

Academic Writing Skills

ECGE4001R

Aims of the Session.

- To consider the requirements to write at HE.
- To assess the criteria required for what constitutes a good essay.
- To consider note taking strategies (Home Work Task).
- To consider and understand key words used in essay titles in Psychology.

Essay Writing

- Coursework is designed to assess the Students understanding of the subject area / module topic.
- Therefore a well structured Essay that demonstrates good understanding of the QUESTION is FUNDAMENTAL.
- Failure to communicate / demonstrate the understanding = lower marks.

Writing

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- Analysing the Task
- Preparing a Plan
- Collecting relevant information
- Writing up
- Checking your writing

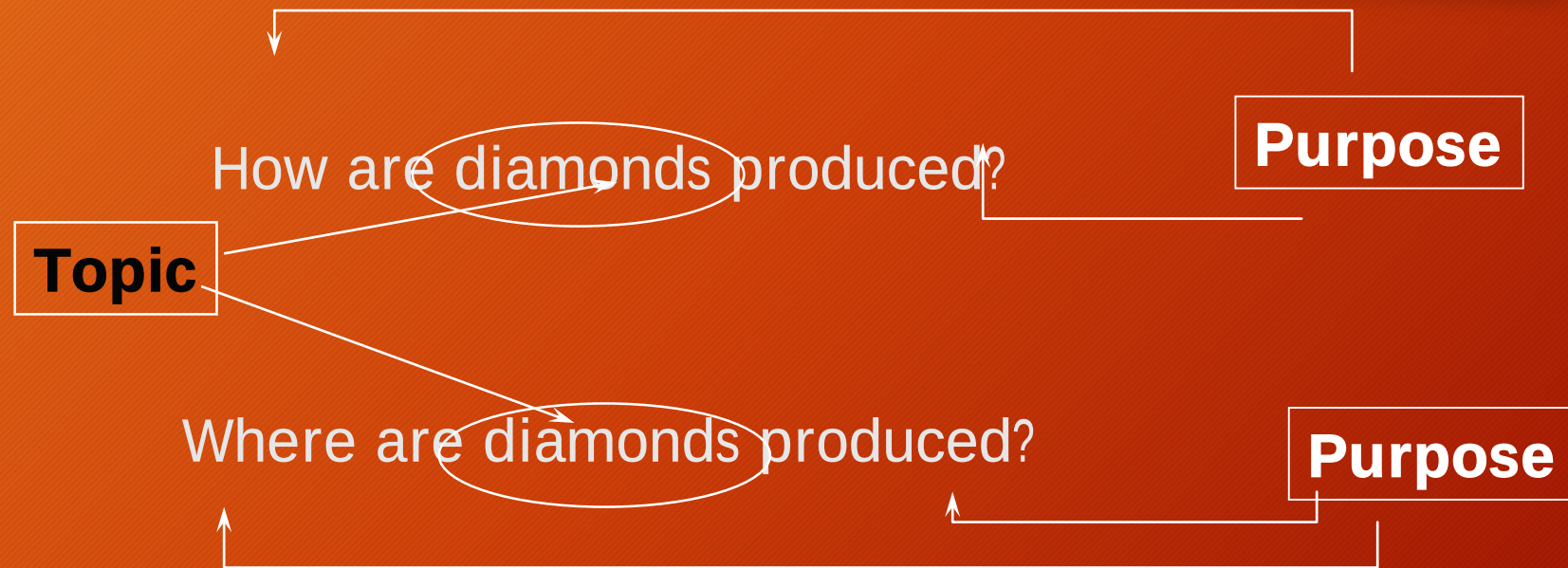
Analysing the Task

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- What is the question?
- Long description
- First step is to locate the question itself
- Locate the **Topic** and then the **Purpose**
- **Topic** - what the question is about
- **Purpose** - the information you need to give about the topic

Example

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Topic

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- If you fail to identify the topic of the question you are likely to produce an assignment which lacks direction and irrelevant to the question.
- This will score badly when marked.

Purpose

8

- After identifying the topic the next stage is to identify the purpose.
- You can do this by asking the following question:
- What does this question require me to do?

Example in Psychology

- Discuss Erikson's theory of Lifespan Development with particular reference to Adolescent stages.
- What are the **topic** and **purpose** of this question?

