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CHAPTER 7

Writing essays

7.1 Getting to grips with writing

Of all aspects of studying, writing is the most challenging. But it is also the most rewarding. This is not a coincidence.

7.1.1 The importance of writing

Writing is not simply a chore you endure for the purposes of assessment. It is an *essential* part of the learning process. When you explain your ideas to others in writing you can't make the mental leaps you do when you are in conversation or mulling something over in your mind. You have to work out carefully exactly what you think about a subject. And you come to understand it for *yourself* in the process of explaining it to others. When you look back over a course you will find that the topics you have written about are the ones you understand and remember best.

Deepening your learning

So, one reason why assignment writing is especially demanding is that it forces you into a deep and powerful kind of learning. In earlier chapters I have talked about how you absorb ideas from books and lectures. However, until you are able to *use* the ideas to say things for yourself, you have not really *learned* them. Ideas only become a properly functioning part of your thought processes when you can call on them in expressing yourself to other people. One way of doing this is through discussing new ideas with others. But the most effective way is to argue a case in writing.

Developing your writing skills

Writing assignments significantly develops your powers of self-expression, and being able to write clearly and persuasively is an extremely valuable social skill. You may eventually discover that the most significant thing you have gained from your studies is the ability to write much more effectively. This is as likely whether you start with a relatively weak writing style or with a well-developed one. Wherever you start from, there is valuable progress to be made.

Doing yourself justice

In many higher-level courses, most assessment is of your written work. Consequently, your results are affected throughout your studies by your ability to write the kinds of assignment required. So, investing time in developing your writing skills is critically important. You may find that it pays to spend a little less time on mainstream coursework in order to allow more time for developing writing skills; otherwise you risk getting less credit for your learning than you deserve.

Key points

Writing is a major part of studying for three reasons.

- It deepens your *learning* of the subject you are studying.
- It strengthens your powers of *self-expression*.
- It is the major medium through which your progress is *assessed*.

7.1.2 Different kinds of writing

In the arts and humanities there are various kinds of writing you might do – mostly academic, but some creative and some more professionally orientated. The more *academic* type of writing focuses on ideas, theoretical perspectives, research, and textual analysis (using 'text' in the broadest sense, to include visual text and performance). This involves the skills of developing a clear and forceful line of argument. Different disciplines and fields have their own styles and emphases, but they share what we can call a *critical-analytical* mode of writing. In such courses the essay is the most common form of writing, in coursework and exams. Although there is growing emphasis on other forms of assessment, the essay retains its central role. Styles of essay vary to some extent between subject areas, but basic techniques can be applied, with a bit of adjustment, in most subjects. So, although developing an effective essay-writing style is a fairly long learning process, you can continue working on it from course to course throughout your studies.

Creative writing (or activity) draws on your own ideas and resources to a greater extent, although knowledge and understanding of the 'traditions' of writing, art or performance is almost always required. The more *professionally* oriented types of writing emphasise your ability to understand real-life situations, pick out salient features, and write about the issues they raise along with possible courses of action. They include, for example, reports, book reviews, problem analysis, case studies, and reflective accounts of work experience. These more practical modes of writing tend to address the needs of particular areas of professional training, such as journalism or law, and may involve links to specific work situations.

This chapter focuses on *essays*, the pre-eminent academic type of writing. Because developing writing skills tends to be a long haul, before going any further you may want to find out what kinds of writing your course involves. However, the various modes of writing are not utterly different and many higher-level courses do require essays at some stage. So, in any case, working on your essay-writing skills may be a good investment. If in doubt, ask your university department for advice.

7.1.3 Essay writing

What is an essay?

Originally, the meaning of the word 'essay' was a try or an attempt, but it now has the general meaning of *a short piece of writing on a set topic*.

- An essay begins with a *title* which sets out the issues to be addressed.
- It takes the form of an *argument* which leads the reader from the title at the beginning to a conclusion at the end.

See Chapter 3
Section 3.3, Why do
they write like that?

The challenge of essay writing

The nature of this challenge depends, to an extent, on your cultural background and personal language history. Essays can be a big leap from the language environment of everyday life. If you have had little contact with the kind of formal, controlled language used in essays, you may need to spend more time on your writing skills. Don't hold back, thinking that you have more important priorities to attend to in your studies; your writing may be the most important. Everyone can develop serviceable essay-writing techniques eventually, but how long it takes will depend on where you are starting from. If you have further to travel, you need to invest more time.

Writing is not an extra you can tack on to the end of your other study activities. It requires serious effort and plenty of time. Because writing is challenging it's always tempting to put it off until the very last minute, but this is a big mistake. You risk missing out on learning the course content in depth and developing your writing potential to the full.

Getting help

In developing your writing it is extremely helpful to have support from *teachers*. Your tutors will be able to give you feedback on your assignment work, and your *university support services* may offer general help with essay writing skills.

It is also an excellent idea to swap essay plans and marked essays with other students, and share writing strategies and tips. This is *not* cheating – as long as you write your own essays of course. By comparing your approach and performance with others you can gain valuable insight into your own writing. Letting people see your work is daunting at first, but once you have broken down the barriers other students can give you new ideas and very helpful feedback.

Developing your essay-writing skills

To develop your essay-writing skills you need to address two basic questions.

- 1 What is a good essay?
- 2 How can I go about producing one?

We will consider the first question in this chapter and the second in Chapter 8. Much of the discussion in this chapter is based on short sample essays presented in Section 7.2. You will need to work on this section first to get the full force of the rest of the chapter.

Key points

- This chapter focuses on *essay* writing.
- Developing your essay writing can be a significant challenge if you are unfamiliar with more formal ways of writing. Make sure you give it the time it requires.
- Don't keep worries to yourself. Seek help from your tutors and from other students.

7.2 What are you meant to write?

A perplexing thing about essay writing is that it can be difficult to get a clear idea of what is wanted. Writing seems to be treated as a private activity. You know what *your* essays look like and what your teachers say about them, but you have very little idea what *other students'* essays are like and what comments they receive back. You might be told that your essays ought to be more structured, or less subjective, but you don't really know what a more structured or more objective essay would look like. This can be worrying.

As we saw, one of the best ways to find out about what is expected in essays is to see what other students write. This is not so that you can *copy* someone else's style; it is to broaden your vision of the possible ways you might approach an essay. In this chapter we explore two short essays about the Ellis article first discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. The writers were mature students taking an access course (you met them in Chapter 4). This is the task they were set.

Write a short essay (of no more than 500 words) on the following:

Did higher-ranking women in the eighteenth century migrate to towns mainly because of the attractions of the towns, or mainly to escape from life in the countryside? Discuss in the light of Joyce Ellis's article.

The word limit of 500 words is unusually low, simply to keep this chapter manageable. A target of somewhere between 1,000 to 2,000 words would be more usual – allowing more space for you to develop your ideas, illustrate them and provide evidence in support of them. Nevertheless, these short pieces help to reveal the central principles of essay writing.

Box 7.1 Recommended preparation

It is best to read the rest of this chapter after you have worked on Chapter 4 Section 4.2, which guides you through reading Joyce Ellis's article. You will also find it useful to have at least glanced at the notes made on the article in Chapter 5 Section 5.2.1. Knowing what the article is about will enable you to understand the writing challenge the students faced and judge how well they succeeded. It will also help a lot when following my discussion of their essays throughout this chapter.

Making copies of the essays

Although the essays by Philip and Hansa are printed here in the chapter it will be easier to work with photocopies since you will be 'marking' and improving them. Make **several** copies so that you can write on them freely.

Activity 7.1

Read the essays by Philip and Hansa on the pages that follow (or your copies of them).

- 1 As you read:
 - mark any places where you find it hard to get the point
 - jot any questions in the margins, along with other points that come to you
 - write in alterations you think could usefully be made.
- 2 When you have finished reading both essays, take a sheet of paper and write the headings 'Strengths' and 'Weaknesses'. Note down the best and the weakest things about Philip's essay, and then do the same for Hansa's.
- 3 Try to weigh up the quality of the two essays.
 - Do you think one of the essays is better than the other?
 - Are they good in different ways?
 - Overall, do you think that they are good essays?
 - Are you judging mainly in terms of the ideas in the essays, or on how the essays are written?
- 4 Imagine you are Philip's teacher. Write a few sentences to him to help with his future writing.
- 5 Finally, look back over:
 - our lists of strengths and weaknesses
 - your conclusions about the overall quality of the essays
 - your advice to Philip.

Can you draw any general conclusions about the qualities a good essay should have? Jot down your thoughts.

Before you begin, read Box 7.2 below.

Box 7.2 Developing your judgement of writing

Activity 7.1 is demanding and it will take you some time. You may not want to do all of it right now, but at least do Task 1. However, the whole exercise is *worth doing*. It is time well invested because you need to develop your ability to judge what works well in writing and what doesn't. You won't become a good writer by learning formal rules. Instead, you have to become a *reasonably good judge* of pieces of writing, including your own. 'Marking' other people's work is an excellent way of deepening your understanding of what you are aiming for in your own writing.

Here are the two essays I received. Philip's came with a note. Part of it reads: 'Writing this is a learning experience because I am starting late in life to going back to be re-educated. But I feel more than willing to attempt the challenge ...'

