

# Some guidelines for writing your essays<sup>1</sup>

## 1. *Structure of an essay*

The first page should give the essay title, your name and student number as well as a word count. All pages of your essay should have a page number printed on it.

The essay should have the following structure:

- ***An introductory section.***

An effective introduction will – in a few lines – map out the course that you will be taking the reader on in your essay.

- ***A main section.***

This part is the meat of your essay. State clearly assumptions that are underlying your analysis and include definitions as well as brief explanations of key concepts (you can assume that the reader knows the level of economics that you do). Present your arguments in a coherent and logical order. Sub-sections are often very useful for this purpose. In general, you should aim to bring related material together under a general heading. Organize your material in paragraphs/sections that relate logically to each other. Be sure to explain the intuition for results rather than enter into unnecessary details. Discuss how the results from the literature can be used and why they are important to answer the question that you are trying to analyze. Including tables with supporting data and figures with illustrations is usually extremely helpful (be sure to number tables and figures for easier reference). If you provide mathematical formulas, always make clear what variables in them mean (e.g.,  $\tilde{r}_i$ : random return on asset  $i$ ). Moreover, it usually is helpful to restate verbally what an equation means. Be consistent in your notation (and do not just copy formulas from various sources without thinking about how they relate).

Always make clear where relevant information can be found in your essay (e.g., pointing out that the summary statistics are given in table 4; referring to equation (4); etc.).

- ***A conclusion.***

This section should briefly summarize the main points of your essay and wrap up the sequence of ideas that you presented in a neat package. You might want to

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<sup>1</sup>Course material provided by Alexander K. Koch.

give an outlook on what open questions remain or briefly point out caveats. For example, include in your discussion what assumptions the theories you presented required and how results would be likely to change if one modified them, what implications for the broader topic the presented theories have, how they can guide real-life decisions, etc.

- ***A bibliography.***

This is a list of the references you cited in the essay. These should be alphabetically ordered (by last name of the first author). See hints for doing citations/references below.

**FAILURE TO CITE APPROPRIATELY EXPOSES YOU TO THE RISK OF BEING ACCUSED OF PLAGIARISM!!!**

## 2. **A few hints on how to go about writing your essays**

In drafting your essay it is useful to always have its structure in mind (see section on structuring an essay). Start off by writing an outline for your essay. At first, such a 'working outline' might be an informal list of concepts and ideas that you intend to cover in the essay. You will then more fully develop it as you do your research and successively include section headlines and some notes on what to include in each of them. Continuously revising this outline as you progress with your research and writing will lead to a final outline that should guarantee a clearly structured and coherent essay.

In your essay, try to relate to economic theories that you have learnt about or ones that you find in books and articles and learn about for the purpose of writing your essay. In doing this, make an attempt to apply the theory to your particular problem, rather than just restate the theory as it is described in a text book/lecture notes/journal articles.

Try to be analytical. Make explicit the definitions and the criteria you use in your reasoning. Give an account of the evidence you rely on in reaching your conclusion. Etcetera. A piece of good academic writing is typically different from a piece of good political speech!

Do not quote too much other people's work. Use your own words to describe concepts and only quote literally **SHORT** and **REMARKABLE** passages from other people's work (e.g., a really brilliant way of putting things, a humoristic remark, etc.). Often essays become very badly structured because they just paste one quote after the other. You will make your essay much better (and more original) by starting from this string of quotes and ideas, thinking about a logical thread linking them and then writing up in **YOUR**

**OWN** words a line of arguments that makes sense to **YOU** (giving credit to others by citing the sources of the various ideas at the appropriate place).

When doing your research, do not resort to obscure sources on the web. It is not a good idea to just Google concepts and then use a nice looking webpage. Use journal articles, books, newspapers or working papers from academic institutions. Web pages should only be used as sources if they provide data or other information not available from the primary sources above and are from 'renowned' institutions (e.g., Bank of England, IMF). Nobody checks that information on web pages is correct! Journal articles are refereed and books have passed an extensive editing process. Note also, that most working papers are in a 'pre-publication' stage, where no one but (hopefully) the authors have checked them.

### 3. How to do citations and references

Do the citing as in a professional journal article (to see what this looks like, for example, check any issue of the Journal of Finance). The principle that you should keep in mind is that the information that you provide the reader with must be sufficient for him or her to find the original argument and verify that it is correctly restated by you. In particular, this means that you must give a page number whenever you quote literally or refer to specific ideas presented in some part of a book/article rather than to broad ideas and themes in a book/article.

**Example 1:** You are describing *in your own words* ideas presented in a journal article that you read:

In-text citation:

Glosten and Milgrom (1985) provide a model of a dealer market and analyze the consequences of asymmetric information about the stock's underlying value for the functioning of such a market.

Reference in bibliography:

Glosten, L. R., and P. R. Milgrom, 1985, Bid, ask and transaction prices in a specialist market with heterogeneously informed traders, Journal of Financial Economics 14, 71 — 100.

**Example 2:** You are quoting *the author's words*:

In-text citation:

"Whaling norms were not tidy, certainly less tidy than Melville asserted in *Moby Dick*"  
(Ellickson 1989, p.34)

Reference in bibliography:

Ellickson, R.C., 1989, A hypothesis of wealth-maximizing norms: Evidence from the whaling industry, *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*, 5, reprinted in: S. E. Masten (editor), 1996, *Case Studies in Contracting and Organization*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

**Example 3:** You are using data from a website:

In-text citation:

Expenditure per student in Azerbaijan was 7.3 percent of GDP in 2002 (World Bank 2005).