Oh no!
I have to write
an essay



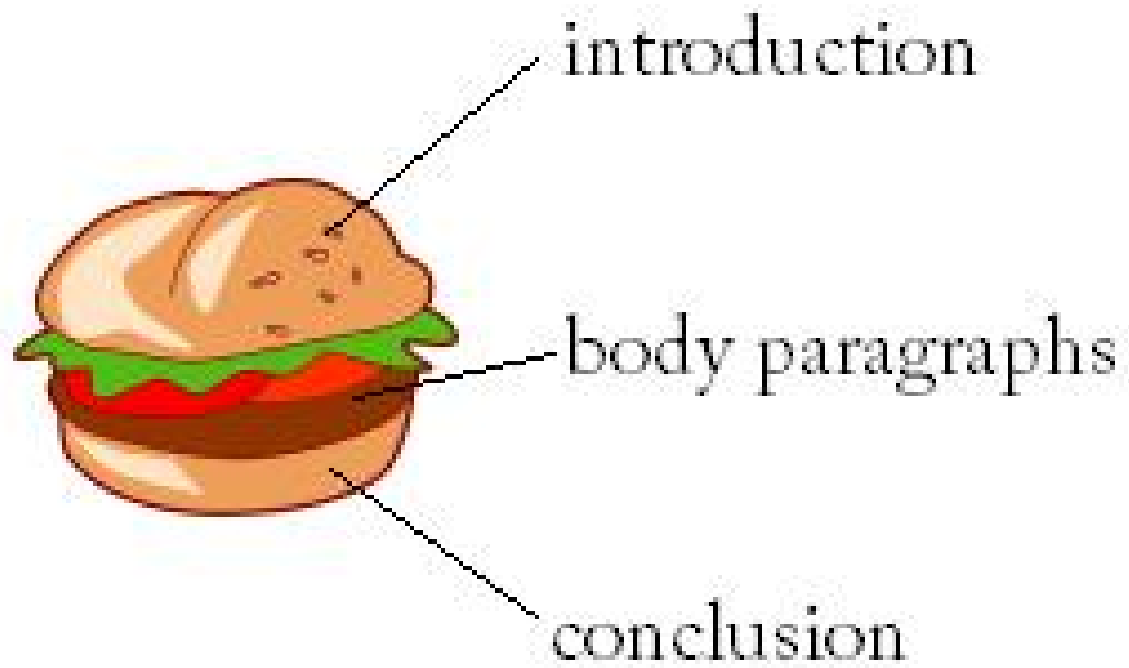
First things First.....

- UNDERSTANDING THE TASK.
- Understanding and interpreting the task.
- Planning
- Structuring
- Drafting

What constitutes a “good” Essay

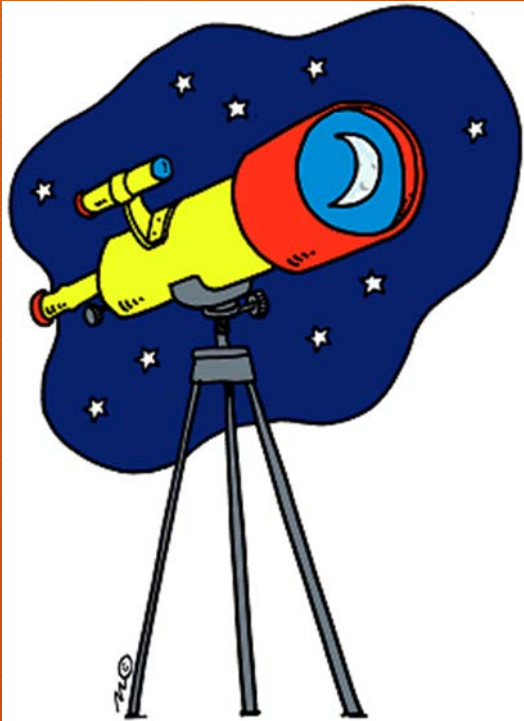
- Understanding of the set question.
 - Interpretation of the question.
- Understanding of the topic.
 - Demonstrate your OWN understanding of the topic.
- Critical Thinking
- Structure.

