Hiding in Plain Sight: Lessons from the SSPS essay marking descriptors for good (and excellent) essay writing

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Introduction

Edinburgh University's School of Social and Political Science essay marking descriptors are an obscure beast. On the one hand, they provide what seem like clear criteria for all the different grade ranges, clearly laying out what students need to do to achieve the different grades. On the other hand, however, these criteria are highly abstract, and it requires a good amount of context knowledge to understand what they mean in practice. This paper attempts to translate these abstract descriptors into practical advice, and suggests concrete steps that can be taken to improve essay writing. It starts out with a closer look at the different marking descriptors, and identifies five dimensions of essay writing implicit in the descriptors. This initial analysis is then followed by a detailed discussion of the dimensions identified, namely (1) understanding of the topic, (2) analysis of the problem, (3) the use of literature, (4) language and presentation, and (5) structure and organisation. Each of these sections attempts to explain what the respective category means, what mistakes should be avoided, and how to do well in it.

Essay marking descriptors – Main Issues and Categories

To start with, I have copied and pasted below the school's essay marking descriptors in full length. These were designed both for students, to have a better understanding of the criteria on which they are being graded, but also for markers, to provide more specific guidelines for what exactly to grade on, and to ensure consistency of grading across the school. Keep in mind that whoever marks your essay will be using these criteria, and they will form the basis for their decision as to what grade range your essay will be categorised in.

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 B- (60-63%) B (64-66%) B+ (67-69%)

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-.

C C- (50-53%) C (54-56%) C+ (57-59%)

A satisfactory answer with elements of the routine and predictable. It should be generally accurate and firmly based in the reading. It may draw upon a restricted range of sources but should not just re-state one particular source. Other authors should be presented accurately, if rather descriptively. The materials included should be relevant, and there should be evidence of basic understanding of the topic in question. Factual errors and misunderstandings of concepts and authors may occasionally be present but should not be a dominant impression. The quality of writing, referencing and presentation should be acceptable. Within this range a stronger answer will be graded C+; a weaker answer will be graded C-.

D D- (40-43%) D (44-46%) D+ (47-49%)

A passable answer which understands the question, displays some academic learning and refers to relevant literature. The answer should be intelligible and in general factually accurate, but may well have deficiencies such as restricted use of sources or academic argument, over-reliance on lecture notes, poor expression, and irrelevancies to the question asked. The general impression may be of a rather poor effort, with weaknesses in conception or execution. It might also be the right mark for a short answer that at least referred to the main points of the issue. Within this range a stronger answer will be graded D+; a bare pass will be graded D-.

E (30-39%)

An answer with evident weaknesses of understanding but conveying the sense that with a fuller argument or factual basis it might have achieved a pass. It might also be a short and fragmentary answer with merit in what is presented but containing serious gaps.

F (20-29%)

An answer showing seriously inadequate knowledge of the subject, with little awareness of the relevant issues or literature, major omissions or inaccuracies, and pedestrian use of inadequate sources.

G (10-19%)

An answer that falls far short of a passable level by some combination of short length, irrelevance, lack of intelligibility, factual inaccuracy and lack of acquaintance with reading or academic concepts.

H (0-9%)

An answer without any academic merit which usually conveys little sense that the course has been followed or of the basic skills of essay-writing.

Reading through these descriptors, you will have noticed certain themes they keep touching on, whether this is 'use of literature', 'referencing', 'understanding', 'analysis' etc. To order this in a more systematic way, I have copied the different items from the descriptors and pasted them, below, into categories, representing what in my view can be identified as the five recurring themes. They are (1) understanding of the topic, (2) analysis of the problem, (3) Reading and use of the literature, (4) Language and Presentation, (5) Structure and Organisation. Furthermore, I have ordered these into two overarching categories, distinguishing between those dimensions that reference knowledge and understanding, in other words the substance that is needed for an essay, and those that are more about organisation and presentation, in other words the craft of writing.

The tables below show the grade ranges 30s and above (as anything below the 30s rarely happens, and also does not exactly provide much inspiration). Some of the items fit into several of the categories, so I have pasted them into several accordingly.

Substance: Understanding and Explaining

Category	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s
Understanding of topic	Evident weaknesses of understanding but conveying the sense that with a fuller argument or factual basis it might have achieved a pass	Understands the question	Should be generally accurate. there should be evidence of basic understanding of the topic in question. Factual errors and misunderstandings of concepts and authors may occasionally be present but should not be a dominant impression.	Very good answer that shows qualities beyond the merely routine or acceptable. There should be no significant errors of fact or interpretation.		An authoritative answer that provides a fully effective response to the question.	fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' [80s] plus exceptional degree of insight and independent thought.
Analysis of the problem				The work of other authors should be presented critically.	high intellectual quality. maintains a sophisticated level of analysis throughout, own independent conclusions	The analysis should achieve a high level of quality early on and sustain it through to the conclusion	fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' [80s] plus exceptional degree of insight and independent thought. Flair in tackling issues. potentially publishable quality, in terms of scholarship and originality

Evident in these two categories is how they build on one another. 'Understanding' is mentioned from the 30s through to the 90s (with an omission in the 70s). This shows an expectation to at least demonstrate some level of understanding in the lower marks, and to excel in the higher ones. The second category of 'analysis' on the other hand, only starts to become relevant in the 60s. This indeed is what often makes the difference between a 50s and 60s essay. While some 50s essays might be

solid discussions that describe the different aspects of the topic reasonably well (that is, they show good understanding), if they fail to engage in the critical analysis and explanation of the analysis dimension, they will struggle to break into the 60s bracket.

