

Essay Writing – Advanced

Martin Booker

This paper builds on Essay Writing – Essentials. While getting the basics right is the most important part of essay writing, there are a couple of points that can help you further boost your essay writing skills. The aim of this paper is to discuss some of these, and give you ideas of how you can enhance your essays, as well as better understand the marking descriptors we use at the school. It could help you to break that glass ceiling into the 70s, but it can also assist you if you are struggling to get into the 50s or 60s, as it points to some of the mistakes that are often made. The following are just some suggestions, you don't have to follow all of them, but you could think of trying some of them. Let's start with the school's higher marking descriptors:

A1 (90-100%) An answer that fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' (see below) and in addition shows an exceptional degree of insight and independent thought, together with flair in tackling issues, yielding a product that is deemed to be of potentially publishable quality, in terms of scholarship and originality.

A2 (80-89%) An authoritative answer that provides a fully effective response to the question. It should show a command of the literature and an ability to integrate that literature and go beyond it. The analysis should achieve a high level of quality early on and sustain it through to the conclusion. Sources should be used accurately and concisely to inform the answer but not dominate it. There should be a sense of a critical and committed argument, mindful of other interpretations but not afraid to question them. Presentation and the use of English should be commensurate with the quality of the content.

A3 (70-79%) A sharply-focused answer of high intellectual quality, which adopts a comprehensive approach to the question and maintains a sophisticated level of analysis throughout. It should show a willingness to engage critically with the literature and move beyond it, using the sources creatively to arrive at its own independent conclusions.

B (60-69%) A very good answer that shows qualities beyond the merely routine or acceptable. The question and the sources should be addressed directly and fully. The work of other authors should be presented critically. Effective use should be made of the whole range of the literature. There should be no significant errors of fact or interpretation. The answer should proceed coherently to a convincing conclusion. The quality of the writing and presentation (especially referencing) should be without major blemish. Within this range a particularly strong answer will be graded B+; a more limited answer will be graded B-.

Summary: Getting into the 50s and 60s is mostly about getting the basics right (structure, sources, referencing, coherence, writing style etc.). Getting into the higher 60s, 70s or higher asks you for, in addition to getting the basics right:

- (a) A high intellectual quality throughout the essay (70s)
- (b) Engage critically with the literature and move beyond it (70s), or even
- (c) 'Command' of the literature (80s)
- (d) Exceptional degree of insight (90s)
- (e) Flair in tackling issues (90s)

How can you get there? First of all, I think it makes sense to distinguish between what you can do in the reading and the writing phases, to acquire these qualities.

Reading Phase

This is where you should acquire points (c) command of literature and (d) exceptional degree of insight, as well as laying the foundations for (a) and (b). The more obvious point is that you should read quite a lot. To have a 'command of the literature', you need to know all the important arguments and positions in the particular field you are looking at. This provides the basis for an 'authoritative answer' (80s descriptor).

It is not just about quantity of reading though. There is also a qualitative aspect. If you follow the following instructions, you are more likely to arrive at the 'exceptional degree of insight' that the 90s require: Spend plenty of time not just reading, but *processing* the reading as well. Don't just passively take in what other people have written for you, but actively engage with the literature. It is important to note that this should start in the reading phase, not when you are already in the midst of writing up. Here are several suggestions of what you could do:

- Relate what you are learning to 'real-life' situations.
- Think how the solution to one problem may help you solve others.
- Create a diagram or flow chart or mind map to represent a topic.
- Look for underlying themes or principles.
- Think about inter-relationships.
- Look for similarities or differences.
- Look for points for and against an argument.
- Critically evaluate what you are learning.
- Discuss topics with a friend/ group of friends.¹

NB: You are also more likely to *retain* detailed information if it is related to an underlying understanding. This will help you for exams as well. My suggestion would be to set aside a specific time for these exercises, e.g. one hour a day, so that it becomes an integral part of your reading and learning strategy. If you are getting lost in too much information, some of these techniques (like mind-mapping) can also help you order your thoughts.

All these exercises will make you look at the essay topic from different angles, understand the varying perspectives, and gain greater insight. You will feel more confident about your understanding of the topic, your creative thinking will be stimulated, and you will be ready to tackle the writing phase. Note how you are now 'mastering' the topic, confident of your ideas, rather than just coping with it and not really sure what you are doing. Don't be too perfectionist though, you will never know everything! (see also note on procrastination at the end of this paper).

¹ This list is taken from the Student Counselling Service's [guide to exam success](#), highly recommended resource.

Writing Phase

If you have followed the advice for the reading phase you have already done the groundwork for a seriously good essay. You only have to put it to paper now. The most important thing (just to repeat this again), is to get the basics right. Try to improve on these in every essay that you write.