Essay structure



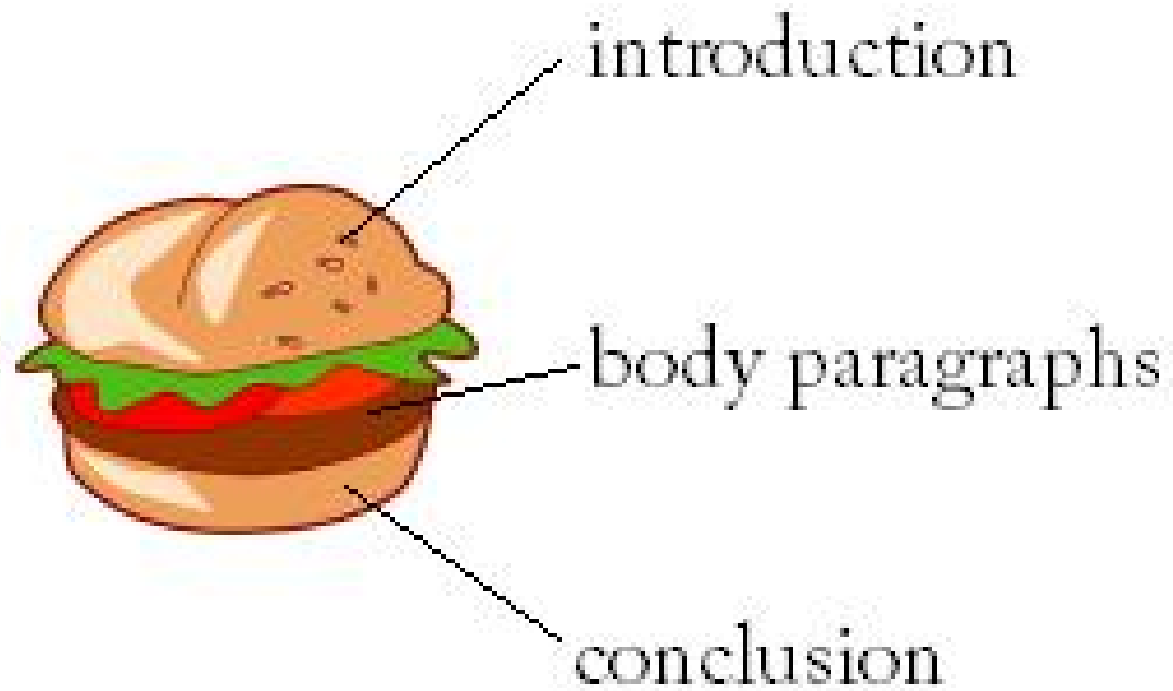
The Title!!!

-



Make sure
that you focus
on the title
throughout
the writing
process.

Essay structure



Guidance for writing an essay

- Introduction

An introduction provides some background to the issues that will be explored in the essay, and indicates how the topic / question will be addressed. The whole point is to provide a context for your discussion.

Structure

- ▶ Introduction.
- ▶ Sets the tone to the whole Essay – Vital.
- ▶ Introduces the reader to the topic.
- ▶ Introduces the reader to the rest of the Essay
 - Revert back to question.
- ▶ 1 – 2 paragraphs
- ▶ Make sure there is distinction between Introduction and “meat” but not via subheadings.

Task

- Individual
- Write an introduction for the following question.
- Discuss Erikson's theory of Lifespan Development with particular reference to Adolescent stages.

Introduction

- Some students like to complete their introduction AFTER they have planned what they want to say in the main body.

Structure

- Main Focus “Meat” .
 - Answer the Question.
- Demonstrate Understanding of Area/Question
- Demonstrate Effort
 - Read, Read, Read
- Back up with evidence where possible.
- Critical Thinking.

Coverage of literature

- You must ensure that your essay covers a reasonable amount of information relevant to the question that you are addressing. You must try to present a balanced argument, which often means finding information for and against a particular position. Also the literature must be up to date. Marks may be lost where old sources are used when more up to date references are available.