PHILIP'S ESSAY**On the Town. 'Woman in Augustan England' 1680–1820**

Joyce Ellis presents to us a portrayal of woman living around the eighteenth century. The women who lived a fairly comfortable style of life belonged to a class of society where the father or husband would be a land-owner, these males were orientated to country life and all it entailed so they expected their wives or daughters to fit in to a standard of life they felt gave a certain status to the country way of life. These were under-privileged women as the boredom of country life could become frustrating to them, does it not make you see a resemblance to the modern day young woman, she can combine marriage, raising children, and holding on to a career as well.

With society becoming more wealthy it was possible for the fathers and husbands to provide an even better standard of life for their wives and daughters, more servants could be provided to do the work and this left the woman more time than ever to develop the social skills of the era, but this in turn led to extreme frustration among woman of that class. The country was no place now to exercise these new skills they had been taught, for one thing females outnumbered males at that time, also few chances arose to meet and mingle with crowds of people, but most importantly the demands of propriety meant that their conduct should be impeccable at all times any error would be seen in such a limited environment so therefore woman began to long for the urban or city way of living, if even for a short period so that they could deploy the art of socialising and mingling with a greater amount of society.

Towns offered woman a great variation of respectable ways in which to carry out the social skills, indeed many women have gone down in history as being great experts as organizers of social events thus enhancing their husbands standing. In a town or city, women could meet with many more of the female sex than they did in the country, they could exchange views and learn new ideas from each other, also they could meet with more of the male population as the cities had theatres concert halls, and many places where both sexes could mingle together respectably. In many ways going into urban life from the countryside was beneficial to woman of the upperclass.

This transition was not without a certain amount of jibes from the male population against the women of that time, who looked on them as being inferior in many ways, and considered those who chose to get away from boredom of the country as being improper in outlook.

Nevertheless woman, whether wealthy or poor need the stimulus of company and the need to escape from routine and boredom and so will continue to seek for the things that will be in their favour.

(483 words)

HANSA'S ESSAY

Did higher ranking eighteenth century women migrate to towns mainly because of the attractions of the towns, or mainly to escape from life in the countryside?

Eighteenth century society expected women to have accomplishments such as the ability to embroider, play the piano and sing. They were supposed to be fragile, delicate and innocent; they were taught at smart boarding schools or by private tutors, social skills to fit them for the role expected of them at the time, as 'embodiments of their husbands' and fathers' status'.

Life in the country during this period of history offered little scope for the indulgence of these skills owing to the sparsity of the population and the difficulty of transport, as women from the higher ranks were constrained to mix only with their own kind.

Thus the lives of these well born ladies were immensely boring. It was not considered fitting that a woman should take any part in the management of a country estate, or in the country pursuits of riding, hunting or fishing as enjoyed by the men and she was therefore reduced to spend her time reading or writing letters. However, in an urban environment, it was acceptable that women could socialise on a much wider scale and even organise and plan social events, an added dimension to their very constrained lives. Because of this, and because an urban environment offered women so much more scope, not only to display their accomplishments but also to indulge their own desire for sociability, amusement and companions', the female population of England's towns expanded dramatically.

In view of the somewhat prescribed role forced upon women in the eighteenth century by the male dominated society which formulated social mores, it was inevitable that women would be attracted to the towns where the skills that society required of them could be more widely indulged and more fully displayed. In the towns there were more people of the same rank, so that women could socialise on a wider scale, and as there was public transport they had greater mobility. They therefore fled from the country in order to escape the restrictions and consequent boredom placed upon them by the very limited pastimes that a high ranking women in the eighteenth century was permitted to indulge.

In effect, I think that the high ranking women of the eighteenth century were neither mainly attracted to the towns, or escaping from the countryside, what they were seeking to do was to fulfil the very limited role with which society had burdened them as fully as was possible.

(426 words)

In what follows I discuss the points that struck me as I read the two essays. I expect that you will have picked out many of the same points. There is no great mystery about what is good writing and what is not. Good writing is easy to read and makes sense. Poor writing is unclear and confusing; it keeps making you stop to try to work out what is being said and where the argument is going.

7.3 The significance of titles

Which essay did you find easier to read? For me it was Hansa's. As I read Philip's essay I was uncertain about where his argument was leading me. He makes some interesting points, but there is no real sense of direction. On the other hand, Hansa's essay flows as an argument.

The first thing I noticed about Philip's essay is that although it begins with a title it is *not* the one he was given. This immediately creates two problems.

- 1 If I were Philip's tutor I would find it difficult to weigh up his essay against the challenge he was actually set.
- 2 The title he has made up is not a good one, so it weakens his essay from the outset.

Philip's title doesn't pose a *question* for him to answer. So I began reading without any sense of what he was aiming to discuss. He has given himself a broad theme, but no *purpose*. An essay never asks you to just 'write what you know about the topic' – it always requires you to present an *argument* of some kind. Often (as in this case) the purpose is to answer a question. Other essay titles may ask you to discuss a particular point of view, or compare and contrast two points of view. But however the title is worded, it is always meant to pose a 'problem' which your essay should then set out to argue about and (to some extent) 'solve'.

Philip neither starts with a problem to solve nor finishes with a solution, so there is a rather aimless feel to the essay. It isn't going anywhere in particular. This makes reading it a lot harder. Since, as reader, you have to *project* meaning into the written words, if you are not sure where the words are leading it is much more difficult to follow. A good essay is never just a string of sentences. It is a journey from the question in the title to the answer in your conclusion.

Box 7.3 Openings

There is a lot to be said for brisk, direct opening sentences in an essay. You need to set the reader's thoughts off in the right direction, so there is no virtue in a lot of formal throat-clearing. For example, it is *not* a good idea to fill the opening paragraph with dictionary definitions of some key words in the title. The first sentences should grab your reader's attention. They should be related to the essay question and should be doing important work for your argument. But they don't have to be fancy.

It is often said that in an Introduction you should say what you are going to do in the essay – then do it in the ‘middle’ part of the essay, and in the conclusion say what you have done. But this kind of writing to a ‘formula’ is tedious to do and pretty dull to read.

I think Philip's lack of clear purpose is the biggest weakness of his essay. We see it at the end of the first paragraph, where he throws in a comment about modern young women. The comment doesn't make a lot of sense to me, but in any case it has little to do with the topic. *Everything* you write in an essay should contribute in some way to answering the question in the title. This is the great value of having a problem to solve – it gives you a way of deciding what to include and what to leave out. It also helps you to organise what you put in, so that it builds up towards your conclusion. Because Philip does not have a clear purpose, he drops in stray points that don't lead anywhere. And in his last paragraph he is left making vague remarks about women in general – needing company and seeking things ‘in their favour’. (Couldn't this be said about men too?) So the essay fizzles out, without doing justice either to the themes of Ellis's article or to Philip's own ideas. All of this is quite understandable in a first essay. But it points up the crucial importance of recognising that an essay is meant to be an *argument*.

You will have noticed that Hansa's essay starts with the title she was given. Also, at the end she tries to answer the question. So straight away Hansa's essay has some important strengths compared to Philip's. As well as finding her essay easier to read, I also found it more *satisfying* because she focuses on the question and comes to a conclusion about it. From the start she gets stuck into the argument, making a purposeful attack on the question in her opening sentences. And, while she covers a lot of the same ground as Philip, she develops a stronger line of argument overall – although not always as clearly as she might I think.

Key points

- An essay should take the form of an *argument*.
- This argument should start from the problem posed by the *question* or *title* of the essay, and it should lead your reader through to a *conclusion* set out in the final paragraph.

This is not easy to achieve, but it is what you should aim for.

7.4 Essay structure

In spite of getting off on the wrong foot by not sticking to the title, Philip's essay contains a lot that is relevant – as we can see if we pull it apart. Here is the basic content and structure of his essay set out in note form. (The question marks indicate points I would want to query.) Quickly check my

notes against his essay to see if you agree that I have captured the gist of what he says.

Paragraph 1: Introduction – social context

- 1 Ellis – a portrait of C18 women whose fathers/husbands were of land-owning class.
- 2 Men were country-oriented → expected wife/daughters to fit into high-status rural life-style.
- 3 Women were under-privileged [?], owing to the boredom of country life.
- 4 *Contrast* with modern woman – who can combine marriage, children & career.

Paragraph 2: Tedium of country life

- 1 Increasing wealth → rising standard of life → more servants → women more time for skills → extreme frustration.
- 2 In country, women couldn't exercise skills
– females outnumbered males [?]; few opportunities to meet.
- 3 Strict rules of social propriety, very visible → conduct impeccable at all times.
- 4 Longed for urban life – even for short spells – to be able to socialise.

Paragraph 3: Attractions of town

- 1 Towns → variety of respectable social options, including active role in organising.
- 2 More women to meet – exchange views – learn new ideas.
- 3 More meetings w. men – theatre, concerts – both sexes could mix respectably.
- 4 In many ways beneficial to women.

Paragraph 4: Contemporary explanations of women's migration to towns

- 1 Male jibes at women's migration to towns.
- 2 Viewed women as inferior in many ways.
- 3 Saw escape from boredom of country as ‘improper’.

Paragraph 5: Conclusion – Women's need for company and amusement

- 1 Women need company and escape from boredom.
- 2 → will continue to seek things in their favour.

Setting out the content of the essay like this shows us a number of things. We can see straight away that Philip's essay has a structure. Each paragraph deals with a new aspect of the topic and the sequence of paragraphs shows a clear line of development. In the first paragraph Philip sets up the general background; he then explores the repellent side of country life, followed by the attractive side of town life; then he notes contemporary attitudes to the women's migration to towns; and in his final paragraph he draws a general conclusion. This is an excellent outline plan for a short essay. He

hasn't entirely carried it off, but there is nothing wrong with the basic structure.