So how does an excellent essay that 'goes beyond the literature' (70s descriptor) distinguish itself from less highly rated essays? One of the key points is that it doesn't just reproduce what the readings are saying, but it employs these readings as tools for its own string of argument or discussion. The tone of the essay will be such that the student knows what they are saying (based, of course, on sound knowledge), and confidently pursues his/her/their own argument. As this still sounds quite abstract, the following are a collection of ideas of how you can boost your essay accordingly, and common mistakes that you should try to avoid. The selection is based on my experience with marking student essays, the mistakes that are indeed often made, as well as the questions that I am often asked.

1. How critical do I have to be? SPS loves critical students (60s descriptor) because we want to see that you are not just following what other people have said, but can set your own priorities, and judge for yourself. This does not mean, however, that you always have to tear apart other people's work. Be critical, but also be fair. And be critical of criticism you read. You will be surprised how often scholars seem to criticise each other's work without seeming to have read it carefully, or (deliberately or not) misunderstanding each other. Don't be the one to reproduce these mistakes! Also be aware that being critical in an essay does not mean constantly criticising other authors, but it often simply means discussing the strengths and weaknesses of a certain approach, and coming to an informed conclusion about them. Being critical is thus about *avoiding* uncritically adopting whatever other authors have said, and instead having a filter system through which you critically evaluate the readings.

2. How much of my own opinion can I use? The essay marking descriptors ask you to "engage critically with the literature and move beyond it, using the sources creatively to arrive at [your] own independent conclusions" (70s). This does not mean you should always add your own personal preferences and comments. First of all, it is important that any opinion that you state is based on the readings or on substantiated 'facts'. However, moving beyond the literature can simply mean that there is additional insight, additional to the literature that is already there. This might sound a big ask, but is actually achieved quite easily if you follow the different recommendations from the reading phase. You will see e.g. that just by comparing two different approaches you might already come to new insights.

3. How much should I cite? How do I best go about it? The following is a good website, which I think gives you some really good ideas about how to use references, how much of them, and to what effect: <http://www.uc.utoronto.ca/quotations>. This page gives you concrete examples of how you should use other author's ideas in support of your own argument/discussion, rather than just reproducing what they are saying. In particular, if you follow the advice on introducing quotes ("In Arendt's words..." etc.), just doing this will give your essay a more authoritative voice and change the tone of your writing for the better (if you are not doing it already). This kind of quoting shows that you are enlisting other authors in support of your argument rather than simply reproducing their ideas. There are other good websites on this topic which you can find with a simple google search.

4. How do I write a good conclusion? The conclusion is your answer to the essay question. First of all, a good conclusion should be based on an intelligent discussion in the main part of the essay. If the main part is good, a good conclusion should not be too difficult to achieve. Secondly, it is usually a good idea to think of a differentiated answer. You might agree with a statement on one level, but you might not agree on another level / in a different context etc. (or you might agree on both levels – just make clear there *are* different aspects to it). Sometimes, especially when the question asks you to review or assess an approach/article/argument, it makes sense to look at the purpose of the approach/article/argument. Author B might have criticised author A for not doing x, but maybe A deliberately chose not to do x, because it wasn't really the purpose of her study. Have an eye on the different contexts, demands and purposes of texts, as well as political implications that are involved in the topic you are looking at.

5. How can I be original? Don't overthink this. Usually what is seen as an original contribution is fairly simple stuff. It can be e.g. bringing two different ideas together in a clever way. It can be finding a compromise between two approaches that seem to contradict each other, but on second sight (or if you look at different levels of analysis – see above) don't really do so. It can be applying an established theory to a new example – e.g. you could think about using your own generic example through which you run the whole essay (if appropriate for the essay question). Note how all these ways of achieving 'flair' and 'originality' (90s descriptor) are rooted in the recommendations for the reading phase.

6. Keep asking questions. Doing social and political research is all about asking questions, and (if you are lucky) finding answers to them. So don't stop asking questions, keep an open mind for alternative explanations, keep questioning your ideas and concepts (as well as other authors' ideas and concepts), be aware of their limitations, and anticipate counterarguments. This reflective approach should also show in the way you write, e.g. in how you take different interpretations into account and discuss them.

C. Lastly, a note on procrastination: If you regularly suffer from procrastination (like an estimated 80% of students²), this paper might have just made it worse, as you might now feel added pressure to do really well in the essay. Be aware that the reason for continuous procrastination is not because you are lazy (that's only the symptom), but it is quite likely that it has to do with perfectionism about the task. It is thus also important you don't get too perfectionist. As outlined at the beginning, not all of the above is necessary to achieve great grades, but some of the above might help you in doing so. The paper listed in footnote 1 also has a section on procrastination (p. 10). Do look it up.



² See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29570615>, a good read on the 'war on procrastination'.