

Mock essay

Evaluate the statement that there is no such thing as a perfect essay, but are only degrees of acceptability.

To evaluate the above statement, this essay shall initially explore the hypothesis that there are degrees of acceptability, before considering whether this does or does not support the notion of a perfect essay. It shall do so by addressing issues of structure, style and presentation and assessing the criteria for these.

Structure is important in that it enables the clear exposition of ideas followed by their analysis and evaluation. Should this simple structure be omitted, then a logical presentation of material and demonstration of analytical and evaluative skills will be lacking. What is notable about these criteria of assessment is that they are met by an agreed standard of the department, which range from 'fail' to 'first class'.¹

Style is personal, although it is no less important for the clear presentation of ideas, but even here there are a number of agreed norms that apply.² For example, one should be *carefull* to *spel* and use adjectives and adverbs *correct*; *never* use *no* double negatives, or apostrophe's incorrectly and shouldn't abbrev. In essays exams assessments reports and other assessment work commas keep strings of items apart, but excessive, use of commas, is unnecessary. If words are out or sentences left unfinished. Clichés and colloquialisms should be avoided like the plague, right? Furthermore, as a matter of general style, sentences that become extremely long, through the use of sub-clauses, or, in certain situations, sets of conditions, which may or may not apply, can thus lose their sense and clearly become repetitive, so losing their clarity. From some essays, inductions may be drawn that are assumed to be deductions. However, once again these and other grammatical errors are set by agreed standards of English use.

Footnotes and quotations are a matter of presentation, of which there are a choice of styles. Some writers and publishing houses prefer the Harvard (or 'author, date: page') system, while others prefer the more traditional ('footnote' or 'endnote'). The former is neat, but the

¹ Philosophy Department, University of Wales Trinity St. David, 'Marking Criteria', 2014. Please note that other methods of referencing – other than footnotes – may also be used, as explained and exemplified on p.2.

² The following is adapted from N. Hughes, *Grammar Made Easy in Twenty-Three Steps: Or How To Rite Rite*, <http://www.personal.umd.umich.edu/~nhughes/html/docs/riterite.html> (September 2002).

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footnote system has the benefit of enabling references to be cited from a secondary source³. A clear reference is especially important if it is an academic paper to which one's point refers.⁴

It is important that all direct citations should be put in 'quotation marks', unless they are long quotations that can be indented and set apart from the text.⁵

It is also agreed that all uses of another person's argument should be referenced. It is an offence of plagiarism to cite a text, even by borrowing a well-put phrase or turning the words round, without referencing the source: in such instances, whether to be or not to be is questionable, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come? Style usually gives the students away.

These are matters of presentation, but are important in that they enable the essay to be read and assessed, as are other matters of presentation, such as poor line spacing, using too small a font or too difficult a font to read.

These demonstrate that there are degrees of good and bad structures, styles, and presentations of essays, which can make the presentation of the evidence, its analysis and evaluation unclear. In each case, the criteria of assessment are shown to be one of custom and relative acceptability. Although mistakes, poor grammar, argument and presentation may customarily be referred to as 'imperfections', this is not an accurate use of language: the idea of imperfect is itself derived from an ideal of perfection. The given arguments have not needed recourse to an idea of a 'perfect' essay as an absolute standard of assessment. It may well be that the absolute ideal of perfection is merely extrapolated from relatively good practices to a best possible practice. Furthermore, the argument or thesis that is presented may be extremely good, but that too is a relative judgement, for the notion of a perfect argument is as problematic as that of a perfect style.

Therefore, the statement 'there is no such thing as the perfect essay, but only degrees of acceptability on a scale of good and bad' has not been proven. The statement links two different notions of evaluation, according to an ideal of perfection and according to the social norms of agreed criteria. While it is clear that there are degrees of acceptability on a scale of good and bad, it has not been possible either to affirm or deny the possibility that there might be a perfect essay.

³ Author x, *Book x*, Place of Publication x, Publisher x, year xxxx, p.x.; cited in Author y, *Book y*, p.y.

⁴ This is given as Author z, 'Article z', *Journal Name z*, Journal Number z, Year z, p.z.

⁵ Author s, *Book s*, date s, p.s.

Bibliography

Philosophy Department, University of Wales Trinity St. David, 'Marking Criteria', 2014.

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