# Essay-Writing Check List

# DO:

1. Use your candidate number as the file name when you upload your essay.
2. Write your tutor’s name at the top of the essay and number your pages.
3. Double-space your essay and leave margins on all sides to make it easier for the marker to write comments.
4. Cite your sources properly. To do otherwise is plagiarism. Follow the MHRA/MLA or Harvard Style Sheet for the format of titles, footnotes and bibliography.
5. Define and discuss any key terms raised by the essay question. Do not take them on trust. You might need to consult a dictionary of critical terms as well as the *OED*.
6. End your introduction with a thesis statement. This is the sentence that indicates what line of argument you will follow.
7. Make sure that everything in the essay relates in some way to the thesis statement from which you started.
8. Be sure that you are including enough quotations from the text to provide evidence for your argument. This is especially important in close reading.
9. Use quotations from critics critically. Don’t just use them to make your argument for you.
10. When quoting, spell out what the quotation does for your argument and/or what it means to you. Follow the Style Sheet in the *Students’ Handbook* for advice on how to incorporate quotations into your essay.
11. Use single quotation marks; reserve double quotation marks for quotations within quotations.
12. Indicate line endings when quoting poetry. Do not turn verse into prose but mark line endings with a forward slash, or by indenting it in a block when you quote three or more lines.
13. Make sure you know the precise meaning of all the words you are using, especially of they are technical critical terms or unusual in any other way. It is tempting to use a thesaurus to find fancy words, however, it can introduce problems unless you also use a dictionary to check the meaning of words you have found.
14. Organise your ideas into connected paragraphs. An essay should not read like a series of notes. A good way to organise a paragraph is to think PEAL: POINT, Example, Analysis, Link to next paragraph.
15. Remember that the more times you redraft your essay the better it will be.

Always make sure that you have enough time to read your essay through before you hand it in. That way you will be able to correct casual errors. You might find it useful to read it aloud to make sure it sounds right, or to have someone else read it through.

Remember: up to ten marks can be deducted for poor grammar, syntax, punctuation, referencing and presentation.

**DON’T:**

1. Waffle. Big, vague statements without any real content leave you with nowhere to go, whereas concrete examples can be analysed and dissected in detail. (Dissection: good for an essay; bad for a frog.)
2. Write ‘I believe … I think … I feel’. Your essay is implicitly about what you think and feel so saying so is redundant. Moreover, asserting that you really think something does not count as evidence in an argument.
3. Let your sentences get too long. Not only are they difficult for you to punctuate properly and for your marker to read but often the idea you are trying to convey gets lost in the process. Learn the value of the occasional short declarative sentence.
4. Forget that a sentence needs a main verb.
5. Use a comma splice. A sentence must have both a subject and a main verb in order to be complete, but it cannot have more than one subject or main verb. A comma splice is a variety of run-on sentence that occurs when two complete sentences are joined mistakenly by a comma. There are generally three methods of correcting this problem: a. replace the comma with a full stop or semi colon; b. use a coordinating conjunction (and/but/nor/or); c. make one of the sentences a dependent construction by linking it with a subordinating conjunction (if/when/so that/although/because) or a relative pronoun (that/which/who/whom/whose).
6. Start a paragraph with the phrase ‘This is’. ‘This’ must always refer to a noun or noun phrase, which is almost impossible at the start of a paragraph. In general you need to be clear about what your pronouns refer to.
7. Use passive constructions, especially unlocated passives such as ‘it could be argued that’. Passive voice constructions do not tell your reader as much as the corresponding active version would. For example, ‘it is shown that’: it is better to state who is doing the ‘showing’ and even better to use a more explicit verb, e.g. ‘Coleridge demonstrates that’.
8. Use dangling participles: see this useful website for an explanation: <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/dangling-participles?page=all>
9. Confuse title formats: titles of whole books and issues of journals should be italicised; titles of parts of books - such as short poems, chapters, articles – should be placed in single quotation marks. E.g. ‘Ode to Melancholy’ in *The Poems of Keats*.
10. Get muddled about apostrophes: apostrophes are used in possessives (e.g. Judith’s) and in contractions to replace a missing letter (e.g. in ‘don’t’). Contractions are best avoided in academic prose (that way you can avoid the common mix up of ‘its’ and ‘it’s’). Remember: every time you misuse and apostrophe, a Shetland pony dies.

For further help with your writing, make an appointment to see the department ‘essay doctor’. You can also sign up for skills courses in CeDAS on the ground floor of the international building. There are numerous on-line courses you can take on your own, e.g. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_41.htm>

More advice can be found on Moodle under **English Department Academic Support Resources**.