Similarly, Hansa's essay has a structure. To help us uncover it we can again set out what she says in note form. Again, check the notes below against her essay to see whether you think they are a fair summary.

Paragraph 1: Introduction – Role of women in C18 upper-class society

- 1 C18 soc. – expected women to have accomplishments (piano, etc.).
- 2 Image of women as fragile, etc.
- 3 Trained for role as 'embodiments' of male status.

Paragraph 2: Restrictions of rural life

- 1 Country life → little scope to display skills:
 - sparse population at higher social levels; travel difficult; tight social boundaries.

Paragraph 3: Tedium of rural life – attractions of town

- 1 Refined ladies' boring life – denied role as estate managers – excluded from country pastimes → reduced to letter writing, reading.
- 2 But in town, wider social opportunities:
 - role in social planning; opportunity to display accomplishments; enjoy socialising.
- 3 Offered women much more scope for display of accomplishments – desire for sociability/ amusement → rapid expansion of female urban population.

Paragraph 4: Women's need to be in towns to play out the role prescribed for them

- 1 Male-dominated society → women highly prescribed and restricted role → social skills required of them could only be satisfactorily enacted and displayed in town – where more people of same rank, good transport.
- 2 Women fled country to escape v. tight restrictions (→ boredom).

Paragraph 5: Conclusion

Women not so much attracted to town – or escaping from countryside – as mainly trying to fulfil their very restricted social role as fully as possible.

The structure of Hansa's essay is fairly similar to Philip's. However, you may have noticed that the subject of her second paragraph spills over into paragraph 3. This immediately suggests an improvement – the first part of paragraph 3 could be put back to the end of paragraph 2 (from 'Thus the lives ... writing letters.'). Then she will have a paragraph on the country followed by one on the town, which will help her reader to follow this shift of focus as her argument moves forward.

Key points

- An essay needs to be *structured*.
- Part of this involves organising the points you want to make into *groups*, and giving a *paragraph* to each group.
- Part of it is arranging the paragraphs into a meaningful *sequence*, leading towards your conclusion.

7.5 Presenting an argument

Philip clearly has a sense that he is meant to be arguing a case. Perhaps the best bit of argument comes at the start of paragraph 2. If you look at my notes you will see that I have used arrows to show how the argument works. He says that increasing wealth led to a rising standard of living, which meant that more servants were employed, which led to women having more time to polish up their social skills – but that this 'in turn' led to frustration, because country life no longer gave women enough opportunities to exercise their skills. This is very purposeful writing. He drives us forward through the logic of his argument.

As paragraph 2 continues, Philip tells us why women didn't have the opportunity to exercise their social skills in the country, saying first that women outnumbered men (though I'm not sure where he got that from) and then that few chances arose for mingling. At this point the logic is still clear – we have just been given two reasons *why* opportunities to exercise social skills were limited. But he then moves on to the oppressiveness of the rules of 'propriety'. It isn't obvious whether that still has to do with the exercise of social skills. Perhaps it is added simply as another source of the 'frustration' Philip mentioned earlier, but if so the connection is not made. It reads as an item in a list of points, not as part of a clear sequence. This lessens the impact of the earlier build up of the argument. That's a pity, because the last point is about these women longing for city life where they could exercise their skills, which would have followed on very nicely from the points about not being able to do so in the country. We end the paragraph with the sense that there were 'a bunch of reasons' why women were fed up with country life, instead of a sharp focus on the irony of having increasingly sophisticated skills but dwindling opportunities to use them.

Now that we have made an alteration to the structure of Hansa's essay we can see the stages of her argument more clearly:

- The role of well-to-do women
- Country life
- Town life
- The futility of trying to play the 'society woman' role in the country
- Conclusion.

7.5.1 Linking points together

Let's see how Hansa puts her argument together. Notice that she introduces the country life stage of the argument by referring *back* to 'these skills'; that is, the skills she has referred to in her opening paragraph. The new paragraph 3, on town life, begins with 'However, ...'. That suggests a *contrast* between this and what she has just been discussing (country life). And when she begins the fourth paragraph with 'In view of the somewhat prescribed role ...' she is again referring *back* to the earlier stage when she discussed that role. 'In effect ...' signals her conclusion. So we have a connected 'line' of argument here – a thread of meaning running through the essay that the reader can follow.

Looking at the flow of Philip's argument as a whole, we can see that it gets off to a weak start – without a title that gives a clear framework and purpose, and with a rather bland opening sentence. After this opening, the first two proper points in paragraph 1 (see my notes) actually do a good job of getting things going. Unfortunately, point 3 does not follow on particularly well and point 4 is simply a distraction. Yet broadly, once he gets going, you can see that in the first two paragraphs Philip is telling a 'story' about how and why women's roles in the countryside changed over time, and what this meant to them.

At the end of the second paragraph Philip concludes 'so therefore woman began to long for the urban or city way of living ...'. This *leads* us into the next paragraph, and to the topic of women's roles in the town. He begins the fourth paragraph with 'This transition ...' which connects *back* directly to what he has said in the last sentence of paragraph 3. And by using the linking word 'Nevertheless' at the start of the last paragraph, Philip shows he knows he should be making a connection there too, even if he hasn't quite worked out how to pull the whole thing together at the end. So he has a good general sense of the need to connect each stage of his argument into a flowing sequence.

But although Philip links up the *stages* of the argument well, he doesn't always organise the points he wants to make *within* each stage into a meaningful sequence. As we saw, in the second paragraph he doesn't manage to weave the idea of the demands of propriety into the flow of his otherwise purposeful writing. Here is how the main points about women's role and their life in the countryside might be re-organised into a connected, logical sequence.

- 1 [Points about rising standard of living etc., which Philip handles well] → *these* women lost their household function.
- 2 *As a result*, they had more time to develop accomplishments and fulfil a 'decorative' role.
- 3 *But* the demands of propriety meant they could mix only with their own kind (unlike their menfolk).
- 4 *This* particular *population* was sparse. Lack of transport and bad weather *prevented these* women from mixing socially and so fulfilling their role in rural society.

- 5 *Instead* they were restricted to pastimes such as needlework, letter writing, reading and walking, in and around their homes.

Here a clear *line of argument* is being developed, connected up, within the stage of the argument that deals with life in the countryside.

Key points

- You have to *develop* an argument *in stages* towards your conclusion.
- That means you have to *link* each stage to the next, so that the reader can follow the *direction* your argument is taking.
- And, *within* each stage of the argument, you need to organise your *main points* into a satisfactory *sequence*.

7.5.2 Arguing to a conclusion

If we ignore the bits of his essay where Philip strays off the subject, how well does his argument work? Does he make a good case? Well, I think even Philip was feeling a bit doubtful about this since by the end he seems to be running out of steam. He obviously hasn't realised that his closing sentences need to pull together what he has said earlier, and present an *answer to the question* in the title (as given). Rather, he seems to be casting about for something grand-sounding to finish off with, so he makes the general point about women's needs.

Box 7.4 Conclusions

Your essay should end with a concluding section which sweeps briefly back over the arguments you have presented and pulls them together. This overview should show how the discussion in your essay has answered the question set. A conclusion doesn't have to be particularly grand. It just needs to give a clear sense of your having made a worthwhile response to the challenge in the title.

Your *primary purpose* in an essay is to arrive, in the final paragraphs, at an answer to the question. (Not all titles take the form of a question, but always there is some issue to be resolved.) The answer doesn't have to be a 'yes' or a 'no'. It can be a 'maybe', 'it depends', or 'partly yes and partly no'. The key thing is to show that your essay has addressed the specific challenge you were set.

Yet, as we saw, there is some quite vigorous argument earlier in the essay. So what does it all add up to? The gist of Philip's argument seems to be this:

- Men of the land-owning class enjoyed country life and expected their women folk to 'fit in'.
- But women found country life stultifying and frustrating.
- Town life offered them many more opportunities [so they migrated there, though Philip doesn't actually say so].

- The men mocked them for migrating, or criticised their impropriety.
- But women will do what they need to.

In the end, he presents the women's migration as a straightforward clash of interests between them and their menfolk. The upshot is that women refused to bow to pressure or criticism from men and looked to their own needs, as women in general will. This is a weak conclusion because it relies on a notion of 'what women in general will tend to do'. None of the rest of the essay presents any arguments about what women in general do, so we have no reason to agree. (After all, thinking about different times and different societies, there are many examples of women having felt themselves morally or practically prevented from seeking what was 'in their favour'.) Ellis is trying to explain why these women, bound into a particular society at a particular time, not only longed for town life but actually migrated to towns in large numbers. This calls for a more robust explanation than 'what women in general tend to do'.

Overall, then, Philip's argument is pitched in the right general area, but it doesn't really get to the heart of things. Nevertheless, I think it is a good attempt by someone who is new both to reading this kind of article and writing essays.

Turning to Hansa's essay, in the fourth paragraph we see her 'bringing together' what she has said in the first three – about the role of women, about country and about town life. This is a very good move. She is setting herself up ready to draw her conclusion. She wants to argue that women's attitudes to country life and town life arose directly out of their very restricted role as status symbols for their menfolk. We can summarise what she says as follows:

- 1 women were *attracted* by the towns (because they could fulfil their role better there);
- 2 women were *escaping from* the countryside (because they could not fulfil their role there).

