.

EXAMPLE OF AN OUTLINE BASED ON A QUESTION:

Feminists disagree about whether censorship is an effective way to deal with pornography. Compare and contrast the feminist anti-censorship and pro-censorship positions. Based on your research, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each position. **Assess the strategies which emerge from each position.** Develop your own informed point of view: would you advocate censorship to deal with pornography? If not, what would you suggest as a strategy?

Introduction

The central question is "do I think that censorship is an appropriate strategy to deal with pornography, based on my critical assessment of the feminist debates about this issue".

Main Body

I) What does it mean to talk about censorship in relation to pornography?

II) What are the feminist arguments in favour of censorship of pornography?

A. Key definitions

i) How do these feminists define `pornography'?

ii) How do they define `censorship'?

iii) What are the underlying political assumptions of the pro-censorship feminists?

B. Assessment of pro-censorship position

i) Strengths

ii) Weaknesses

C. What strategies emerge from this political approach?

III) What are the feminist arguments against censorship ?

A. Key definitions

i) How do these feminists define `pornography'?

ii) How do they define `censorship'?

iii) What are the underlying political assumptions of the anti-censorship feminists?

B. Assessment of anti-censorship position

i) Strengths

ii) Weaknesses

C. What strategies emerge from this political approach?

IV) What are the key differences between the two positions? (Contrast)

V) What are the key similarities between the two positions? (Compare)

Conclusion

Your own informed position, including your strategies.

THIS TOPIC IS AN EXAMPLE. DO NOT WRITE YOUR OWN ESSAY ON PORNOGRAPHY.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH OUTLINE

From Candace Séguinot and Thomas Greenwald, Essay Writing. Writing Workshop, York University, 1980.

An outline imposes order and establishes relationships between bits of information.

Here's an example of what happens when information for an essay is collected and listed but not ordered. The central idea for the essay is the following: to show the Beatles' contribution to popular music and culture.

The information which you have gathered includes the following points:

- 1) Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry were both major influences, but by 1963 both were in decline.
- 2) In the early sixties, homogenized folk music was the dominant popular form.
- 3) Rock music in this period was dominated by dull, white male singers who did not write, produce, or play their own music.
- 4) The Beatles created an original sound with catchy lyrics, melodies, and harmonies.
- 5) They played their own instruments and wrote almost all their own music.
- 6) The group presented its music with wit, style, and irreverence.
- 7) The Beatles helped open the door for other approaches to rock music and have influenced such musicians as Miles Davis, David Bowie, and Jeff Beck.
- 8) The Beatles became symbols for a new way of approaching life and dealing with authority.
- 9) Their music grew from relatively simple structures to forms of complexity and subtlety unlike anything that had come out of rock before.

The outline below shows how much easier it is to understand the relationship among these various pieces of information when they are organized.

RESEARCH OUTLINE

I. Status of rock music in 1963, prior to the Beatles.

- A. Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry were both major influences, but by 1963, both were in decline.
- B. Homogenized folk music was the dominant popular form.
- C. Rock music was dominated by dull, white male singers who did not write, produce, or play their own music.

II. The Beatles' immediate impact on rock music in 1963.

- A. The group played their own instruments and wrote most of their own music.
- B. Catchy lyrics, melodies, and harmonies created an original sound.
- C. The group presented its music with wit, style, and irreverence.

III. The Beatles' development and influence on pop culture.

A. Music of the Beatles grew from relatively simple structures to forms of complexity and subtlety unlike anything that came out of rock music before.

B. The Beatles helped open the door for other approaches to rock music and have influenced a wide spectrum of musicians, such as Miles Davis, David Bowie, and Jeff Beck.

C. Most importantly, the Beatles became positive symbols for a new way of approaching life and dealing with authority.

Making some points subordinate to others helps focus on a few ideas, and this in turn makes it easier to keep a central idea in the reader's frame of reference. Using different kinds of numbers or letters helps you visualize an arrangement that will make it easier to choose the right connectives when you begin to link paragraphs. **In order to complete this research outline, notes on the sources you will use in each section would be included with a summary of the relevant points you will use.**

4. FINDING AND SELECTING SOURCE MATERIAL

In order to be a successful university student, you need to be able to do library research. In the first semester, you are required to complete two on-line interactive tutorials to help develop your skills. Do not hesitate to ask the librarians for further assistance and sign up for workshops offered by the Scott library on YORKLINE, periodical use, CD-ROM, and library research.