'Flair' and 'originality', finally, are reserved for 90s essays. This is an elusive quality, the gold dust on your essay, and while it only features explicitly in the 90s marking descriptor, this does not mean you cannot incorporate some flair and originality to boost your essay even among the slightly lower grade ranges.

Craft: Presentation and Organisation

Category	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s
Use of the literature	With a fuller argument or factual basis it might have achieved a pass	Displays some academic learning and refers to relevant literature. in general factually accurate, but may well have deficiencies such as restricted use of sources or academic argument, over-reliance on lecture notes	Firmly based in the reading. may draw upon a restricted range of sources but should not just re-state one particular source. Other authors should be presented accurately, if rather descriptively. The quality of writing, referencing and presentation should be acceptable	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. The quality of the writing and presentation (especially referencing) should be without major blemish	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	Should show a command of the literature and an ability to integrate that literature and go beyond it. 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.	Fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' [80s]
Language and Presentation		The answer should be intelligible, but might e.g. include poor expression	The quality of writing, referencing and presentation should be acceptable	The quality of the writing and presentation (especially referencing) should be without major blemish		Presentation and the use of English should be commensurate with the quality of the content	Fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' [80s]
Structure / Organisation		Contains irrelevancies to the question asked	The materials included should be relevant	The answer should proceed coherently to a convincing conclusion	A sharply-focused answer. adopts a comprehensive approach to the question		Fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' [80s]

The category 'use of the literature' builds, of course, on the substance you have acquired in the above category of 'understanding of the topic'. Here, however, it is not so much about *what* you have done in terms of the reading, but *how* you then use that knowledge, and how you build it into, and present it, in the text of your essay. It ranges from deficiencies in the 30s and 40s, covering the basics in the 50s and 60s, to using it for an expert analysis in the 70s and above.

The category 'language and presentation' only features in some of the grade ranges, and looking at how they are integrated in the respective marking descriptors for the different grade ranges, it is notable that they tend to be included towards the end, almost as an afterthought. I discuss why this might be the case in the section on this category below.

'Structure and organisation', finally, moves from questions of relevance in the 40s and 50s, to coherence (60s) and focus (70s). In my view, this category is (at the moment of writing) a little underdeveloped, as there is more to structure and organisation than just these general orientation points.

Apart from this, however, these marking descriptors are notably comprehensive. They cover all aspects of essay writing. And by doing so, they provide an effective basis for thinking further about essay writing, a base camp, so to speak, for climbing the higher ridges of the essay Everest. In the following, this paper uses these categories, one by one, as a departure point, and derives practical and actionable steps for how to enhance your essay writing. In short, it translates the abstract descriptors into concrete advice.

Essay marking descriptors – Categories in Detail

This section goes into detail on all of the six categories individually, pointing out the typical mistakes to be avoided, and how to do well in each of the categories. This is followed by some thoughts on how to achieve this and where the work needs to be put in. I apply a distinction here between the reading and writing phases of essay writing, but of course this is an analytical distinction, and in reality they often overlap. The respective sections are then rounded off with feedback examples for the different grade ranges for illustration. These examples can also help you better understand feedback you might have received on your own essay(s), and specifically how this feedback signposts the specific grade ranges, and links the contents of your essay to the respective essay marking descriptors.

Understanding of the topic

30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s
Evident weaknesses of understanding but conveying the sense that with a fuller argument or factual basis it might have achieved a pass	Understands the question	Should be generally accurate. there should be evidence of basic understanding of the topic in question. Factual errors and misunderstandings of concepts and authors may occasionally be present but should not be a dominant impression.	Very good answer that shows qualities beyond the merely routine or acceptable. There should be no significant errors of fact or interpretation.		An authoritative answer that provides a fully effective response to the question.	Fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' [80s] plus exceptional degree of insight and independent thought.

What is it?

Simply put, this category refers to your knowledge of the topic. A typical 50s essay shows knowledge of at least the broader points of the topic. For the higher grade ranges you need to demonstrate more detailed knowledge, and ideally also awareness of the different debates in the field, the different perspectives and approaches from different writers. The development from the lower to the higher grades is thus where a broad understanding of the main points moves into a detailed understanding of not just the main points, but also the different aspects and nuances of the topic.

What to avoid?