So, at this stage, Hansa's answer to the essay question is 'a bit of both'. But then in her conclusion she seems to contradict that, by saying they were 'in effect' doing *neither*. What they were doing, she says, was *mainly* trying to fulfil the role that society had 'burdened' them with. (Notice that this 'mainly' is what the essay question asks her to reach a conclusion about.)

Hansa is saying that the important issue here is what was expected of women at that time – the *role* that was available to them. This is what really explains why the women migrated to towns. It was not essentially a matter of 'escaping' from the countryside because it was dull and soggy, nor of being 'attracted' to the town because it was more fun. The deeper and more important reason for women's migration was so that they could live more meaningfully *as the women they were expected to be*. This brings us much closer to the heart of the arguments in Ellis's article than Philip's account does. However, Hansa hasn't made her case very obvious. We have had to dig a bit to find it. When I first read her conclusion it took me by surprise; it seemed contradictory. Indeed, I think there is something missing from her essay.

7.5.3 A frame of reference

Hansa, like Philip, starts her essay by talking about the role of well-to-do women at the time. And also like him, she doesn't give us any idea *why* she does that. When you read the essay title it does not have any obvious connection to women's roles. So we are left a bit bemused. We can follow what Hansa is saying, but we don't really know what the *point* of it is.

If we compare this with Ellis herself, she begins (as we saw in Chapter 4) by talking about a 'dramatic' migration of women to the larger towns during the period. Clearly, a social change on that sort of scale needs explaining. In other words, she begins by showing why the whole issue *matters*. Having established that, she presents an argument about why the women migrated. She says she wants to disagree with the satirists of the time who presented these women as seeking 'freedom from male control'; in her third paragraph she tells us she is going to argue *against* the satirists' views. She also outlines what it is she is going to say. So, by then, we can see both *what* she proposes to do and *why*. In short, she has set up a 'frame of reference' within which we can understand the purpose of her argument. (Bear in mind how important frames of reference are for readers: Chapter 3, Box 3.2.)

This framework is missing in Hansa's and Philip's essays. If Hansa gave us some idea of the scale of the migration, and a few pointers to the debate she is engaging with, we would be able to follow her argument through to its conclusion more easily. For example, she might add something like this to the end of her first paragraph:

They were also expected to live for long spells in their family homes in the countryside. When these women began to migrate to towns in large numbers, satirists of the period presented this as a wilful desire for 'freedom from male control' and a chance to enjoy frivolous pastimes.

There are many different ways of doing this kind of frame-setting. The point is that nowhere in her first paragraph does Hansa make a link to the title of the essay (and hence to the conclusion she is leading towards). She has her argument in her head, but she doesn't remember to set up a frame of reference within which her argument will make sense to her readers.

Key points

You have to remember that your readers need some kind of frame of reference for your argument. You need to find a way of presenting a context for your argument at the start, so that you set your readers' thoughts going in the right direction. They need some sense of:

- the background against which you are arguing, and
- *why* it is worth paying attention to what you are saying.

7.5.4 Introducing your own ideas

At the end of paragraph 2, Philip makes his point about the busy lives of modern young women. (Presumably he means to draw a contrast, rather than suggest a 'resemblance'.) Why did I suggest that this is not a good idea? Doesn't it show initiative to bring in a few ideas of your own? Is essay writing meant to be just repeating back what you have read in books and articles?

This is a tricky issue. Certainly you are meant to think as you write – to say things as you have worked them out for yourself. It would be very dreary indeed simply to repeat back what you have read, and you wouldn't learn much. On the other hand, your thinking is meant to be based on the ideas and information you have been reading about in your studies. The essay is an exercise in 'engaging with' these arguments and ideas, and trying to put them to use. This helps you to learn in depth. It is also an exercise in being disciplined in your writing – saying exactly what you intend to say, and only what you can justify saying. It is not an open invitation to write down your thoughts to see what your tutor makes of them.

Box 7.5 Display your knowledge of the course

The main substance of an essay should come directly from your studies. Construct your arguments using what you have read and heard within the course (unless you are instructed to do otherwise). Don't be tempted to bring in lots of extraneous knowledge. It is very hard for tutors to judge material they are unfamiliar with. And they are usually working with a marking guide based on what is taught within the course.

I can see three problems with Philip's attempt to introduce the comparison with modern women.

- If he is going to bring in something from beyond the Ellis article he needs to *justify* it. He can't just drop in a remark in passing and expect his reader to accept it without question.
- Because Philip's observation is not drawn from what he has read in Ellis's article, it opens up a whole new area – it *raises questions* about what kinds of generalisations can be made about women now, what kinds of comparisons can reasonably be drawn between then and now, and what kinds of evidence might be relevant to making this case. He simply does not have the space to tackle all this.
- In any case, it is beside the point; it is *irrelevant* to an argument about the reasons why higher-ranking eighteenth-century women migrated to towns.

‘I find you have to relate everything back to the course work – it's what you get out of the books that counts.’

You are not forbidden from introducing ideas of your own into an essay, but you have to do it cautiously, and always take the time to back up your case so that your reader doesn't just dismiss it out of hand. Your reader is only interested in well thought-out arguments based on good authority or good

evidence, not just anything you happen to want to say. Generally, as a newcomer to a subject, it is best to concentrate on trying to do an intelligent job of working with the arguments and information you have been reading or learning about in books and articles, lectures and seminars. Your own originality of thought has plenty of opportunity to shine through.

This even applies to the terms you use. For example, Philip says in paragraph 1, 'These were under-privileged women ...'. 'Under-privileged' is not a term Ellis uses, and it sounds pretty odd given that she is talking about wealthy society women. Privilege was what they *did* have. 'Socially cut-off', 'under-stimulated', or 'under-employed' are all terms that might more accurately be used. But basically it is wisest to stay close to the terms that authors use. After all, what grounds has Philip for placing these women in a particular category other than what he has learned from Ellis? She will have chosen her terms carefully, based on her own detailed knowledge of the subject and on the terms in use amongst other experts. Writing essays is also learning to use the language of the writers in the field you are studying.

Key points

- Dropping thoughts of your own into your essay, in passing, tends to raise lots of complicated questions that you cannot deal with.
- If you include points that distract your reader from the main flow of your argument, this diminishes its impact.
- Any ideas you do bring in need to be explained and justified.
- If you focus on working with the terms and ideas you have been studying, your own thoughts and interpretations will work their way in anyway. You don't need to make a special effort to bring in extra ideas of your own.

7.5.5 Making judgements

The essay title, then, invites the writer to engage in the debate between Ellis and the satirists. This involves coming to some kind of *judgement* between the arguments on the two sides. As we saw, Philip does not really commit himself. Insofar as he makes judgements, they are about the parallels between the situation of these eighteenth-century women and women now, and between eighteenth-century women's actions and those of women in general. I found these views both irrelevant and inappropriate.

Box 7.6 Making 'good judgements'

We make judgements about what we read all the time. Indeed, we read other people's writing *in order* to think through our ideas more thoroughly and to extend them. Unless we have some ideas of our own we can't make sense of what we read. And our ideas 'inform' our judgements.

However, when you present your judgements in an essay they have to be *relevant* to the question you are discussing, and *appropriate* in terms of the sources of information and authoritative debate available to you. You must try not to make assumptions as you develop your argument. Ask yourself 'what if my reader disagrees with me?'

Hansa, on the other hand, does commit herself. In taking Ellis's line against that of the satirists, she brings her own judgement to bear. But does she manage to present her judgements 'relevantly' and 'appropriately'? In the first three paragraphs she very properly keeps her judgements to herself and sticks to outlining the women's general circumstances, and the opportunities available to them in country and town respectively. But then in paragraph 4 the gloves come off.

In view of the somewhat prescribed role forced upon women in the eighteenth century by the male dominated society which formulated social mores ... (underlining added)

Hansa is saying that this society was dominated by men; that men made the social 'rules' and, presumably, 'forced' them upon women. Relationships between men and women at the time are certainly *relevant* to the essay question. But is it *appropriate* for Hansa to make such a statement as if it is based on her own knowledge of the facts – when actually, if she got it from anywhere, we know that it was from Ellis? At least, she should refer to the source of her information, saying perhaps, 'As we see from Ellis's article, this was a male dominated society ...'.

However, she would have difficulty doing that because Ellis does not say this explicitly anywhere. Ellis does not use the term 'male dominated', nor does she explore the question of where the rules of correct female behaviour 'came from'. So Hansa is not making a statement based on fact here. This is a judgement, based on her interpretation of Ellis.

What Hansa says, then, is inappropriate for two reasons:

- 1 because she writes *as if* she herself has knowledge that she does not have;
- 2 because she presents what is a *judgement* as though it were fact.

In effect, what she presents us with are her own *assumptions* about how eighteenth-century society worked.

Hansa's personal judgement comes through again right at the end of the essay when she talks about women being 'burdened' by their role. Again, she presents this as if it is obvious and well established that 'society' placed a heavy and oppressive load on these women. (I dare say some of their servants would not have found their way of life such a burden.) So, again, this 'pronouncement' jars. It feels as though we are being dragooned into seeing things from Hansa's point of view without having been given good reason to.