Alternative:

Expenditure per student in Azerbaijan was 7.3 percent of GDP in 2002.<sup>2</sup>

Reference in bibliography:

World Bank 2005, World Development Indicators Database: <http://devdata.worldbank.org/external/dgcomp.asp?rmdk=110&smdk=473881&w=0> (accessed on 20 July 2005)

Alternative: No reference necessary since website was given in a footnote.

If you have multiple references from one source for one year, use Author (2005a), Author (2005b), etc.

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<sup>2</sup>World Bank World Development Indicators Database: <http://devdata.worldbank.org/external/dgcomp.asp?rmdk=110&smdk=473881&w=0> (accessed on 20 July 2005).

#### 4. Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious academic offence which can lead to failure of the course or even the loss of your degree. Examples of plagiarism are not appropriately referencing sources and failure to appropriately acknowledge the work of others in your essays. The Student Handbook provides information on plagiarism and lists a number of sources on academic writing. In addition, academic writing courses are available from the Language Centre (see <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Language-Centre/Pages/in-sessional.html>). The College rules and processes regarding plagiarism can be found in the College's Regulations Governing Examination and Assessment, available online at: [http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic\\_regulations/Examination\\_Assessment\\_Offences.html](http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic_regulations/Examination_Assessment_Offences.html). A good description of what plagiarism means is reprinted here from a guide to writing research papers on <http://webster.comnet.edu/mla/>:

Using someone else's ideas or phrasing and representing those ideas or phrasing as our own, either on purpose or through carelessness, is a serious offense known as plagiarism. "Ideas or phrasing" includes written or spoken material, of course - from whole papers and paragraphs to sentences, and, indeed, phrases - but it also includes statistics, lab results, art work, etc. "Someone else" can mean a professional source, such as a published writer or critic in a book, magazine, encyclopedia, or journal; an electronic resource such as material we discover on the World Wide Web; another student at our school or anywhere else; a paper-writing "service" (online or otherwise) which offers to sell written papers for a fee.

Let us suppose, for example, that we're doing a paper for Music Appreciation on the child prodigy years of the composer and pianist Franz Liszt and that we've read about the development of the young artist in several sources. In Alan Walker's book *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years* (Ithaca: 1983), we read that Liszt's father encouraged him, at age six, to play the piano from memory, to sight-read music and, above all, to improvise. We can report in our paper (and in our own words) that Liszt was probably the most gifted of the child prodigies making their mark in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century - because that is the kind of information we could have gotten from a number of sources; it has become what we call common knowledge.

However, if we report on the boy's father's role in the prodigy's development, we should give proper credit to Alan Walker. We could write, for instance, the following: Franz Liszt's father encouraged him, as early as age six, to practice skills which later served him as an internationally recognized prodigy (Walker 59). Or, we could write something like this: Alan Walker notes that, under the tutelage of his father, Franz Liszt began work in earnest on his piano playing at the age of six (59). Not to give Walker credit for this important information is plagiarism.

The website <http://webster.comnet.edu/mla/> also lists a few useful examples:

The original text from Elaine Tyler May's "Myths and Realities of the American Family" reads as follows:

*Because women's wages often continue to reflect the fiction that men earn the family wage, single mothers rarely earn enough to support themselves and their children adequately. And because work is still organized around the assumption that mothers stay home with children, even though few mothers can afford to do so, child-care facilities in the United States remain woefully inadequate.*

Here are some possible uses of this text. As you read through each version, try to decide if it is a legitimate use of May's text or a plagiarism.

**Version A:**

Since women's wages often continue to reflect the mistaken notion that men are the main wage earners in the family, single mothers rarely make enough to support themselves and their children very well. Also, because work is still based on the assumption that mothers stay home with children, facilities for child care remain woefully inadequate in the United States.

Plagiarism: In Version A there is too much direct borrowing of sentence structure and wording. The writer changes some words, drops one phrase, and adds some new language, but the overall text closely resembles May's. Even with a citation, the writer is still plagiarizing because the lack of quotation marks indicates that Version A is a paraphrase, and should thus be in the writer's own language.

**Version B:**

As Elaine Tyler May points out, "women's wages often continue to reflect the fiction that men earn the family wage" (588). Thus many single mothers cannot support themselves and their children adequately. Furthermore, since work is based on the assumption that mothers stay home with children, facilities for day care in this country are still "woefully inadequate." (May 589).

Plagiarism: The writer now cites May, so we're closer to telling the truth about the relationship of our text to the source, but this text continues to borrow too much language.

**Version C:**

By and large, our economy still operates on the mistaken notion that men are the main breadwinners in the family. Thus, women continue to earn lower wages than men. This means, in effect, that many single mothers cannot earn a decent living. Furthermore, adequate day care is not available in the United States because of the mistaken assumption that mothers remain at home with their children.

Plagiarism: Version C shows good paraphrasing of wording and sentence structure, but May's original ideas are not acknowledged. Some of May's points are common knowledge (women earn less than men, many single mothers live in poverty), but May uses this common knowledge to make a specific and original point and her original conception of this idea is not acknowledged.

**Version D:**

Women today still earn less than men — so much less that many single mothers and their children live near or below the poverty line. Elaine Tyler May argues that this situation stems in part from “the fiction that men earn the family wage” (588). May further suggests that the American workplace still operates on the assumption that mothers with children stay home to care for them (589).

This assumption, in my opinion, does not have the force it once did. More and more businesses offer in-house day-care facilities.

No Plagiarism: The writer makes use of the common knowledge in May's work, but acknowledges May's original conclusion and does not try to pass it off as his or her own. The quotation is properly cited, as is a later paraphrase of another of May's ideas.

5. **Useful references**

- William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, 1959 (and other years), *The Elements of Style*. Various publishers. (roughly £ 5) **Library:** 808.02 STR
- Kate L. Turabian, 1996 (and other years), *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago. (roughly £ 10). **Library:** 808.02 TUR