

## Paul's Tips on Writing Essays

### 1) Essay format:

Essays must be typed (i.e. not hand-written) and must meet the length requirements stated in the course outline, give or take one hundred words. Pages should be fastened together with a single paper clip or staple; do not enclose your paper in any sort of cover or duotang. Every essay must also have both a *real* title (i.e. a title which does not simply state your topic) and a works cited list. Do not use a title page but begin your essay as follows:

Your name

Your student number

English ###

Dr. P. Martin

March 23, 2004 (date on which you're handing in the essay)

The Title of Your Paper (centred)

Papers that do not follow these guidelines will be handed back unmarked.

N.B. These are not my own invented guidelines. They adhere to the standard MLA (Modern Language Association) format for any essay or research paper.

### 2) Works Cited:

At the end of your essay, you must always indicate any source you have taken quotations or ideas from. This includes work by friends, conversations, e-mail, and class lectures. Any unacknowledged borrowing from another source *is* plagiarism, whether it is intentional or not. I have set up a link from our web site to a site that shows you how to properly format your works cited list according to the MLA format. Be aware that some websites show titles of books and periodicals as being italicized rather than underlined. Remember that all titles of books or periodicals must be underlined and not put in italics. For more detailed information, you can also check the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers in the library or purchase a copy from the reference section of the UVM bookstore.

### 3) MLA style/Parenthetical citation:

When citing the page number from which you are quoting, remember that the period always comes after the parentheses. For example, a proper use of parenthetical citation would be

"It was the best of times it was the worst of times" (Dickens 1).  
and NOT

"Mr. Blue was just as intrigued as I was." (Poulin 9)

In the case of a question or exclamation mark, that punctuation always precedes the final quotation mark and one places an additional period after the parentheses.

"What would she do in her loneliness?" (Kroetsch 164).

Quotations should only be indented when they exceed four lines of text on your page (not on a page of the book). Finally, remember that you only need indicate the

author's name in the parentheses when a) quoting from that text for the first time or b) when quoting from a different author than the author of the previous quotation. When quoting from two texts by the same author, the same rules apply except that you use the titles of the texts rather than the name of the author. For more information on parenthetical citation, please consult the sources listed above.

#### **4) Content:**

The most important part of any essay, regardless of whether you are using secondary sources or not, is that you express your own ideas in a clear and concise manner. In other words, I'm far more interested in what you discover about the text or how you apply the ideas of other critics than I am in reading a summary of what those critics have said in the past.

Similarly, make sure to avoid simply retelling the events of the story; always assume your reader has read the text and is very familiar with the plot. You must, however, also keep your argument focused on the text and what happens in the text. A reasonable number of quotations – in a short paper, two quotations are too few and forty are far too many – and examples from the text are necessary in any essay to make sure that your argument is grounded in the text.

Keep focused on your topic and make sure there is no excess content that has little to do with supporting your thesis. At the same time, be careful not to omit anything crucial from your argument either. While you can never discuss everything of interest in even a long essay, you can avoid your reader asking herself or himself "why didn't the writer discuss this?" by indicating in your introduction which aspects of the topic you will be discussing and perhaps why you are leaving other areas out of your argument. In other words, make clear to your reader what it is you will be discussing and, most important, how you have chosen to address your topic.

One of the chief problems students encounter when writing an essay that discusses two or more texts is how to structure such an essay. One of the most common responses to this dilemma is to organize the essay so that it discusses the topic in relation to one book for half the essay and then about the other book for the rest. Unfortunately, the result is then little more than two small essays joined together somewhere in the middle.

What such an essay should be is an essay that examines how the topic relates to *both* texts. The most effective way to attack such a topic, then, is to ensure that for most of your essay you are discussing both texts at once. Of course, some elements of your argument will relate much more to one text than the other, but this is an inevitable and extremely important aspect of such an essay. In other words, one learns as much from the dissimilarities of two texts as one learns from what they have in common.

#### **5) Style:**

Of course, every essay must have introductory and concluding paragraphs and follow all the grammatical rules pertinent to a formal academic essay. For any paper to receive a grade of A, punctuation, spelling and, for the most part, grammar should be flawless.

Here are a few common errors to watch out for:

- spell checks do not always work! Make sure to check each word that your computer corrects.
  - remember the difference between it's and its! Also remember never to use contractions in a formal essay.
  - make sure that every sentence makes complete sense. Have a friend or classmate carefully read through your essay.
- Finally, make sure to proofread your essay carefully before handing it in.

### **Marking guidelines**

Marks in this course are not scaled and follow the usual UVM grading system.

A+	4.0	
A	4.0	Excellent
A-	3.67	
B+	3.33	
B	3.0	Good
B-	2.67	
C+	2.33	
C	2.0	Satisfactory
C-	1.67	
D+	1.33	Poor
D	1.0	Minimum pass
F	0-49%	Unsatisfactory

### **Grading Criteria**

#### **A**

- An excellent essay in nearly every respect with nearly no deficiencies in grammar, structure, or style.
- Clear development of a specific and challenging thesis, with proper paragraphing
- Sentence structure correct, with full range of sentence types (compound, complex, and compound-complex), with full range of punctuation
- Graceful style, neither pompous nor breezy, with few errors
- Uses interesting and appropriate evidence effectively to support the thesis. Detailed reference to appropriate texts, with evidence of individual response
- Quotations well integrated into text, with proper documentation
- Ability not only to expound subject but to see around it-- subtleties and ambiguities, qualifications and concessions, relations to other subjects, etc.

## B

- A solid essay that fully answers the question but which falls somewhat short in at least one area
- Clear development of a specific thesis, with proper paragraphing
- Sentence structure correct, with reasonable range of sentence types and full range of punctuation
- Style not too wordy, with errors relatively few and minor
- Adequately detailed reference to texts
- Quotations well integrated into text, with proper documentation
- Ability to expound reasonably sophisticated ideas with clarity

## C

- A good essay that answers the question but with less insight and completeness than an A or B essay
- Reasonably clear development of a thesis, with proper paragraphing
- Sentence structure correct, but perhaps overly simple, with tendency to avoid punctuation besides period and comma
- Errors relatively few, but occasionally serious, with evident misunderstanding of some point of elementary grammar (comma splices, fragments, semicolon errors, subject-verb disagreements, poorly integrated quotations)
- Effort to support points with references to the text, with reasonable effort at documentation
- Basic ability to expound ideas

## D

Inadequacy at one of the following levels:

- Difficulty with paragraphing or consecutive thought
- Errors of grammar or diction frequent enough to interfere with understanding
- The roots of some fairly good ideas, but clouded by weak expression
- Overgeneralization with inadequate support, or with examples that run to lengthy and irrelevant paraphrase

## F

- Inadequacy on several levels at once
- Ideas too simple for level of course
- Content largely "borrowed" from sources with no individual distillation, but no apparent attempt to deceive
- Plagiarism with intent to deceive

(I have compiled and adapted these grading criteria from a number of sources that I have looked at over the years. Many of these words are not my own, but the original sources for them are missing and thus not cited. They reflect commonly agreed upon distinctions between the various grades and not merely my own perspective on what each letter grade should signify.)