Simply put, avoid not knowing enough to be in a position to write the essay. You should have read at least the main readings before you even start writing. A common beginner's mistake is to begin writing too early in the process, before having acquired enough knowledge, with the idea of filling in the blanks at a later point. Don't do this. Build up enough substance first.

Also, make sure you have really understood what other authors have written, and represent their ideas accurately. This is rarely achieved by merely looking at the quotes from the lecture slides, or at how author A was quotes by author B. For a fuller understanding, you do need to read at least some of the original texts.

How to do it well?

The gold standard is aptly formulated in the 80s descriptor of 'an authoritative answer'. This means writing like an authority on the topic would write, aware of the different debates and perspectives on the topic, the bigger as well as the smaller points, with a 'command of the literature'. This, of course, is not easy to achieve, but the closer you get to this ideal, the better you will be doing in this category. Realistically, it is not expected that a typical undergraduate student becomes an authority on a topic that they have probably only just started learning about. That is why this is reserved for the 80s grade range, an exceptionally high mark by Edinburgh University standards. But even to move from the 50s to the 60s, you need to move in the same direction, of adding substance and understanding.

How to get there - reading phase or writing phase?

The groundwork for doing well in this category unsurprisingly is in the reading phase of essay writing. Read plenty of literature, and take good notes. It also makes sense, however, to build different kinds of processing activities into your reading strategy, which will help you engage more actively with the readings. You could, for example, create mind maps of the topic, flow charts of the readings, categorise the different aspects you come across in the different readings (as I have done in this paper), look for underlying theories or assumptions, think about how one text compares to another on specific aspects of the topic etc. This will help you gain a more in-depth understanding of both the bigger picture and of how the details are connected to one another. And it will help you gain a better overview of the different discussions and debates within the topic. It is through this kind of processing that you become (or move towards becoming) an 'authority' on the topic. So this category not just about what and how much you read, but also how you process the knowledge you are gaining, and how you integrate the different readings with one another.

Typical feedback comments

> 50s: "This section shows a good understanding of the basics of the topic. It does not engage much with the details, however, and overall remains a little too general and vague."
>
> 60s: "This section shows a very good understanding of the different aspects of this topic. It engages nicely with some of the details. What is maybe missing a little is [now often comes a reference to our second category, on not just understanding but also *analysing the topic*] a more decisive analysis of the topic. For example, you could point a little more towards not just how things work, but also the 'why' question, the cause-effect relationships in these examples."

70s: “Excellent analysis of not just the bigger picture of this topic, but also nice attention to detail. Shows great in-depth understanding, nicely summarising the relevant readings, but also [again a reference to the analysis dimension] nicely integrating this with your own interpretations.”

Analysis of the problem

30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s
			The work of other authors should be presented critically.	High intellectual quality. maintains a sophisticated level of analysis throughout, own independent conclusions	The analysis should achieve a high level of quality early on and sustain it through to the conclusion	Fulfils all of the criteria for ‘A2’ [80s] plus exceptional degree of insight and independent thought. Flair in tackling issues. potentially publishable quality, in terms of scholarship and originality

What is it?

This category becomes relevant if your ambition is to achieve a mark in the higher grade ranges. Looking at the marking descriptors, it is notable that it only features from the 60s upwards. The literal meaning of the word ‘analysis’ is the breaking down of something into its constituent parts, and this is indeed the essence of this category. Analysis means identifying what different parts there are, and what different details need to be taken into consideration. However, analysis is not just about *identifying* the different parts. In a broader sense, it is also about how these different parts work together, the mechanics and functioning of the machine if you like. How are they connected, what are the cause-and-effect relationships (if it is possible to infer such)? And lastly, there’s the ‘critical’ element, asking the question of what kinds of power dynamics are behind specific social phenomena, or behind specific statements people make. What kinds of interests are at play here, what hierarchies (for example political hierarchies, or hierarchies along the lines of class, race or gender) have produced a specific outcome, a specific institution, a specific social norm?

What to avoid?

There are three ways in which the analysis dimension typically falls short in some essays: First, a common error is when the essay discussion is simply too descriptive. Description of a topic is, of course, important. You do need to describe what the thing is. But you shouldn’t stop here. You need to go beyond a superficial description, add detail, and also discuss at least to some extent how the phenomenon works, and why it is the way it is. Don’t just answer the ‘what’ question (what is this phenomenon?), but also the ‘how’ (how does it work) and the ‘why’ (what caused it? What interest/power is manifested in it?).

Another way in which an essay can be too descriptive is if it only repeats what the different readings are saying, and in this sense merely describes the readings. They need to be integrated into your own analytical framework and interpretation.

Second, the opposite of being too descriptive is also to be avoided: do not rush to judgments and conclusions without a good descriptive element first. A good analysis always builds on a good description, and if you don’t have a good basis for making your analytical claims, your argument will be speculative, and not carry much weight.