Scholarly material comes in two forms: journals/periodicals (which come out several times a year as a paper copy or an e-journal), and books (which are either integrated texts written by one author or an anthology/collection of articles each written by a different author). Newspaper and magazine articles are not considered scholarly sources. They can be used but only in addition to the required sources. Use relevant course material. Encyclopedia and dictionary sources may be of some help in the initial stages of your research but you should not rely on them. **INTERNET SOURCES ARE NOT PERMITTED FOR THIS ESSAY.**

EXAMPLE OF AN ARTICLE IN AN ANTHOLOGY

Larkin, J. (1997). "Sexual terrorism on the street: The moulding of young women into subordination." In A. Thomas & C. Kitzinger (Eds.). Sexual harassment: Contemporary feminist perspectives. (pp. 115-130). Buckingham: Open University Press.

EXAMPLE OF A BOOK WRITTEN BY ONE AUTHOR

Hamilton, R. (1996). Gendering the vertical mosaic. Toronto: Copp-Clark.

You might use only one chapter from such a book:

Hamilton, R. (1996). "The women's movement(s)." In Gendering the vertical mosaic. (pp. 43-62). Toronto: Copp-Clark.

EXAMPLE OF AN ARTICLE IN A JOURNAL/PERIODICAL

Jiwani, Y. (1999). "Erasing race: The story of Reena Virk." *Canadian Woman Studies* 19, 3: 178-184.

Given the large size of the class, there will be a lot of demand on the library resources. **Begin your work early in order to ensure access to the materials that you need.** Too often students mistakenly assume that finding and selecting the sources is easy. This is not the case. Budget the necessary amount of time. Note that the footnotes or bibliography of one article or book will often lead you to many other sources.

To do a successful essay means learning to select resources that are appropriate to the assignment. Each essay question is very broad; however, you are not being asked to examine all the issues connected to the topic but rather to focus in on a particular debate. This makes your choice of sources all the more important; they must be relevant to this debate. Before committing yourself to a particular source, then, read introductions and conclusions of articles and books to assess the relevance to your question. Remember that the quality of your final essay will be determined in part by the quality of the sources you use.

You might find that one side of the debate seems better represented in the source material. Look extensively and exhaustively for material that represents both sides. Do not rely too heavily on one or two sources: read widely looking for a variety of viewpoints. Do not assume that the better-represented side of the debate is a more 'correct' or 'better' view. Assess the arguments on their merits.

In some cases you may not find sources that directly address the debate you are considering. What is important, then, is to learn how to build an argument. For example, the question on women and sports focuses on women-only or mixed sports activities. So articles on women's different physical capabilities (which might make them less able to compete with men) might help you to build your arguments even though this material is not directly focused on the issue of single or co-ed sports. You can also construct the negative argument out of the positive, that is, many authors who might agree with co-ed sports will address the arguments used to reject this approach.

You may also find that you are more interested in one side of the debate. You do not need to write an essay that is equally balanced on both sides (since you are trying to develop an informed point of view and not an 'objective' presentation). However, you must address the challenges to the point of view you are trying to develop. In your final essay, you will need to take up directly the arguments of those who disagree with your point of view and explain the weaknesses in them, that is, why you reject them.

In your final essay, you will include only a portion of what you have learned. Trying to incorporate too much material can create as many problems as using too little material. The point is not to regurgitate and reproduce all the material but to select relevant sources that will help you answer the question and support your informed point of view.

Always check the country of origin of the source. Wherever possible, use Canadian sources. When you use sources from other countries, do not assume that the laws, social practices and information pertain to Canada. Note the date of the material; it should be fairly current to reflect recent debates.

5. CITATIONS AND REFERENCING

When you are reading material, carefully note all your sources. Be fastidious about keeping track of direct quotations and page numbers, indirect quotes and even general approaches to material. It is very difficult to go back later and re-trace your steps.

Disorderly research can often inadvertently lead to plagiarism which is a serious offence at the university. For penalties associated with plagiarism, see the sheet on Academic Honesty attached to your course outline. For your information, the original Latin term 'plagiarius' means to 'kidnap'.