So although Hansa has brought in her own judgements in a way that is relevant, she has not quite handled them appropriately. But then in a first essay it is quite an achievement to have to engaged so well with Ellis's

arguments. I doubt if it will take Hansa long to develop the ability to present her case more convincingly.

Key points

In the concluding paragraph of your essay you should give a direct *answer* to the *essay question* you have been asked (or a solution to the problem posed in the title). It does not have to be grand, but there should be a sense of having reached an ending.

The *judgements* you make should be:

- *relevant* and *appropriate* to the question you are discussing
- *justified* by the case you have argued in the main body of the essay.

7.6 Making your case convincing

One of the best ways of putting together a convincing argument is to make direct use of your source material – in this case, Ellis's article. Neither Hansa nor Philip does quite enough of it. Hansa does some in her opening paragraph, when she refers to the particular accomplishments women acquired – playing the piano, singing, embroidering – and, in the last sentence, quotes from Ellis briefly. In her second paragraph she also identifies the different pastimes men and women had in the countryside. (Philip does none of these things in his opening paragraphs.) They both need to make the Ellis article a more tangible presence in their essay because Ellis is both the *source of the information* they present and the *authority* for their arguments.

In making a convincing case, there are two basic tools available to you. First, *explain* fully what you mean to say, using ideas and illustration drawn from *authorities* on the subject. Second, provide *evidence* to support your case. Each requires a certain amount of know-how to be used effectively.

7.6.1 Explaining and illustrating an argument

The things you write about can seem perfectly obvious to *you* but be utterly obscure to a reader. Indeed, if you come back after several months to something you have written yourself, you can often find your *own words* mystifying. It is important to remind yourself that your reader cannot see into your mind. *Your points often need more explanation than you think*. It is always a good policy to take the time to spell things out clearly.

‘ I try to be clear and develop points. I don't assume that my reader knows what the topic is about. Explain, explain, explain. ’

‘ I just assumed I was being clear, but when I got my essay back (and had forgotten some of the topic) I couldn't follow some of my own points! ’

Illustrating your argument

When you present an argument you are often using words and ideas that are open to a range of interpretations. *Illustrating* a point you are trying to

explain is giving an *example* that makes your meaning clear and helps to fix what you are saying more precisely in your reader's mind. So, when Ellis says that men actively enjoyed their life in the countryside she illustrates this claim by giving specific examples of the pleasures they enjoyed; riding, hunting, fishing and shooting. In turn, Hansa refers to these pastimes in her essay. This helps us imagine just how the men spent their time and so appreciate the point she makes. Hansa might have illustrated the attractions of the towns by mentioning some of the detail Ellis provides; rather than referring vaguely to 'social events', she could have made specific mention of the theatres and concert halls (as Philip does). This would help us to 'see' why women were attracted to the towns, and would not take up many more of her 500 words. In short, explanations and illustrations help your reader to see the force of your argument. They also demonstrate to your tutor that you understand what you are writing about.

Providing evidence in support of your argument

When Ellis describes Lady Jane Coke's fate, stranded in her house for four months during the winter of 1748–9, she is illustrating her point about the tedium of women's lives in the countryside in a particularly vivid way that sticks in our minds. However, at the same time as illustrating this point the example *also* offers evidence in support of her claim that these women's lives were tedious. In other words, she is backing up her argument. The quotation she uses ('continual rains') suggests that the information is drawn from an account given by someone who was actually there – possibly from Lady Coke herself, in a diary or letter. So this is 'first-hand' evidence. (We return to the question of evidence in 9.6.2.)

'Illustrating' your point is sometimes confused with giving 'evidence' in support of it. You need to keep these processes separate in your mind. But if you *can* find some section of text that does both jobs at once, it is very economical (taking up fewer of the words available to you). So this would be a good example to use in the essay.

Quoting

At some points you may want to use an author's exact words, to quote the author, in order to convey the precise point he or she makes or to provide evidence that indeed such a thing was said – as Hansa does at the end of her first paragraph. You will have noticed that in doing this she used *quotation marks*.

To take another example, you might write:

In Ellis's view it was 'vital that [these women] conformed to contemporary norms which had shifted ... towards an ideal of delicate, innocent and essentially decorative womanhood'.

Notice that I have inserted the words 'these women' here, to allow the sentence to read correctly. To signal that this is *my* addition, I have put these words in square brackets. I have also left out a few words that I didn't need, but, by using three dots (an ellipsis), I have *again* signalled the change to the original text.

This exactness in the use of other people's words is extremely important. When you quote an author, it is vital that you reproduce the passage *completely accurately*, giving clear signals when you have made any changes. In most essays you shouldn't need to quote from secondary sources all that often, since the essential point is to learn to write in your own words. But when you do quote you *must* be accurate.

When you quote you should also include, at that point in your essay, a *reference* to the work you are quoting from and the page number for the quotation. Referencing is discussed in Chapter 8.

Key point

- Whenever you quote an author's words you *must* show that this is what you are doing by using quotation marks.
- Everything between quotation marks, including punctuation, should be *exactly* as in the original text. If you deliberately add or omit something, you should signal the changes with square brackets or with ellipses.

Avoiding plagiarism

Still on the subject of working with other people's ideas, note that the emphasis has to be on working *with* other people's ideas rather than reproducing their words. If you copy your essay material directly from an article, without using quotation marks and without acknowledging your source, you will be accused by your tutor of *plagiarism*: that is, in effect, stealing other people's ideas. This also applies if you reproduce an author's argument (perhaps paraphrasing it) and fail to acknowledge that you have done so and where you have drawn the ideas from. In the world of writing, plagiarism is *a serious offence*. Furthermore, a well-referenced essay actually gets you credit rather than making your work look derivative.

It is also possible to be guilty of plagiarism without even being aware of it. As you are reading an article you might jot down passages from it in note form and, later on, working through your notes for an essay, simply forget where you got these passages from and assume that they are *your* words. You can avoid such 'accidental plagiarism' by getting into the habit of including a reference to your source as a *heading* in your notes, and using quotation marks *whenever* you write down another person's words. But this also underlines the importance of the point made in Chapter 5 about making the effort to translate what you read into *your own words* as you make notes.

This is all the more important now that we have the resources of the internet available to us. These days, cutting and pasting from a website into your notes is one of the most common causes of unintended plagiarism. The note-making skills discussed in Chapter 5 should be applied to internet sources in just the same way as other source material. On the other hand, you have no doubt read stories in the newspapers about students raiding websites for material to use in essays, and even buying essays written by other people.

See Chapter 8
Section 8.2.8,
Reviewing, revising
and polishing

See Chapter 10
Section 10.4.3,
Plagiarising
assignments

This behaviour is certainly not accidental, and when discovered (as it often is) it is always heavily penalised.

Key point

Reproducing an author's words without using quotation marks and referencing your source is *plagiarism*. So is unacknowledged paraphrasing of an author's argument. Plagiarism is *cheating*. It will be taken very seriously by your university; if you plagiarise you will be penalised.

7.6.2 Providing evidence

To be convincing, you need to support your arguments with evidence. But what exactly *counts* as evidence? 'Telling stories' drawn from your own or a friend's experience does *not* count as convincing evidence. Your essay will be seen as subjective: that is, slanted in line with your personal experience, opinions or beliefs. There are exceptions to this however. Sometimes you may be asked to draw on your own experience – in film studies, on your personal response to particular scenes for example. But on occasions like these your tutor is asking for something a lot more considered and reflective than mere reaction, opinion or anecdote. And in most cases you will need to draw your evidence from elsewhere.

For instance, we saw that it would have been helpful for Hansa to be able to rely on Ellis's authority when mounting her argument about male domination. Had Ellis in fact argued this explicitly, she could have used Ellis's terms and also quoted her words. In this way Hansa could both have *explained* herself clearly and offered *evidence* in support of her argument.

At present, Philip's and Hansa's arguments appear to arise too directly out of their own 'knowledge' and this is unlikely to be convincing to their readers. It is a vital part of writing skill in the humanities to be able to weave quotations and other references into your essays, so that you convey a sense of direct engagement with the texts you have been studying. Ellis herself does this in her article, when she draws on the findings of demographic research carried out by other academics. She has also researched primary sources such as contemporary diaries, letters and plays – and, as we saw, she quotes directly from some of them. In principle, we could check these sources for ourselves.

So, you are often drawing your evidence from information contained in the *same* texts from which you draw your basic arguments and ideas – as in the case of Ellis's article. Nevertheless, you need to get into the habit of referring to the *specific* evidence on which you are basing the points you make (Etherege's play, or Sophie von La Roche's observations), even though it has been done in the article. The fact that the author of the article has already drawn conclusions is not going to convince the reader that *you* understand how the evidence works. You have to *show* that you do.

Exploring the strengths and weaknesses of Philip's and Hansa's essays has revealed how important it is for an essay to have an *argument* which *answers*

the question in the title. This is important because working out your argument tests your *understanding* of the ideas and information you have been studying. And developing it into a *well-organised* and *convincing* argument helps you to take control of your new knowledge and learn how to use it for yourself.

Key points

- An essay should have an argument running through it, from the title to the conclusion.
- In the conclusion of your essay, show that you have answered the question asked in the title. (If the title doesn't contain a question, make it clear that you have completed whatever task it sets.)
- In presenting your argument, take the time to explain to your reader what you mean. Use examples to illustrate your point.
- Don't expect your reader to take your word for things. Back up your points with evidence, or by referring to the views of other writers on the subject.
- Make use of your new knowledge by bringing in concepts and material from the course.
- Give your essay structure by organising it into a sequence of paragraphs with a logical flow.
- Always use quotation marks when you reproduce an author's words, and provide a reference for your source material (see Chapter 8).

