

WRITING AN ESSAY

Some thoughts to help you get started.

A: 'Golden rules' of essay-writing

1. STRUCTURE

Always make it clear to yourself and to your reader:

"Where you are, how you got there, and where you're going next".

At the beginning of every paragraph:

- State clearly what your main overall point in that paragraph is.
- Explain how it relates to / arises out of the previous point(s) you have made:
 - Are you starting a whole new topic? In this case state the relationship of your new subject to the central questions of the essay. If appropriate, state also its relationship to the previous major topic you have dealt with.
 - Are you introducing another in a series of points that all fall under the same general topic - e.g. different ways in the *Odyssey* in which the gods contribute to dramatic effect?
 - Are you introducing a problem or difficulty with, or contrast to, the point you have been dealing with in the previous paragraph?

At the end of a paragraph:

- Sum up what you have been saying.
 - Are you ending one major topic? Try to sum up your argument, discussion or conclusions, and explain how these may shed light on the central question(s) of the essay.
 - In every other case, try to sum up what you have been doing in the paragraph, e.g. if you have been giving a list of examples of 'hospitable behaviour', state the main thing these have in common, and above all what they show about values, attitudes etc.

In the course of each paragraph:

You may of course be making a series of subsidiary points within a paragraph. The same rule applies: each point should lead naturally and logically into the next. Always ask yourself:

"What is the relationship between this point and the last? Is it self-evident, or do I need to 'signal' what the progression of thought is?"

2. INVESTIGATION

As a general rule, it's better to be asking questions at the outset of an essay rather than making positive statements in answer to the essay topic. Save your positive statements for the end, after you have argued the case and given evidence for your conclusions.

e.g.: **Topic:** "'Homer is the first tragedian of Greek literature.' Do you agree?"

Begin: "In what ways might it be said that Homer is the first tragedian?"

not: "It is clear that Homer is/is not the first tragedian..."

3. ILLUSTRATION

Try to back up **every** statement you make with at least one example from the text (and give references).

--This makes your essay both more interesting and more persuasive.

--It is also a useful check on the validity of anything you want to say. Think if you can justify your statement from the text. If you cannot think of any example in support of your idea, or if you can think of more examples that contradict it, stop and ask yourself whether what you are saying is in fact valid at all.

4. ARGUMENT

Always argue any point you make; never simply state it. Your motto:

"X is so because... "	<u>not</u> just	"X is so"
"I think X because... "		"I think X"

--Explain each idea in detail.

--Explain the implications of that idea.

--Back it up with close reference to the text.

--Justify it against any possible objections (see under CRITICS).

This applies whether it is your own idea or one you have adapted / adopted from a critic.

5. CRITICS

Use their ideas intelligently.

--If you take an idea from a critic, **ALWAYS SAY SO**. If you want to use their words, quote, acknowledge and give references. If you prefer to put it in your own words, still acknowledge the source of the idea and give references.

--If you agree with what a critic says, try to develop the idea a little for yourself, by saying something like:

"Griffin (*Homer: The Odyssey* p. x) points out Y... This seems to me to reflect accurately Homer's intention. For instance..."

and go on to demonstrate the point from the text, if at all possible by finding your own examples.

--Feel free to disagree with critics. No-one is infallible. A useful test for judging the validity of critics' remarks (or for that matter your own views) is:

Think what objections could be raised, based on the text, to the point of view in question.

Weigh up the evidence for and against these objections.

You may decide that the objections can be dismissed for X, Y or Z reasons; or you may believe the objections hold good, and the critic's statement should be modified. As always, state all this in your discussion.

B: Possible outline for essay structure

These are guidelines, not a blueprint - don't feel you must follow this pattern slavishly!

1. INTRODUCTION: 1 paragraph

Define topic. It can help to try to rephrase the essay topic in your own words.

Split the essay topic up into a number of 'constituent' questions:

e.g.: **Topic:** "Is it right to regard Homer as the first tragedian?"

--Are there features and techniques that seem similar to the dramatic ones employed by tragedians to be found in the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*?

--What are they?

--What are the differences of form (including the nature of performance) between epic poetry and tragedy (drama)?

--Are there any differences between Homer's approach to his story / characters and the approach of tragic dramatists, which are independent of those dictated by the different *genre*?

--Is Homer using different means to achieve the same effect as a dramatic writer?

Define terms, where necessary.

E.g. what is meant by "an inorganic addition to the poems"? What are the exact implications in a literary context of the term "moralistic"? etc.

--A dictionary may help to get the precise sense of certain terms. Be careful, though, over the difference between the generally used modern sense of a word and its technical sense as applied to (Greek) literature - as in the case of "tragedian".

--If in any doubt, ask your tutor what they meant by a particular word.

Ask questions rather than making statements.

2. (optional) BACKGROUND INFORMATION : 1-2 paragraphs

Certain essay topics may require a brief survey of the relevant facts to provide an idea of the context within which the discussion is taking place. Do this as briefly as possible, selecting the facts necessary to understand the situation.

Start and finish such a section by relating your factual overview to the essay question:

--at the beginning, state what the need is for the information you are about to supply, in the context of this topic.

--at the end, state in what way the information has clarified the situation, to permit you to proceed with the discussion.

3. CENTRAL ARGUMENT : any no. of paragraphs, but usually about 6-8

General approach: Having divided up your topic into its main subsidiary questions, work out how many points you will need to make in dealing with each of these questions.

--Group together ones that naturally belong under the same heading - each group will normally make up one paragraph.

--Arrange the groups in logical sequence.

3. CENTRAL ARGUMENT (continued)

Types of essay:

There are 2 basic types of essay topic:

(a) '**Controversy' type:** asking you to give an opinion on a major question of interpretation. Ordinarily, this involves discussing the relative merits of 2 opposing views ('though it may involve doing the same for 3 or more different approaches).

(b) '**Exposition' type:** asking you to describe and discuss one major feature of, or one major subject area dealt with in, a work of literature.

Approaches:

Type (a): The basic approach here is:

--explain, illustrate and give arguments in favour of 1 of the possible views. (Where appropriate, give any arguments against this view that are not covered by arguments in favour of an opposing view - sounds confusing but it does sometimes happen!)

--do the same for the opposing view (or for however many alternative approaches you are discussing).

--compare the arguments, weighing up the evidence and considering the relative force of the points on either side.

--come to your conclusions as to which view seems to you the more persuasive. You may of course decide that a compromise between the two (or more) is preferable, or that both views seem to you equally valid - but still give clear reasons why you think this is so.

Type (b): Here you follow the 'General Approach' outlined above. (See also "Golden Rules" under 1. STRUCTURE and 4. ARGUMENT.) You may, however, find that within your discussion there are aspects which require to be considered as 'controversy-type' questions on a smaller scale - in which case, for that part of your essay, proceed as above, but more briefly.

Paragraph structure

1. Topic sentence: state main point of paragraph.

2. Expansion or explanation of topic (1-2 sentences) see under A1. STRUCTURE

3. Discussion of topic: --argument --refutation
--illustration --explanation
--demonstration --comparison

4. Concluding sentence: sum up.

4. CONCLUSION

--Re-state central question(s) asked.

--Sum up the conclusions arrived at.

--State the importance of these conclusions for understanding and appreciating the work as a whole.

In particular, if it is a 'controversy-type' essay, state what difference it makes to hold one or the other view. Do this especially if you haven't been able to decide which is the more valid.

This will usually take only 1 paragraph, but may take 2 or 3.