Structure

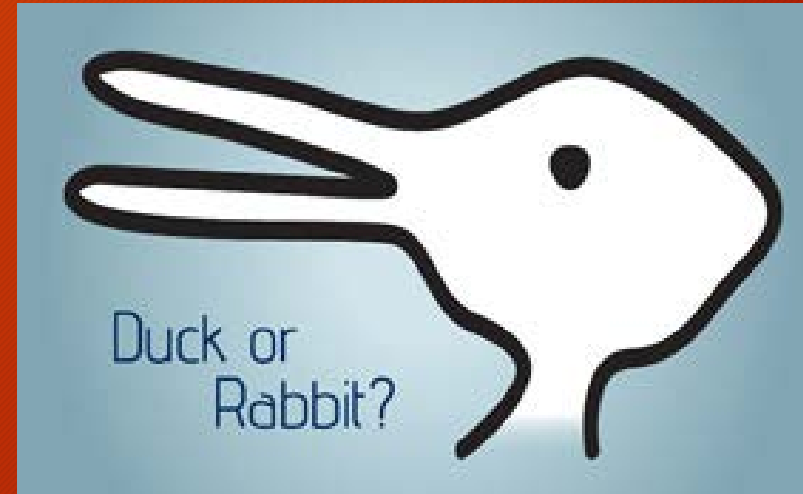
- ▶ An essay must have a clear structure in order for the reader to follow your argument. There should be a clear progression of ideas. The type of ordering used is highly individual and will also depend on the question. Ordering need not necessarily be chronological (particularly if this does not form a logical argument).

Clarity of argument

- Most essays present an argument, which means that there is often more than one theory covered and conflicting perspectives. You must try and indicate how a particular piece of evidence relates to theories that you are discussing (does it lend support or dispute). Using research evidence effectively to clarify your argument is a very important aspect of essay writing. Studies reported should be relevant and this relevance should be made explicit in your work.

Analysis and Interpretation

- All assignments, almost without exception, will call for a degree of ...
- Analysis and Interpretation



Critical analysis

- ▶ This is where you come in. Stop writing, engage brain and start to think about the issues that you are discussing. Are the arguments plausible? Do they ignore important pieces of evidence? Do they explain what they are supposed to explain? Have they been interpreted accurately? This is where you show how you are an intelligent person and not simply a photocopier. Remember we want to see that you understand what you have read. Also remember that opinions are of little value unless they are supported by or grounded in, some kind of research evidence.

So where do we start?

- Analysis means:
 - - critical engagement
 - - scrutinising

Research



- How?
- Think about how you would plan a holiday.

You must think hard and make careful selections, otherwise...



Read



But not everything!

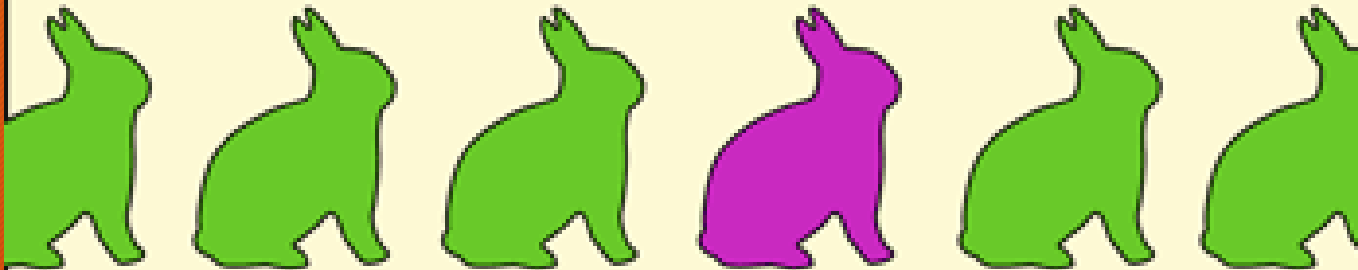
Be selective.....

- Book list
- Library
- Internet
- (advantages/ disadvantages)
- Intranet (module resources etc)



Sometimes, you will have to repeat some steps.

repetition



ORGANISATION – as you research, you must keep your notes in good order.



Remember: avoid this...



...and attempt this:



Main Focus... “Meat”

- ▶ Sources of Evidence
 - Why?
 - Demonstrates reading/effort and understanding
- ▶ Empirical or Anecdotal
- ▶ Empirical
 - Journals
 - Text Books.... Not just ANY book.
 - Internet ?
 - Lecture notes?
- ▶ Anecdotal
 - Real life examples (including Biographies).
 - Hypothetical examples.

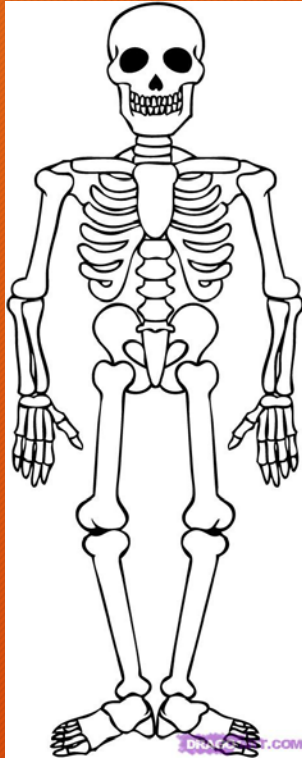
Empirical vs. Anecdotal

- ▶ Empirical = preferred option.
 - More “scientific”
 - Demonstrates reading
 - Anecdotal sometimes considered “lazy”
- ▶ Anecdotal = useful also.
 - Sometimes unable to find research examples.
 - Demonstrates understanding.