7.7 'Proper' English

Now we will look at the *way* Philip and Hansa wrote and presented their essays. Another difference you may have noticed between them is that Philip's written English is less polished than Hansa's. It is often difficult to read because he doesn't use enough punctuation to help us make sense of his words, and because of certain mistakes he makes. I found Hansa's essay easier to read. Her writing is more technically correct and more assured than Philip's. But I think that sometimes it is too formal and elaborate.

Activity 7.2

Go back to Philip's and Hansa's essays, and the notes you made about them. Look at the *way* they *express* their ideas. Did you pick out any mistakes in their sentences, punctuation or spelling? How important do you think it is to spell words correctly?

7.7.1 Sentences

We can see that Philip *knows* what a sentence is because he writes some perfectly good ones. For *example*:

In many ways going into urban life from the countryside was beneficial to woman of the upperclass.

This sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop. It has a subject (urban life) and a main verb (was). As any sentence is, it is a self-contained unit of meaning. It makes sense read out on its own. The only thing wrong with it is that 'upper class' should be two words rather than one, and Philip should refer to women not 'woman'.

But what about this sentence? (Read it out loud.)

With society becoming more wealthy it was possible for the fathers and husbands to provide an even better standard of life for their wives and daughters, more servants could be provided to do the work and this left the woman more time than ever to develop the social skills of the era, but this in turn led to extreme frustration among woman of that class.

It sounds long and rambling. But in fact all it needs is two full stops and a couple of minor corrections (to 'wives' and 'woman') to turn it into three pretty sound sentences.

With society becoming more wealthy it was possible for the fathers and husbands to provide an even better standard of life for their wives and daughters. More servants could be provided to do the work and this left the women more time than ever to develop the social skills of the era. But this in turn led to extreme frustration among women of that class.

Box 7.7 Writing sentences

A sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark. It is a self-contained unit of meaning. Every sentence needs a verb – a 'doing' word – and (almost) every sentence needs a subject – a person who, or thing that, is 'doing'. *She popped the question* is a sentence. 'She' is the subject (because she was 'doing' the popping) and 'popped' is the verb (because that is what she was doing). If you are not sure whether you have written a sentence, a simple test is to ask 'Does it have a subject and a verb?' ('it' is the subject of that sentence and 'does have' is the verb).

It is quite possible to use grammar effectively without knowing the rules in a formal way. Many people can hear whether a string of words is a sentence or not because it 'sounds' complete when it is; they don't have to stop and think about whether it contains a subject and a verb. If you find it *isn't* obvious to you, even when you read your work out loud, get some advice (see the paragraph below for suggestions). You will find it difficult to develop your writing style until you have a reasonable feel for what a sentence is.

At first sight it looks as if writing in sentences may be a big problem for Philip. He *does* have a sense of where a break is needed, but he tends to use commas where he needs full stops. The sentences are there; he just hasn't

marked them as sentences. I doubt if he needs to worry too much about this. With prompting from a tutor and plenty of practice – and especially through reading his essays out loud – his sensitivity to sentences will develop spontaneously. But, if you need to, you will find websites that offer support with sentence structure (search for 'English' and 'grammar'); your own university may provide one. Also, your word processor's grammar checking facility should give you some support. It won't be infallible but it can be useful to have the prompt, to help you double-check what you have written. Make sure you know how the grammar checker works (look under Help if necessary), and when you see a mistake picked out, take the time to find out what might be wrong. That way you will gradually build up your ability to get things right without needing help. Alternatively, buy a book on grammar or ask your local library for information about classes – your local college will probably run short courses on grammar and writing.

Hansa's writing is much more assured. But, as I said, some sentences strike me as over-formal and elaborate. Take this one, for example:

Because of this, and because an urban environment offered women so much more scope, not only to display their accomplishments but also to indulge their own desire for sociability, amusement and companions', the female population of England's towns expanded dramatically.

Too many points that are important in their own right are squashed into this one sentence. Its construction is complicated: 'Because A ... , and because B ... , not only C ... but also D, E and F, the female population ... '. It would read more easily if she removed the central part of the sentence – 'not only to display ... amusement and companions'. (And, incidentally, she doesn't want the apostrophe after the 's' in 'companions'.) There would still be more than enough to take in. Also, more emphasis would be placed on the last part of the sentence, which is actually the *main point* of it. As things stand, we arrive at 'the female population ... ' over-burdened and out of breath, as it were.

In sentences such as this, Hansa's meaning is so condensed that it gets lost. She is trying to say too much. If she wrote more directly, in simpler sentences, her meaning would be clearer and she could give more emphasis to the points that are most important. A simple sentence contains one idea; if your sentences contain more than one idea, consider splitting them into two or more.

7.7.2 Punctuation

Some of the sentences we have looked at are harder to understand than they might be because they are not very well punctuated. Punctuation is the system of signals you give to your reader to show how the grammar of the sentence is supposed to work; punctuation marks are the 'stops' in a sentence that divide it up into parts. They make it easier to follow the meaning of the

words. For instance, it is easier to read this sentence of Philip's if we put a comma after 'wealthy':

With society becoming more wealthy, it was possible for the fathers and husbands to provide an even better standard of life for their wives and daughters.

Box 7.8 Punctuation marks

The basics of punctuation are the capital letter at the start of a sentence and the full stop at the end. You use commas to mark off any sub-parts of the sentence. Other punctuation marks include:

semicolon ;	marks a pause which has more emphasis than a comma but less than a full stop; also often used to divide up items in a list
colon :	signals that a list is to follow
brackets ()	always come in pairs and go round an aside – a point which is not part of the main flow of a sentence. If you read 'through', missing out what is in the brackets, the sentence should still make sense
dash –	can be used similarly to brackets, but you can use just one to signal a shift to a related point
hyphen -	links words together (as above, in <i>sub-parts</i>)
apostrophe '	indicates letters missing (as in <i>don't</i>); also indicates belonging to (as in <i>Philip's</i>)
inverted commas ''	used when you quote; speech marks

Question mark ? and exclamation mark ! are pretty obvious. You will very rarely need to use an exclamation mark in an essay.

We all make mistakes in punctuation as we write. So it is important to check through the first draft of your essay with this in mind. When in doubt, read the sentence out loud – even in an exaggerated way – and 'listen' to where you make little pauses as you speak it. Often, you need a comma at those points.

7.7.3 Consistency

A common problem with sentences is not making all the parts match up. What is wrong with this sentence of Philip's, for example?

So therefore woman began to long for the urban or city way of living, if even for a short period so that they could deploy the art of socialising ...

The mistake is that 'woman' should be followed by 'she' not 'they'. 'Woman' is *singular*, whereas the word 'they' is *plural*. (Philip should also put a comma after 'period', and change 'even' to 'only'.) Similarly, in her fourth

paragraph Hansa refers to '*a high ranking women*'. You have to make up your mind whether you are talking about one thing or lots of them.

Another kind of matching up is making the items in a list the same kind of word. Instead of writing 'sociability, amusement and *companions*', Hansa should say '*companionship*'. The first two words in the list are abstract nouns, so the third word should be an abstract noun too. Also, some words take partners: 'not only ... but also', for example, and 'either ... or'. When Hansa writes in her conclusion 'women ... were *neither* mainly attracted to the towns' she should add '*nor* escaping from the countryside'.

Another common slip is to have tenses of verbs not matching. Look at this sentence of Philip's:

The women who lived a fairly comfortable style of life belonged to a class of society where the father or husband would be a land-owner.

'Lived' and 'belonged' are in the past tense. So Philip should use the past tense of the other verb in the sentence; 'would *have been*', rather than 'would be'. (And, incidentally, a 'class of society' is not a place so he shouldn't say 'where'. He should have written '*in which* the father ...'.)

The tense of a verb is its setting in *time*. For example, 'I laugh' is set in the present, 'I laughed' is set in the past, and 'I will laugh' is set in the future. (There are, of course, other tenses too.) The main thing is to be *consistent* in using them. Decide whether you are discussing the past, present or future and then stay there, unless you have a good reason for making a change.

Some of these may seem small points. But I am not nit picking or being critical for the sake of it. Inconsistencies such as these get in the way. They slow your readers down and distract them from taking in the meaning of your sentences. Reading is hard enough without having our attention diverted along the way.

7.7.4 Choosing the right words

Both Philip and Hansa occasionally use words and phrases that don't really do the job they want. We saw, for instance, that Philip uses the word 'resemblance' when actually he means 'contrast'. Here are some other examples from his writing.

	<i>Philip's words</i>	<i>More accurate words</i>
Paragraph 1	'portrayal'	portrait, account
	'orientated to'	fitted for
Paragraph 2	'a greater amount of society'	a wider society
Paragraph 3	'variation of'	variety of
Paragraph 4	'amount' of jibes	many jibes

And in Hansa's second paragraph I'd say it is better to refer to the 'exercise' of skills rather than the 'indulgence' of them.

Box 7.9 Choice of words

When you are writing you have to use the words that come to you. You would never get started if you stopped to worry about each one. However, when you are reading over what you have written you should check that you have used words that convey the meaning you intended. The exact meaning of the words you use is more important in writing than in speech.