Quotations are not a substitute for a clear argument in your own words. Quotations should give evidence for, and support your argument, not substitute for it. Frame your quotations with explanations. Do not insert quotations in your text with little explanation and do not use two quotations back to back. Always ask yourself why you are using the quotation: does it clarify, expand, and/or build your argument?

In-text referencing and bibliographies require precision and accuracy in order to communicate information about the source to your reader. If done properly, not only will the reference make it possible to find the source but will also let the reader know exactly what kind of material it is. For example, a full length book by one author (or two) is a completely different kind of source than an article in an anthology of articles, each one by a different author. Each article from an anthology must be referenced separately.

Use one citation style consistently and be scrupulous about following it exactly. For guidance on citation styles, go to <http://www.library.yorku.ca/ccm/ScottReference/reference/index.htm#>.

6. THESIS/ARGUMENT/INFORMED POINT OF VIEW

Once you have clarified the essay topic, you will gradually develop an informed point of view and move from your tentative thesis to an argument (the central organizing idea) for your essay. It is around this point of view and argument that your essay should be structured. Usually students start their research with some sense of what they think about the topic, and what they expect to find in the sources they read. Step #1 of your essay assignment asks you to write about these initial views.

As you read your sources, ask if the material supports or challenges your opinion. Be open to changing your views based on your research. Eventually you will develop an **informed** point of view which is not just an opinion but is built on thoughtful and thorough investigation that takes account of research and analysis done by others.

7. ESSAY INTRODUCTIONS

The introduction is probably the most important part of your essay. It operates as a signal for the reader and allows the reader access into the material, and to your thought process. It indicates to the reader what to expect and what is significant. *An effective introduction can make an extraordinary difference to the success of the essay.*

Do not keep secret from the reader the main point of your essay, or the conclusion you hope to come to. Too often students only clarify their position in their conclusion. Rather, you need to outline the position you will take in the introduction and develop it through the body of the essay. In this way your conclusion becomes a summary of what you have done. You may also indicate in the conclusion the significance or implications of what you have argued.

A successful introduction contains three key parts:

- a) a clear statement of the topic of the essay;
- b) a clear statement of your position/thesis/informed point of view on the topic, that is, what your essay attempts to demonstrate or argue;
- c) a clear outline of the organizational structure of the essay which identifies the major sections and the order in which they are presented.

Usually you write the introduction in its final form when the essay is finished and you are completely clear about the organization and thesis of the essay.

8. WRITING AND REWRITING

Many students are under the mistaken impression that good essay writers are able to write coherent, elegant essays in one draft. The truth is exactly the opposite: professional writers write and rewrite many times.

Plan to do four drafts. In the first draft, focus on structure and organization; in the second draft, focus on logic/clarity; in the third draft, focus on grammar/language and then do a final proofread. Recognizing the need to rewrite and revise, and building this process into your time management plan can relieve a lot of pressure. Too often the assumption that the first draft of the essay should be perfect causes writers' block. In the process of revision, look specifically for repetition which is a sign of a weak organization. If you find repetition, re-work your essay structure.

i) GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION, PARAGRAPHS ETC

The final draft of your essay should be technically perfect: no spelling, grammar or punctuation mistakes. But you should not be concerned with these issues when you are writing the first draft. In the first draft, focus on translating your outline into sentences and paragraphs in an effective sequence. When this is complete, you can focus one rewrite entirely on technique and grammar.

Note that you should not use the second person 'you'. Generally you should write in the third person; occasionally you might use the first person, especially to emphasize your own point of view.

ii) SIGNALLING THROUGHOUT THE ESSAY

Throughout the essay you need to signal to the reader what is happening. When you move from one key point or section to the next, let the reader know. Remember that the body of your essay should reflect the

structure that you outlined in your introduction. For a list of transition cues, see "Terms Commonly Used in Essay Topics" in the fall course kit.

IF YOU HAVE PROBLEMS WITH ESSAY WRITING, USE THE SERVICES OF THE CENTRE FOR ACADEMIC WRITING (Ross Building 3rd floor, 736-5134). <http://www.arts.yorku.ca/caw>