Lastly, avoid being uncritical. This relates both to how you engage with the readings, and how you discuss the topic. Do not take as given whatever you read, and always look at different

interpretations of a specific phenomenon. What you really want to avoid is becoming the spokesperson for a certain ideology, and reproducing, for example, state propaganda. If your paper reads like a government press release, you've done something wrong.

How to do it well?

The overall organisation and structure of the essay play an important role in this. You need to take decisions on what points you include, and how you connect them with one another. If the literal meaning of analysis is breaking something down into its constituent parts, this is where you decide what these constituent parts are. I discuss this aspect in more detail in the section on structure and organisation below.

A powerful tool you can use to give your essay a decisively analytical direction is to build it around an explicit argument. This starts with an arguable statement that is introduced in the introduction, and pursued throughout the essay. To use the example of my Essay Writing Essentials paper, if the essay question is 'Evaluate Weber and Marx's accounts of capitalism', your argument as introduced in the introduction could be 'I am going to argue that Weber is most insightful on X, but Marx is important for Y'. Throughout the essay you then relate the discussion to this argument, by signposting it in strategic places (for example, after a paragraph that looks at how the two authors discussed a specific aspect of capitalism, say labour relations, you then put this into relation to your argument, with a quick discussion on which you find more insightful on this aspect). The conclusion, finally, summarises the different points of the essay discussion, again in relation to your overall argument. This is a simple and effective way of enhancing the critical analysis element of your essay, and at the minimum, it helps you avoid being overly descriptive, by building that own interpretation of yours into the very design of the essay.

Much of this analysis dimension, however, happens on the level of how you organise the paragraphs of your essay. Here, you need to make sure that you write with clarity, and address all the relevant questions that need to be addressed in order for a critical analysis to gain traction. When you proofread your essay, check if you have covered all the relevant bases. These are usually the 'what' (what is this phenomenon?), 'who' (who exactly is doing what?), 'how' (how does this phenomenon work in practice?), and the 'why' (why is it the way it is? What are the cause-effect relationships? What power/interest/hierarchical relationship is manifested here?). This is not a formula, however, that always applies, as in some instances the discussion might require you to focus on some questions more than others, and in other cases some questions might overlap. In other words, you do not need to cover all these question in every single paragraph, and there is no need to panic if you haven't. But there should be a sense of covering at least to some extent all these important aspects in your essay overall.

'Flair' and 'originality' (90s descriptors) might seem like elusive qualities, but they can actually be achieved relatively easily – with some qualifications, though. This could be, for example, combining two theories in an innovative way that has not been done before. Or it could mean using one poignant example you have yourself developed (this has to be a really good example, though) to discuss throughout an entire essay. Or it can mean solving a contradiction that seemingly exists between two approaches to a topic. This, indeed, is not too difficult, but only, first, if you already know a lot about this topic, and second, if you are good at making these kinds of connections. And a word of warning: If you do not know enough about the topic, these suggestions can actually backfire. You could end up making claims about how to reconcile two opposing theories, when actually your claim has already been examined and potentially dismissed in some of the readings you haven't looked at. Or while you think your example works really well for the essay, someone with

more knowledge (usually this is your marker) might be able to quickly point out different ways in which it actually doesn't work. Only follow the suggestions of this paragraph, then, if you feel confident you know enough to make the claims you intend to make.

Another way of achieving originality and an essay of 'potentially publishable quality' is if you collect your own data (for example, conduct interviews, questionnaires, or do a discourse analysis), and do this in a way that it addresses a gap in the knowledge that exists on the topic. This, however, is usually reserved for dissertations, and outside the scope of a standard essay. In any case, it should never come at the cost of building on the existing literature. And like with the above, you should know what you are doing.

Another point that is important for an effective critical analysis is an effective use of the literature, which is discussed below. You can follow all the steps suggested here, but if you only build the discussion on, say, one or two readings, this can fatally undermine all your critical analysis credentials.

How to get there - reading phase or writing phase?

A good analysis builds on a good understanding of the different aspects of the topic. This means that the reading phase is important. What will help especially in developing an analytical approach to the readings is to follow the above advice of not just reading the readings but also processing them, with the use of mind maps, looking for inter-connections etc. Good, critical understanding is what a good analysis builds on.

However, this analysis dimension is to a large extent, of course, about how you write about the topic, starting with an overall argument that puts the analysis centre stage, and then writing analytically in the ways discussed above, with a particular eye on the organisation of your paragraphs.

Typical feedback comments

> 50s: "The description of the different points is solid, and shows a good basic understanding. However, what is missing a little is a more decisively analytical engagement with the topic. Pay more attention to the 'why' questions, to the reasons behind why things work the way they work."
>
> 60s: "Strong discussion so far, showing not just very good understanding, but also a good critical analysis of the different aspects of the topic. What is maybe missing a bit – that is, if your ambition is for that 70s bracket – is a stronger analytical framework, a bigger theory or argument that binds these different points together more effectively."
>
> 70s: "Great analysis here. The discussion shows really good understanding and insight, with a nice focus not just on the 'what' and 'how', but also on the 'why' question of this phenomenon.