Main Focus.... “Meat”

- Other points to consider.
- Flow
 - No topic/paragraph hopping.
- One paragraph leads to the next.
- Sub headings = Not encouraged.
- Critical Thought.
 - Demonstrates understanding and viewpoint
- Spelling, Grammar and Presentation.

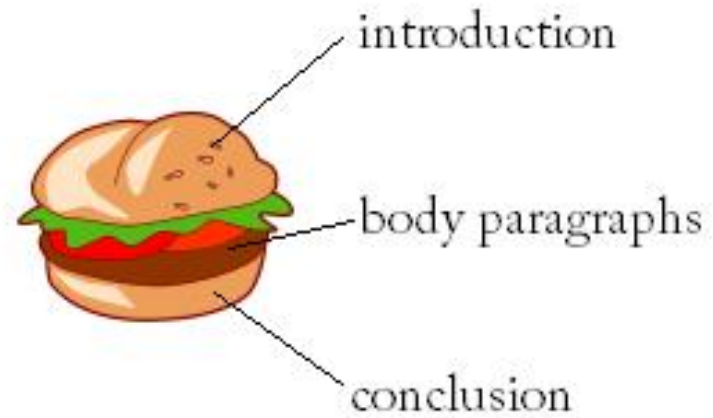
Structure your answer.



- Aim for a skeleton structure early on in the process.
- You can flesh it out later with more detail

STRUCTURE

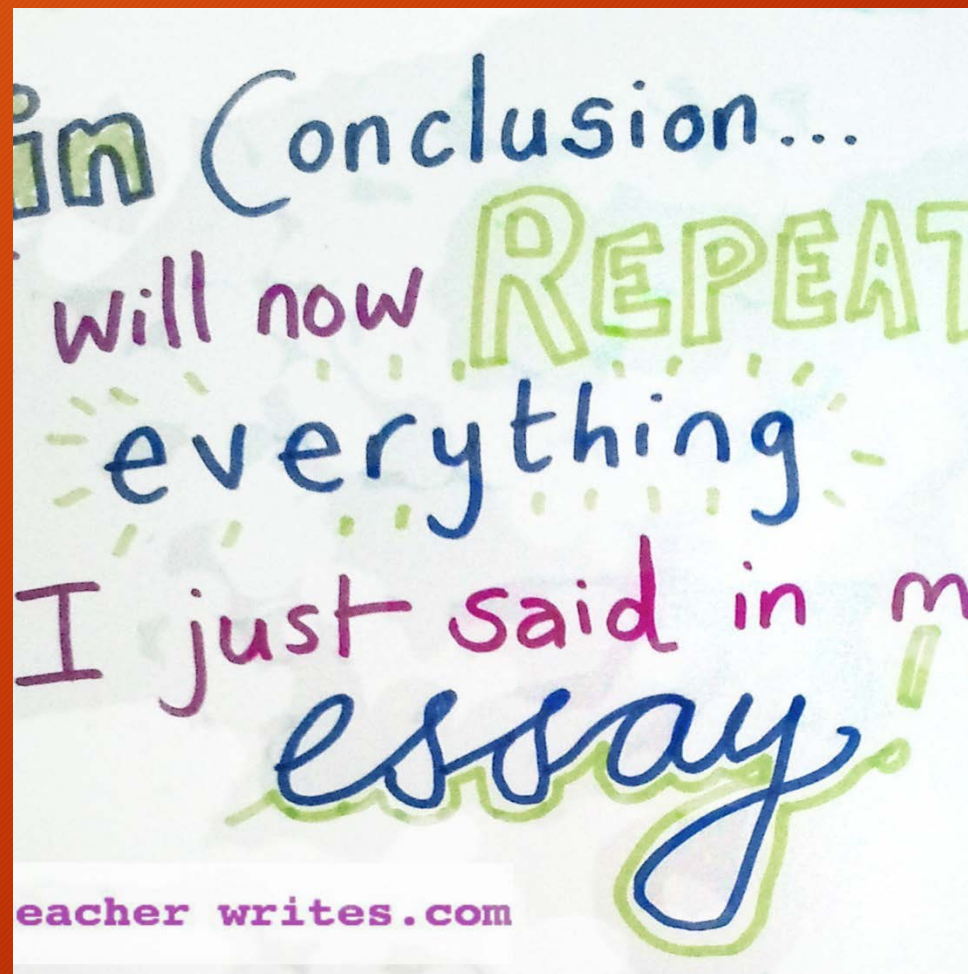
- Introduction and Conclusion
 - > 15% of the content