In the long run your sensitivity to the shades of meaning words carry will increase. But as you study, the best thing to do is just get on with your writing – with a dictionary at your elbow. You may also find a thesaurus useful. A thesaurus lists words in groups of related meanings (MS Word contains one – look under ‘tools’ and ‘language’).

Everyday language

Philip uses a phrase from popular speech when he says that these women have ‘gone down in history’ as experts at organising social events. This is definitely not an academic turn of phrase, since it implies that there is one history we all agree about – a kind of hall of fame for society’s all-time ‘stars’. Note that Ellis herself does *not* say this; she is very precise. What she says is that women ‘sometimes took a leading role’ in planning certain social events such as race meetings, balls, theatre performances and concerts.

Phrases like this may seem to give a flourish to your writing, but they are not appropriate in an academic essay. They are not precise enough, and they tend to raise more problems than they are worth. In any case, a flourish is not quite what you are after. What you need is a lively and compelling style that is at the same time simple and direct.

7.7.5 Spelling

Philip and Hansa made very few spelling mistakes. In Philip’s essay perhaps you noticed ‘wifes’ (wives), ‘citys’ (cities) and ‘carreer’ (career); in Hansa’s ‘sparcity’ (sparsity).

Do you lose marks for bad spelling? In principle, no. However, your essay marker is bound to be influenced by work with lots of mistakes in it, whether in spelling, grammar or punctuation. They detract from the general effect of your essay as well as making it harder to read. If you want your writing to make its full impact you really need to proof-read your work – take the time to read through it carefully before sending it off to be marked. And of course use your word processor’s ‘spell check’ facility.

If you are very poor at spelling, don’t worry that it will hold back your progress. But don’t be entirely relaxed about it either. There are websites that offer spelling tests and general advice. And when you are not sure about a word you should look it up in a dictionary. It would also be useful to start making a list of the words you often get wrong, so that you can test yourself from time to time. However, it isn’t worth setting out on a major campaign to memorise dozens of words. In general, the more you read and write the more

you develop a sense of the broad, though rather idiosyncratic, rules of English spelling.

7.7.6 Presenting your essay

Your university will almost certainly want you to word process your essays rather than write by hand. But however you do it, it is important to present an essay well. Otherwise, it suggests that you don’t care enough about your work to read it through and make corrections before handing it to someone else to read. And your tutor is bound to find it harder to make sense of what you are trying to say if there are too many mistakes in it. Tutors usually make allowances for the occasional blunder but, if you want your writing to have its full impact, you must read it through carefully and correct any errors you spot.

We have seen that, although there are good things in Philip’s essay, there are quite a number of ways in which his writing could be improved.

Activity 7.3

To test yourself out on the points we have talked about, go back to Philip’s second paragraph, starting from ‘The country was no place ...’, and put in some punctuation and any other alterations that make it read more easily.

Here is my attempt, with the reasons for the changes I made given below.

The country was **now** no place ~~now~~ to exercise these new skills. ~~they had been taught.~~ [For one thing, females outnumbered males. ~~at that time~~] Few chances arose to meet and mingle **in society**. ~~with crowds of people. but~~ Most importantly, the demands of propriety **required that** ~~meant that~~ **women’s** ~~their~~ conduct should be impeccable at all times. Any error **could** be seen in such a limited environment. ~~So therefore~~ women began to long for the urban ~~or city~~ way of living, if **only even** for a short period, so that they could **put their social skills to use** ~~deploy the art of socialising~~ and mingle ~~ing~~ with a **wider** ~~greater amount of~~ society.

Changes

- ‘Now’ interrupts the flow of ‘no place to exercise these new skills’, so I moved it forward.
- When Philip wants to identify which ‘new skills’ he is referring to he can *either* say ‘these new skills’, *or* ‘the new skills they had been taught’ – he doesn’t need both.
- Start a new sentence after ‘taught’.
- Comma after ‘thing’ because it’s a preparatory bit before the main sentence starts. No need for ‘at that time’ because he has already said ‘now’ in the previous sentence. But my square brackets indicate that this sentence should really come out altogether – Ellis does *not* say this.
- New sentence at ‘Few’; ‘crowds of people’ isn’t quite right for gatherings of people of this rank – ‘in society’ or ‘socially’ captures it better.
- No need for ‘but’ – just start another sentence at ‘Most’.

See Chapter 8
Section 8.2.8,
Reviewing, revising
and polishing

- What the demands of propriety imposed on women were ‘requirements’ not ‘meanings’. ‘Women’s’ instead of ‘their’, since readers might be losing track of who ‘they’ are by now.
- New sentence at ‘Any error’ – and ‘could’ is better than ‘would’, since not every error might be spotted.
- New sentence at ‘So’. He doesn’t need both ‘so’ and ‘therefore’. Needs the plural ‘women’. Doesn’t need ‘urban’ *and* ‘city’. Good to put a comma after ‘living’, *and* after ‘period’ – since ‘if only for a short period’ is a side point.

The rest we’ve already discussed.

How do these compare with the improvements you made? It doesn’t matter if yours are different because many of these changes are more a matter of taste and judgement than right and wrong. The main point of the exercise was to focus your attention on the details. Your aim is to achieve directness, simplicity and a nice flow to what you write. You will gradually develop a feel for what works best and when, and your tutor will probably have plenty of suggestions to make.

Key points

The *way* you write is as important as what you say. So when you are writing you must try to:

- use properly formed sentences and mainly simple ones
- punctuate them in a way that makes your meaning clear
- pay attention to grammar, making all parts of sentences consistent
- be precise about the particular words and phrases you use and careful to address your reader appropriately
- present your work with care, reading it through to correct spelling, grammar and any other mistakes.

7.8 Writing style and audience

While it certainly helps to write ‘properly’, what really counts is being able to write clearly and forcefully. So how did you rate Hansa and Philip on this score?

As I have said, in my view Hansa tends to use whole clusters of words and constructions that are a bit over-formal rather than wrong. She seems to be trying to impress her reader. For example:

They therefore fled from the country in order to escape the restrictions and consequent boredom placed upon them by the very limited pastimes that a high ranking women in the eighteenth century was permitted to indulge.

Activity 7.4

Hansa’s sentence contains 36 words. Can you see ways to reduce it to, say, 20 or so? At the same time, try to make the sentence simpler and more direct.

Normally, we would use a word such as ‘allowed’ rather than ‘permitted to indulge’, which sounds rather pompous. And, strictly speaking, we ‘indulge *in*’ pastimes. Also, ‘restrictions’ may be ‘placed upon’ people, but we don’t usually say that about ‘boredom’. Boredom is something we experience or suffer. It would be altogether simpler and more straightforward to say something like:

So they fled from the countryside to escape these restrictions, and the boredom that resulted from having so few pastimes. [20 words]

Sometimes Philip, too, seems to be striving to impress by using formal language instead of simple, direct terms. For instance, in paragraph 3 he talks about women being able to meet ‘... *many more of the female sex*’ when he just means ‘other women’. And at the end of paragraph 2 he says, ‘... *so that they could deploy the art of socialising and mingling with a greater amount of society*’ – when it would be more direct to say ‘... so that they could put their social skills to use, and mingle with a wider society.’ Similarly, ‘*This transition was not without a certain amount of jibes from the male population against the women of that time ...*’ could simply be put as ‘Some men mocked these women for making the transition ...’. Perhaps Hansa and Philip are assuming that they have to sound ‘academic’ for their tutors.

But who exactly *are* you writing for? How can you develop an appropriate style and tone of voice unless you can picture your reader?

Key points

- Good writing at higher levels of study is primarily to do with the quality of your ideas and arguments. Nevertheless it is important to work at making your written language as technically correct as you can, simply to be able to get your ideas across effectively.
- Improvement takes time, but regular practice and attention to detail will gradually make a difference. As you begin to gain greater control over your use of language, you will also get more pleasure out of writing.

7.8.1 ‘Speaking’ to your reader

Writing is a very special form of ‘conversation’. As you write, you are talking to someone you cannot see and who does not reply. You just have to assume that he or she is ‘listening’ and reacting to what you say. Furthermore, *you* have to take all the responsibility for deciding what is to be said and how, and for sustaining this other person’s interest. And you are responsible for establishing the *relationship* between you and your listener.

This is one of the trickiest things about writing. You have to convey a sense of who you assume your *reader* to be, and in what frame of mind he or she will be approaching your words. This is known as a 'sense of audience'. You also have to convey a sense of who *you* are claiming to be and from what *position* you are speaking. Are you speaking as an expert on the subject, as a witty entertainer, a friend, or what? This is known as your 'writing voice'.

So there are two issues here. You have to develop a sense of your audience and of the right tone of voice in which to write.

Sense of audience

Who, then, do you assume your audience is when you write an essay? Is it someone who is very learned and critical, or someone who knows nothing? A standard approach is to say, write for the intelligent person in the street. In other words, assume that your reader has not read the books you have been studying, but that she or he is interested in the question posed by the title of the essay and is capable of picking up your arguments quickly provided you spell them out clearly. This is helpful, but slightly puzzling. The average person in the street is unlikely to want to know about Ellis's views on eighteenth-century women, or to be interested in an academic style of debate. Or people say that you should write for your tutor. But this is a bit puzzling too. You know perfectly well that your tutor already knows about almost everything you are likely to say. So perhaps write for another beginner in your subject is a more realistic formulation – someone who needs things explained fully, but who is basically interested and ready for a well-argued case. However, as we saw earlier, you can assume that this person is familiar with the primary texts you discuss, such as novels and poems, so you certainly don't need to 'tell them the story' in your essay.