Use of the literature

30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s
With a fuller argument or factual basis it might have achieved a pass	Displays some academic learning and refers to relevant literature. in general factually accurate, but may well have deficiencies such as restricted use of sources or academic argument, over-reliance on lecture notes	Firmly based in the reading. may draw upon a restricted range of sources but should not just re-state one particular source. Other authors should be presented accurately, if rather descriptively. The quality of writing, referencing and presentation should be acceptable	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. The quality of the writing and presentation (especially referencing) should be without major blemish	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	Should show a command of the literature and an ability to integrate that literature and go beyond it. 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.	Fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' [80s]

What is it?

This dimension is what distinguishes academic writing from all other forms of writing. Academic writing always starts with an appreciation of what has been written on the topic before. What kind of research is there, what kinds of interpretations of this topic have other writers come up with? Only on the basis of this appreciation, academic essays then proceed to build their own analyses and interpretations. The above section on 'understanding' has established what should be the basis of a good use of the literature (plenty of reading). This section is different in that it is not so much concerned with the understanding that comes from reading, but with how this literature is then integrated effectively into your essay discussion.

What to avoid?

In terms of referencing, there are two extremes you want to avoid: First, too few references. The 40s descriptor mentions 'deficiencies such as restricted use of sources', and to qualify for the 50s, you should 'not just re-state one particular source'. In short, you don't want to write an essay that is not sufficiently based on the readings. Factual claims (such as a statement about how common specific attitudes are, or the occurrence of specific phenomena) always need to be referenced. And then there are interpretations and theories (which are not necessarily factual claims, but statements from other authors) that need to be referenced, too. Also, you should not just use one source at a time, especially when discussing issues for which there are different interpretations, as you want to bring those different interpretations into your discussion, demonstrating that you are aware of the different sides of the story.

But there is also the other extreme, over-referencing. This is typically an essay that comes across more like a collection of quotes from other people, rather than developing its own argument. Or the text might be written in your own voice, but it is still only paraphrasing other people's work, leading to an overly descriptive essay as discussed above for the analysis dimension. It might also be a text that is splattered with sometimes unnecessary, unspecific and overly general references, indulging in what is often referred to as 'reference-dropping', where there is an artificial bolstering of the bibliography through adding references, but without adding substance.

How to do it well?

Once more, the 80s descriptors define the gold standard here:

> [The essay] should show a command of the literature and an ability to integrate that literature and go beyond it. 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.

What, however, does this mean, and how does it translate into practice?

There are several points to consider here. Let's start with the right attitude. Once you have internalised this, everything else should easily flow from it. A useful metaphor here is provided by Graff and Birkenstein's *They say / I say: The moves that matter in academia.*[1] Their suggestion is to picture yourself entering a conversation, a room full of people talking about a specific topic. They have all done their homework on the topic, researched, contextualised and theorised it. As the new person in the room, the first thing you do is listen to these experts (this is the 'they say' of the book title). You will work your way around the room, and get a sense of who is good in, say, a bigger-picture view, who is an expert in specific aspects you are interested in, and who might add some particularly intriguing insights. In other words, by talking to the people in the room / reading the different authors' work, you gain an overview of the literature, as well as an understanding of the details of the topic (precisely the cornerstones of a good understanding, as discussed above for the understanding dimension). In your essay, this should then manifest itself in you summarising and discussing what 'they say'. And building on this, you then form your own interpretation of the topic, of what you think is particularly poignant or interesting, or needs to be highlighted. This is the 'I say' of the book title. And these are the broad outlines of how this dimension works, and how to do it well.

Some of the finer points: The 80s descriptors, for example, tell you that '[s]ources should be used […] to inform the answer but not dominate it'. This means you need to find the right balance between 'they say' and 'I say'. There is no magic formula to this, unfortunately, but over time, you will learn to calibrate it, and find a balance that works, and that avoids the two extremes of not using enough literature and relying too much on it. It is also worth being aware that some text passages (such as literature reviews) will rely more on 'they say', and others (in particular the conclusion of your essay or dissertation) will have stronger elements of 'I say'. Different topics will also be skewed more towards one or the other. If a lot of research already exists on the topic, there is more 'they say' to cover, as compared to a topic that is less well explored, and allows more room for your own interpretation. The bottom line, however, is that your own analysis or opinion should always be based on the existing research and literature, and your own interpretations should always be in relation to the already existing interpretations of other authors; and that this is expressed in how you use the literature in your writing, providing references and attribution as appropriate.