Conclusion

A conclusion should include a brief summary of the main arguments (no new ideas here) and bring your ideas together. You will comment on strengths and weaknesses of the work and speculate on possible gaps in the literature.

- DON'T.....



Making links....

- Each section needs to relate to the next
- Use 'linking phrases'
therefore; on the other hand; next; however



Tips

▶ Plan ahead

- Mind Map the area and QUESTION.
- Interpretation of the question.

▶ Clear Introduction.

- How you will answer the question.

▶ A “meat” which answers the question and showing understanding, knowledge and critical thinking.

▶ Conclusion

- Reverts to the question
- Critical Thinking.

Academic Writing



Why bother?

- Objective
- Presenting complex ideas clearly and concisely
- Researching
- Selecting relevant information
- Supporting position with evidence

Writing style

- Try to cultivate an objective and authoritative tone. Don't be too chatty and informal and aim to write in the third person. Keep language simple and sentences a reasonable length. Don't use long words simply to sound clever – an occasional trip to the thesaurus stands out like a sore thumb to the reader! Remember the point of the essay is to clearly communicate your ideas on a given subject – read it through and check that you understand what you've written (better still get a friend to comment)

Formal Writing

- Avoid emotional and subjective forms:
- (i.e. not 'in your face')
 - The author's argument is terrible and I don't agree with it.
- Rather, be more OBJECTIVE:
- (take a step back)
 - It could be suggested that the author's argument has not been fully developed.

What is subjective and objective?

- Subjective Me! Me! Me! Me! !! !! !!
- Objective ... take a step backwards; take yourself out of the discussion to a certain extent.

Formal Writing

- I'm
- It doesn't
- There's no



- I am
- It does not
- There are no ...



Check you work carefully

- Use
 - i) Dictionaries
 - ii) spell – check programmes
 - iii) reference books: grammar, style, thesaurus etc.
- Make sure it makes sense to another reader
- Get someone else to read it through?

Tips

- ▶ Offer own viewpoint without using “I”.
 - Use existing reference/s
 - A feasible notion was brought forward by
 - A large number of research has supported.
 - This Author.....
- ▶ Proof read
 - Get a 2nd opinion.
- ▶ Presentation
 - Make sure its Legible
 - Simple is often best.

Academic Style

- Critical rather than descriptive writing
- Draw on the opinions and findings of experts;
Use evidence to support your views
- Draft/ edit
- Persevere/ learn from feedback

Using direct Quotes

- Using direct quotes does demonstrate to the reader that extra reading has been carried out.
- However, an assignment that has become “reliant” on quotes might also demonstrate a true lack of understanding on the topic.

As an example

- ▶ Essay 1.
- ▶ Paiget (1932) wrote “Children’s games constitute the most admirable social institutions. The game of marbles, for instance, as played by boys, contains an extremely complex system of rules, that is to say, a code of laws, a jurisprudence of its own... All morality consists in a system of rules, and the essence of all morality is to be sought in the respect which the individual acquires for these rules”.

As an example

- Essay 2.
- Piaget in 1932 compared moral judgment to a game of marbles, he claimed that morality is a system of rules which requires interaction between people. This helped form his judgements on when children acquire moral judgement.

Tips

- ▶ The “dreaded” Word Count.
 - Word count + or – 10%.
 - The aim of a word count is to demonstrate that **you can answer the question** in a concise manner.
 - Don’t waffle or write a book chapter.
 - Shows lack of understanding
- ▶ If in Doubt go and check it out.

In Summary

What is a Good Essay? Checklist

- Have you answered the question in the title?
- Have you drawn on a good range of up to date and relevant material?
- Do you show a grasp of the main issues / theories?
- Have you presented a critical analysis and not merely a description?
- Have you written objectively with appropriate evidence?
- Is the essay reader friendly and logical?
- Is the work your own and is the work of others made clearly visible?
- Have you adhered to word limits?
- Have you referenced properly?