Your writing voice

Who are you to present yourself as? Basically, you are a calm detached observer, pointing out to an equal (who happens not to be informed on the subject) some arguments that are relevant to a question you are both interested in (i.e. the question in the essay title). It is not easy to find a comfortable writing voice. It may take several essays before you can settle satisfactorily into one. One of the main reasons you get stuck at the start of an essay is the difficulty of trying to work out where you are 'coming from'. Sometimes you have to take several shots at your opening before you can find a voice in which you can proceed.

Key points

- To write good essays aim for a clear, direct, unfussy style and simple sentences.
- Check that your words say what you want them to.
- One of the key challenges of writing is to develop a sense of your audience and also a voice in which to speak to your reader. Both take time and practice, but as they develop, you become much more confident in your writing.

7.8.2 The significance of writing in your own words

Finding your own writing voice implies that, from the start of your studies, you must *write in your own words* when making notes and preparing essays – even if your writing is weak at the outset. This is a big challenge. You are trying to write in a subject area in which the terms are unfamiliar and your ideas are still forming. If it is also the case that you don't do much writing in your everyday life (true of most people) and you are unused to writing about ideas (true of almost everyone returning to study after a break), it is hard to know where to begin. That is why it feels safer to stay close to the wording of academic books and articles; it seems less likely that you will embarrass yourself by writing nonsense. Yet you are just as likely to write weakly if you rely too closely on the course material – and, as we saw, you run the risk of being accused of plagiarism. Worse still, though, your writing will not improve. Just as you don't make progress in learning to swim while you still have a foot on the bottom of the pool, *you don't begin to develop as a thinker and writer in your subject area if you rely on the words in the study texts.*

The main purpose of writing essays is to practice *using* the ideas you have been reading about in the course. This comes across very clearly from the students talking about the nature of the learning process in Chapter 3.

‘Often the things I learn most about are essay topics, because the process of structuring and writing an essay helps me to understand the main points of the argument.’

This means you have to write about ideas in words that make sense to *you*. They may come out badly to begin with, but like a learner in any field you have to be prepared to make mistakes. It is through exposing your weaknesses that you learn how to do something about them. Also, by using your own words, you show your teacher the progress you are making so that you can get due credit for it. And, having seen where you have reached in your understanding, your teacher can enter into fruitful dialogue with you to help move your ideas and writing along.

A further reason to write in your own words is that you will get more satisfaction out of it. There may be embarrassing moments, but with practice you will build up respect for yourself and your own ideas. This is the most powerful of incentives to carry on studying. If essays feel like a chore, because you are simply making a selection from other people's words and rearranging them on the page, then you are much more likely to give up your studies. You need to allow yourself to experience the deep satisfaction of expressing your own arguments and seeing your writing powers develop.

Key points

- There are four reasons why it is important to write in your own words.
- It enables you to learn the ideas in the course in depth, by using them to say things for yourself.

See Chapter 3
Section 3.2.3, What
do you have to do
to learn something?

- It enables your teacher to give you credit for your learning.
- It makes possible a genuine dialogue with your teacher about your progress.
- It makes studying much more stimulating and develops your powers of self-expression.

7.9 What is a good essay?

In this chapter we have given a lot of detailed attention to two very short essays, using them as a springboard for discussing what is expected in academic essays generally. However, we shouldn't leave the essays without commenting on their overall quality.

7.9.1 How good are the essays we reviewed?

The significance of context

'How good' depends enormously on the context. In one sense, any essay is excellent if it is genuinely the best you can write at that particular point in your understanding of the subject matter and given your level of experience of essay writing. It's like asking 'How well has my day's walk gone, now that I've reached Bradford Town Hall?' It very much depends whether you started from Low Moor on the outskirts of Bradford, from Halifax eight miles away, or from Manchester nearly sixty miles away over the Pennines. We all have to start writing from where we are, and one measure of the quality of our work is the progress we make from that starting point.

In this case we have two people returning to study after a long gap and not having thrived in their previous studies at school. I was not their teacher but, by arrangement, I asked them to read the Ellis article as an extra item alongside their regular course work. It is on a topic completely new to them and presents some quite subtle arguments. There was no classroom discussion of the article. Nor were they given guidance on how to tackle the essay title, or opportunity to share ideas about how to approach it. In short, they faced a tough challenge. To produce an essay at all was a considerable achievement.

Levels of performance

On the other hand, it would be misleading to say that we can't make comparisons between these essays, or judge them against any general standards.

Near the start of this chapter I asked you to make lists of the strengths and weaknesses of both the essays. Have a look at your notes now, and see how they compare with my judgements.

Philip's essay

Strengths

- a reasonable understanding of the issues Ellis deals with
- a good basic structure

- some good sequences of argument
- a promising feel for language
- fluency of expression

Weaknesses

- the wrong title and consequently a lack of focus
- argument is loose-knit in places – some points are not relevant
- occasionally misrepresents Ellis
- uncertainty regarding the overall argument, so arrives at a weak conclusion
- poor punctuation
- the language is artificial at times – striving for stylishness rather than clarity.

Philip's essay strikes me as a fair piece of work at this level. There are plenty of points that need working on, but also some promising features. He develops some strong argument and has the makings of an effective writing style.

Hansa's essay

Strengths

- subtle understanding of Ellis's argument
- good focus on the question in the title
- generally sound structure
- some very fluent writing in places
- plenty of attack in the opening – strong first paragraph
- good sense of how to draw a conclusion

Weaknesses

- one weak point is her use of paragraphs
- in places, her language is over-formal and sentences too densely packed
- needs to clarify her line of argument (i.e. reorganise a little)
- could pay even more attention to signalling how the argument is developing
- doesn't quite set up the frame of reference within which she is arguing.

Hansa's essay is clearly more accomplished than Philip's. It would attract a higher grade – above the middle range I'd say. That is mainly because she addresses herself to the essay question she was set, and puts together a reasonably well-connected argument that leads to an answer to it. Along the way, she shows that she has a good grasp of the ideas contained in her source material. On the whole, her work is careful and technically correct, and she presents it well.

Feedback

Essay writing is the nub of the teaching-learning relationship between students and their teachers. It is where the teacher gets to see how ideas are developing in the student's mind and the students get feedback on the

progress they are making. The dialogue that develops, in the form of the teacher's comments on the essay and the student's response to those comments in writing the next essay, is of critical significance.

So what did I say to Philip? Here is the note I wrote.

Dear Philip

Well done for getting yourself over the hurdle of sending in your first essay, especially as it's such a long time since you last did this kind of writing. The essay shows a lot of promise. You obviously worked hard on the Ellis article and you have done a good sound job of getting your thoughts together for this essay. The structure of the essay is very solid and, what is more, you have a nice fluency to your writing which gives you a good base to build on.

Where you have come a bit adrift is in not working with the exact title you were set. This made it hard for you to come to a strong conclusion at the end. Also, as you will see from my notes on your script, there are some places where your line of argument could be strengthened. And you will need to spend a bit of time working on your punctuation, as well as a few other points of grammar. None of these should present a major difficulty – they will gradually come right with practice. Just make a habit of looking over my markings and notes carefully and then work out how you can make things read more easily.

Broadly, you are doing exactly the right thing – which is to pitch in and work as best you can with the ideas you have been reading about. As you keep doing this you will find your style getting sharper and your grasp of your subject more secure. Keep up the good work.

I wrote to Hansa in congratulatory and encouraging terms. Hers is a very creditable job of getting to grips with quite a subtle article and an essay title which demands some careful thought. Her all-round performance was good.

We have looked at two very different pieces of writing in response to the same essay title. Each shows a student's mind at work, grappling with challenging new ideas, and each shows particular strengths and weaknesses in both approach and writing style. From all this we have drawn out many important pointers to what you are trying to achieve when you write your own essays.

7.10 Review

Let me highlight a few key messages for you to take from this chapter. One is that there is no great mystery about *what* good writing is. You were able to spot it yourself, just by reading the sample essays. The mystery is how to produce it. On the other hand, it is not so easy to judge the quality of your own writing as you progress through your studies, so you will find it useful to return to the *Criteria for writing a good essay* at the end of Chapter 8 when you are about to submit an essay. And, after you get the essay back with

comments on it, check through the list and see what progress you are making. Of all the chapters in the book this and the next are the most likely to be worth revisiting over your years of study.

You might also like to think over the fact that as you read the essays in this chapter, you briefly took on your tutor's role. This will have given you insight into what teachers look for as they mark your essays. As you saw, it isn't easy to read and make sense of other people's writing. Nor is it easy to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses and work out how to give appropriate advice. So:

- Be sympathetic to your teacher and present your work as well as you can.
- Don't be too upset if your teachers miss your point or offer advice you think is inappropriate or unfair. It is almost impossible to get these things right all the time.

Finally, be reassured that *you don't have to worry about getting your writing 'perfect' before submitting* it. The essays you have been looking at were not perfect, but one of them, at least, was a good early essay. These students were doing exactly the right thing in getting stuck in and having a go. Just assume that your first attempts will not be particularly wonderful and crack on. A good learner in any field is prepared to make mistakes. The task of the next chapter is to look at how to develop your skills as a writer.