Another important aspect of how to do well in this category is not just *that* you refer to literature, but also *how* you do it. First, good use of literature usually has a mix of more general and more specific references. General references, that is where you refer to the main point or one of the main points of a book (or several books) or article(s), demonstrate that you have an overview of the topic,

[1] Graff, G., & Birkenstein, C. (2010). *They say / I say: The moves that matter in academic writing* (Second ed.). New York: W.W. Norton.

and the discussions surrounding it. More specific references, that is where you engage with a more detailed point or interpretation made in one of the readings (and typically where you also have direct quotes rather than just paraphrasing), show that you don't just have an overview of the topic but also an understanding of the nuances. Note how this corresponds with the discussion above about what makes a good understanding of the topic (both an overview, and an awareness of, and attention to some of the details).

A second aspect of how to use literature well is to have a good strategy and rationale for when to use direct quotes and when to paraphrase. There are different ways of doing this right. Some writers use direct quotes more frequently, and usually shorter ones. Other authors rarely use direct quotes, but when they do, they tend to be longer and more substantial. Again, this is something you will learn to calibrate over time, and it is a good idea to seek feedback from your markers. There is not enough space here to go into much detail, but one really good overview that I often recommend is from the University of Toronto's writing advice service, which has excellent recommendations for how much to quote, how to introduce quotes, and what verbs and phrases to use. For the question of whether to quote directly or paraphrase, it states:

> Consider quoting a passage from one of your sources if any of the following conditions holds: (1) The language of the passage is particularly elegant or powerful or memorable. (2) You wish to confirm the credibility of your argument by enlisting the support of an authority on your topic. (3) The passage is worthy of further analysis. (4) You wish to argue with someone else's position in considerable detail.

Whether you follow these recommendations to the letter, or maybe have a slightly different approach, the important thing is that you have a rationale, and direct quotes are not employed randomly but strategically.

How to get there - reading phase or writing phase?

If the *understanding* dimension is mostly rooted in the reading phase, this dimension is the other side of the same coin; it is to some extent also about reading, but mostly about how it manifests itself in your writing. The two go hand-in-hand. In the reading phase, you will need to take good notes, and earmark passages of the texts that you might want to use as quotes (don't forget to take note of the page number of the potential quote, as you will need this for your reference). The focus of this dimension, however, is indeed on the writing phase, on how you eventually present the information you have gained in the reading phase.

Typical feedback comments

> 50s: "it is good that you connect to the literature in this section, however, it would be better if you could not just rely on one source at a time, but try to bring the different readings into discussion with one another."
>
> 60s: "The discussion overall is very good, and it is good to see that you are integrating different readings into your discussion. There is a little too much reference-dropping in your writing, though. Here, for example, you make a pretty general and obvious point that can really be considered common knowledge, and hence does not need to be referenced. References should be reserved to either more specific claims that can specifically be found in a piece of writing; or indeed for more general ones, but then only if the ownership of the argument is important, or you want to point your reader to an insightful discussion of this topic."
>
> 70s: "An excellent discussion of how globalisation is interwoven with the different economic processes of capitalism. The balance of integrating different readings with your own analysis and

argument works particularly well, as the connections from the former to the latter are very clear and insightful."

Language and Presentation

30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s
	The answer should be intelligible, but might e.g. include poor expression	The quality of writing, referencing and presentation should be acceptable	The quality of the writing and presentation (especially referencing) should be without major blemish		Presentation and the use of English should be commensurate with the quality of the content	Fulfils all of the criteria for 'A2' [80s]

What is it?

It is worth mentioning here that we are in the business of social science, and not a poetry contest. The grade you get does not stand or fall with how good your writing is. However, poor writing (for example when it is too conversational and informal, or has too many mistakes in spelling and grammar) can add to an overall impression of an essay that is a little sloppy, and/or just not academic enough, or polished enough. Very good writing, on the other hand, can contribute to a positive overall impression. You do not need to be the next Shakespeare, however, and can still achieve an excellent grade. Writing style is not central to what we are looking for in the social sciences, but it is still worth investing some time and effort. And this probably explains why in the marking descriptors for the different grade ranges, as mentioned above, any suggestions for writing and language are usually placed towards the end, as something additional to think of, but which is not central to the endeavour.

What to avoid?

Some elements, however, are non-negotiable, and will cost you points. One is clarity of expression. It should be clear what you are saying, and there should be no ambiguity, in the sense that it should not be possible to interpret what you are writing in two different ways. A lack of clarity will obscure your argument, so this is not just a stylistic issue, but also compromises substance.

Listed in the descriptors is referencing. This means both correct referencing in the text, as well formatting the bibliography correctly. You'll find all the information you need for this in the style guides provided by some courses, but also online, through searching, for example, 'how to cite chapter in book in Sage Harvard?' – the different publication houses that curate the different referencing styles have pages over pages dealing with any referencing conundrum imaginable.

The 'poor expression' listed in the 40s descriptor typically refers to either language that is not very clear (see above), or language that is too conversational and informal. Academic writing needs a certain level of formality. Avoid 'can't' and 'isn't' (in other words, don't write your essay the way I've written this paper), and conversational expressions and clichés such as 'we as a society' or 'at the end of the day'.