Stages of writing

- ▶ Think about the title
- ▶ Gather appropriate information
- ▶ Make a plan
- ▶ Organise material to fit your 'story'
- ▶ Write the first draft
- ▶ Review the draft in light of the title and 'good essay characteristics'
- ▶ Write the final draft
- ▶ Read (or better still get someone else to read

Title

- What is the title asking you to do? – look for key words (compare, contrast, evaluate, consider, discuss).
- What do you understand by the question?
- If you are unsure about requirements – ask!

Planning

- Get some notes down on paper – by reading you will have an idea of what others think – but don't forget what you think in relation to the evidence.
- Scrappy notes will soon become a logical plan and just writing something down gets you over 'clean page syndrome'!
- Use notes to find themes or arguments you will cover

Organising the material

- When you have the main themes or arguments, list the evidence or literature, which relates to each. How do you propose to use the evidence to 'tell your story'?

Writing style

- Write objectively and in the third person
- Avoid a chatty, informal style
- Avoid unnecessary long words or jargon
- Avoid bullet points, lists and sub-headings unless absolutely necessary, they tend to make work disjointed and do not read well

Remember.....

- 1.5 or double line spacing
- Remain in the third person
- No personal anecdotes or opinions
- Do not write don't, isn't etc... write do not, is not.
- Do not write in slang....remain academic throughout
- Proof read!!!

References and Bibliography

- ▶ References
 - The full details of a book/journal/ electronic resource cited in the essay.
 - Reader must be able to know full details of EVERY source cited in the essay.
 - Even if you only read part of the article/book or it was from a secondary source.
- ▶ Bibliography
 - The full details of a book/journal/electronic resource read but not cited in essay.
- ▶ No “shame” in not having a Bibliography.

**Read through, read through and put it
away for a few days then read through
again!**

Essay Title key words

Essay Titles

- ▶ In Psychology, being able to understand what the question requires is fundamentally important.
- ▶ There are a number of keywords that academics will use in setting the titles.
- ▶ It is very very important that you understand these keywords as they are FUNDAMENTAL to your task.

Group work activity

- Academic keyword jigsaw.
- Trying to understand what these keywords used in titles mean.

Answers

- Account for
- = Give reasons for, explain why something happens.

- Analyse
- = Examine in very close detail; identify the important points and chief features.

Answers

- Comment on
- = Identify and write about the main issue, giving you reactions based on your readings.
- Compare
- = Show how two or more things are similar. Indicate the relevance or consequences of these similarities.

Answers

- Contrast.
- = Set two or more items or arguments to opposition so as to draw out differences. Indicate whether the difference are significant. If appropriate, give reasons why one item or argument may be preferable.

Answers

- Critically Evaluate.
- = Weigh argument for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment on which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.

Answers

- Define
 - = Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show that you understand why the definition may be problematic.
- Describe
 - = Give the main characteristics or features of something, or outline the main events.

Answers

- ▶ Discuss
 - ▶ = Write about the most important aspect of; give arguments for and against; consider the implications of.
- ▶ Distinguish
 - ▶ = Bring out the differences between two items.
- ▶ Evaluate
 - ▶ = Assess the worth, importance or usefulness of something, using evidence.

Answers

- Examine
- = Put the subject under the microscope looking at it in detail.
- Explain
- = Make clear why something happens, or why something is the way it is.
- Illustrate
- = Make something clear and explicit, giving examples or evidence.

Answers

- ▶ Interpret
- ▶ = Give the meaning and relevance of data or other material presented.
- ▶ Justify
- ▶ = Given evidence which supports an argument or idea; show why a decision or conclusions were made.
- ▶ Narrate
- ▶ = Concentrate on saying what happened, telling it as a story.

Answers

- Outline
- = Give only the main points, showing the main structure.
- Relate
- = Show similarities and connections between two or more things.
- State
- = Give the main feature, in very clear English.

Answers

- Summarise
 - = Draw out the main points only, omitting details or examples.
 - To what extent.
 - = Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome.
- Trace
 - = Follow the order of different stages in an event or process.

Home Work Task

- Ahead of next weeks lecture – read the section on Note Taking from Stella Cottrell Study Skills Handbook.
- Located in Readings for this lecture section on Moodle.