The opposite, an overly formal, wordy style that uses obscure expressions in what will always look like an attempt to impress, is also not the way forward – instead, this, too, can lead to your argument becoming obscured, hidden behind big words, leading to a lack of clarity. In extreme cases, using obscure language can be a form of bullying the reader, when it forces them to look up words, and to engage in unnecessary brain acrobatics. Unfortunately, it cannot be denied that some of the literature we sometimes ask you to read is a bit like that. They are not always best practice to

say the least, and in my view you should not try to emulate the writing style of the Butlers, Bourdieus and Giddens of this world.[2]

How to do it well?

In terms of writing style, there is no one right answer on how to do it well, as there are many different styles that work. Some suggestions, however: Find the right balance between formal and informal, and express your ideas in a language you would like to read. If you want to be known as a good writer, think about how you can make your writing engaging (e.g. ask the occasional question in the text, make sure sentences are not overly long and winding, alternate between longer and shorter sentences). Good structure and organisation (the next category) further enhances a good writing style.

In terms of clarity, this is achieved by using precise wording that expresses with precision what you are trying to say. Make sure your metaphors are on point, and the concepts you use are clear (this usually means explicitly defining them, certainly for the core concepts of your essay). Clarity is further enhanced by then using these concepts in the way you defined them. It also helps to be as specific as you can about who exactly is doing what exactly (avoid impersonal expression and passive voice, unless the 'who' of the sentence is unambiguously clear from the context), and where you got the evidence for that statement (use references and clear attribution).

Good writing thus reflects a well-crafted argument.

How to get there - reading phase or writing phase?

This dimension is all about the writing phase. However, there is maybe a third phase to consider that is particularly important for this category, a post-writing phase, where you proofread and edit your text. This is where you can give your writing that extra polish, really making sure it is clear, and further enhance and build your style.

Typical feedback comments

> 50s: Your writing style tends to be too much on the conversational side of things. Try to express your ideas in slightly more formal language.
>
> 60s: While mostly your writing is clear enough, there are still some places where your choice of wording is not quite as successful, leading to a lack of clarity in your argument. Pay attention to this when proofreading your essay, and make sure that your ideas are always expressed in as much clarity as possible.
>
> 70s: Expression and writing style are generally of a very high standard in this essay, and this section is particularly elegant, very nicely bringing out the essence of the point you are discussing here.

[2] There is a wider discussion to be had about the inclusivity and exclusivity of certain writing styles. It is somewhat ironic how authors such as Pierre Bourdieu (as much as I admire his work otherwise) could write about the distinctions created by different levels of cultural capital, to only then reinforce these distinctions in his own work, by making his writing difficult to comprehend, unless one has the required context knowledge and style of comprehension.

Structure and Organisation

30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s
	Contains irrelevancies to the question asked	The materials included should be relevant	The answer should proceed coherently to a convincing conclusion	A sharply-focused answer. adopts a comprehensive approach to the question		

What is it?

In my view, this is the one category that remains a little underdeveloped in the marking descriptors. The only things we learn from them is that the material should be relevant (40s and 50s), there should be coherence (60s), and ideally a sharp focus within a comprehensive approach (70s). These points all have in common that they refer to taking good decisions as to what points to include in your essay, and how to arrange them in such a way that they make for a focussed discussion.

This, however, is only one level on which structure and organisation are important. It is the macro-level of overall organisation. The good news is that the meso-level of how to organise your paragraphs is already covered in the *analysis* dimension above. The micro-level of how you structure your sentences is discussed to some extent in the language and presentation section. For these reasons, the discussion of this dimension indeed focusses on the macro-level. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that indeed structure and organisation are important in more ways than just this.

What to avoid?

Typically, poor organisation can show itself in three ways: First, poor decision making as to what points to include in the essay: The shorter the essay is, the more it needs to be focussed on the issues that really matter, and are most relevant in terms of the essay question. There is no space for lengthy excursions to side issues, as this only takes away space from the more important points. And yes, 4,000 words is still quite a short essay compared to, for example, an article in an academic journal (which typically is around 8,000 or 10,000 words long).

Second, even with a more successful selection of the points included in the essay, some papers lack direction. This would typically be an essay that comes across more as a loose collection of ideas, rather than a directed argument. The different points do not seem to connect to each other, and build on one another, as a proper line of argument should do.

The third typical issue is when there are structural concerns in terms of how much space is given to the different parts of the essay. This is usually an introduction or conclusion that is overly long, or a discussion that is not very balanced. For an example of the latter, if the essay question asks you to discuss two different perspectives on a specific topic, these should be discussed in roughly equal length (disclaimer: This does not mean that all the points in the essay should be equally long. Sometimes there is less to be said about some issues, and more about others).

How to do it well?

The first thing you need to get good at is deciding what needs to go into your essay. Once more, there is no magic formula for this, but there are some questions you can ask yourself when taking these decisions. Central to your considerations should be, first, the essay or research question, and second, the argument you are putting forward. These two determine what needs to go into the essay, and what you can leave out. The question you then need to ask yourself is whether this point

that you are considering is something your reader will really need to know in order to understand your argument, and your angle on the essay question, or whether it is something that might be nice to know but is not really that important. Focus here on the need-to-knows, and leave out the merely nice-to-knows[3]. And always keep an open mind. Sometimes what you initially identified as a need-to-know turns out to be less important than you thought, as you learn more about the topic. In this case, have the courage to delete it. This will, of course, always be a judgment call, but with time you will get a better sense of what is important and what isn't, and you will find it increasingly easier to take these decisions.

Once you know what is going to be in your essay, you need to arrange the points in a way that they make for a good argument. Once more, there is no one right way of doing this. But there are some general guidelines. You want to make sure that the different points build onto one another, and build towards that argument you want to make in the conclusion. In order to do this, it usually makes sense to build from the less strong or less convincing points to the more important and more convincing ones. If the question, for example, is about which of three factors X,Y,Z is most important for explaining the outcome W, then you should start with the one that you think is least important, show its limitations, then show how the second one maybe addresses some of these limitations but is still not enough to explain W, and then show how the third factor does the best job in explaining W. Similarly, if the essay question is a pro-con question, you should always start with the side of the argument you do not agree with, and end with the side of the argument that you do agree with (this can be a pro-con structure where you discuss the entire pro-side and then the entire con-side, or it can be a pro-con-pro-con structure, in which you apply the two arguments, for example, to a specific aspect of the topic).

A final point that is important for doing well in this dimension is the visibility of the argument, and of the structure of the essay. You should make clear to your reader what points you have included in your essay (this means you need an explicit essay plan in your introduction, providing an overview of the points you are going to cover). Throughout the essay, you should then signpost your argument, let your reader know the significance of the different points they have just read, and showing them the ropes of how your argument is unfolding. In the conclusion, finally, you summarise the different points within the framework of your argument, showing how the essay has been building up to this point where you are finally able to reach the conclusion you are reaching. There is a clear connection here, of course, to the analysis dimension of essay writing.

Reading phase or writing phase?

Following the above recommendations for building processing activities (mind-mapping, comparing texts etc.) into your reading phase will help you get a better understanding of what is important, and what is less so. Building on this, however, it becomes all about the writing phase, or more specifically the planning and writing phase. You should start writing with a certain plan in mind, and ideally already have the structure of the essay in place before you start writing. When writing, don't forget to make structure and argument visible (essay plan and signposting), and also pay attention to, and refine this when proofreading the essay.

There might be another phase to add here, a speaking phase. This is where you talk to your friends or family (if they're generous enough to listen), and explain to them what your topic is. Vocalising this can be helpful for anticipating whether you are really explaining this well, and where the person you are talking to is coming from, in terms of their previous knowledge on the topic, and the amount

[3] Or relegate them to a footnote if they are really worth mentioning.

of explanation they might need. Sometimes you don't even need friends for this. Talk to the mirror! Even anticipating how your argument might come across to an imagined audience can clarify your thoughts.

Typical feedback comments

> 50s: While all the points you make here are relevant for the essay question, the discussion does lack a little in direction. Rather than an argument with a purpose, this section comes across more like a loose collection of ideas.
>
> 60s: There is a good flow between the different points of the essay. You could do a little more, however, in not just explaining what you are doing next, but also why this point is followed by the next one. What is the logical connection between them? (for example: 'In order to understand the importance of X, a closer examination of Y is needed')
>
> 70s: Excellent signposting here, taking your reader through your line of argument, and explaining very nicely where you are going with it.

Conclusion

Essay marking descriptors serve a certain purpose. They lay out the general framework of marking, and the general criteria for achieving grades in the different grade ranges. To some extent, they need to remain general and abstract, in order to allow for the flexibility needed for them to be applicable to a wider range of subjects, and a wider range of courses. As such, they can ever tell the entire story of what makes good essay writing.

However, as this paper has (hopefully) shown, taking these descriptors as a starting point, and deconstructing and rearranging them into categories and dimensions, can be a fruitful exercise. What has emerged is a comprehensive guide to essay writing. And mapping the resulting dimensions of essay writing to the timeline of the different stages of work has (again, hopefully) provided concrete and actionable steps that can be usefully implemented in your essay writing practice.

A successful essay, then, builds on plenty of reading and a good understanding resulting from it (understanding dimension); uses this knowledge to critically analyse the problem, not just describe it (analysis dimension); integrates the different readings into its discussion, with an eye on how to do this effectively (use of literature dimension); is written in clear and inclusive language (language and presentation dimension); and follows an effective structure that nicely focusses the discussion on the points that are most relevant for understanding and explaining the topic (structure and organisation dimension).

An obscure beast the descriptors might be, but with some analysis of what they actually mean, and some attention to what this entails, this beast can certainly *ahem* be tamed!