

WRITING AN ESSAY. SOME GUIDELINES

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General

1. Write about something you care about, something that fascinates you, angers you, bothers you or interests you. When the subject you are writing about is close to your own experience and how *you* perceive *your* world, you will find it much easier to write. Most readers will be interested in what *you* have to say about the world *you* live in. Don't expect the reader to know everything you know. They don't.
2. Don't waste your time looking for the 'right' framework (phenomenology, dialectical psychoanalysis, post-structuralism etc.). Which painter starts a painting by looking for a frame? Write from the inside not from the outside.
3. A thesaurus is an indispensable writing tool, for example *Webster's New World Pocket Thesaurus* or *The Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus*.
4. You may also want to look into William Zinsser, *On Writing Well. The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (various editions) or any other style guide. The style guide published by *The Economist* is also a good reference. An abridged version is online at: <http://www.economist.com/research/styleguide/>
5. Entire forests are wiped off the face of the earth, because of all the newspapers, magazines, books, memos, dissertations and essays that are being printed every day. Don't let this keep you from printing your essay when you feel like doing so.
6. You can find a lot of information on the internet, if you know how and where to search, but don't discard the good old library too soon. University libraries often have free access and not only store lots of books but also back issues of many journals and magazines. You can search the catalogue of most universities online.
7. Don't spend all your time reading (and writing). Sit down or go for a walk and THINK. Think about what you've read, try to connect it with your own experience, follow different chains of thought and see where it leads you.

Strategy

1. Once you've got an idea of what you want to write about, make a broad outline of the entire essay, with keywords or a few lines indicating the various building blocks. The order of the building blocks doesn't matter yet, you can always reshuffle them later. Put the outline somewhere where you can look at it as you're working on your essay, for example on the wall in front of your desk. Always keep an eye on your road map, the outline of your essay. Don't get lost in getting some minor detail right when you still have a long way to go.

2. The building blocks may become chapters or paragraphs depending on the length of your essay. You may want to divide each building block itself into smaller blocks. Don't worry about changing your outline, it is after all just an outline.
3. Expand on each building block block by block. Don't do all reading first and then start writing. By the time you start writing you will have forgotten what you were reading and thinking of writing and you will have to start all over again. If your essay contains a block on Baudrillard, write it when you're doing research into Baudrillard. When you're finished move on to the block on Foucault or whatever.
4. As a rule of thumb the essence of a paragraph goes into the first sentence. The rest of the paragraph expands on this first sentence. Occasionally the core message of a paragraph appears in the final sentence.
5. Make a project file for your essay, a folder on your computer and a pile on your desk or whatever you find easy to work with.
6. Write down whatever comes to mind. Don't expect thoughts to re-occur later.
7. Look through your random notes from time to time, you may discover some gems you had completely forgotten about.
8. Don't start from the beginning everytime you re-read and revise your essay. Begin where you left off. To get into the flow of writing again, you may want to briefly look at previous paragraphs, but not too long or else you'll never get beyond where you left off.
9. Don't dwell too long on a single word or sentence. If you can't find the word you're looking for, just leave it open. You'll think of something when you see the sentence as part of a paragraph. Besides, once you've finished the entire essay you will find that that one word or sentence doesn't matter that much within the scheme of things.
10. Don't be afraid to leave out precious thoughts and cherished formulations if they don't fit into your overall argument. You can always write another essay.
11. Don't fall in love with a particular formulation either. If it sounds good but doesn't make sense, leave it out. You're writing an essay, not a poem.
12. Not every sentence has to carry a message all by itself. The "message" is in the essay as a whole. Don't just write statement after statement. It makes for boring reading. Try to establish a dialogue with the reader.
13. Don't feel forced to connect all consecutive building blocks of your essay. You can also stack them.
14. If you sense that a particular line of reasoning doesn't really work, look at it from different angles and if need be, delete it altogether. Quite often these are the passages the reader will stumble over as well.
15. Don't delete passages from your essay, but cut-paste them into a separate document, which you may call leftout.doc or whatever. You may want to use some of the passages that you now think don't fit in at a later stage.

16. Essays often end with a somewhat poetic statement. Don't worry if you can't think of a "good" ending. Every end is the beginning of something new.

Formalities

1. Always double check proper names. It's Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi. If in doubt, try and find an article or book by the author or his or her homepage on the internet. Don't rely on secondary sources. The author may have got it wrong and this way an error may perpetuate itself.
2. Use the spell checker.
3. Consistency. Consistency. Consistency. Make sure that you're consistent when using italics, headers, quotation marks etc.
4. Quotations go between "Quotation marks". In case of a quotation within a quotation use: "Laura said, 'Quotations should go between quotation marks'".

Footnotes and References

1. Add a reference whenever you are referring to statements, claims, discoveries, proofs etc. you didn't come up with yourself and that are not general knowledge and to specific information the reader may want to check or look into.
2. You can use references to sustain your argument, but the foundation of your essay should be your own argument and line of reasoning.
3. You can put references in footnotes, endnotes or a reference list at the end of the article, whichever you prefer (or the style guide of the publication you're writing for requires) as long as you are consistent.
4. Put asides and minor explanatory remarks that expand upon an argument but hold up the flow of the overall argument into a footnote.
5. There are various styles for references. Again, it doesn't matter that much which style you use, as long as you are consistent. I'd suggest choosing either of the following two styles.
6. Style 1

Books:

- a. Michel Foucault, *Surveillir et punir. Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
- b. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (Trans. Alan Sheridan). London: Penguin Books, 1991 (1975).

In words it is: Author comma *Title in italics* full stop Place colon publisher comma year. Note that instead of the place of publication AND the name of the publisher, you may also only mention the place, as in: Paris, 1975. In case of a translation it is not absolutely necessary to also mention between

brackets the year of the original publication, but I tend to find it useful because it gives a better sense of chronology. *Discipline and Punish* was written in the 70s not in the 90s. If you're referring to specific pages, mention the edition you are using in the reference, not the first edition. Page numbers may differ across different editions. As to the use of capitals in titles, in *English* nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives begin with a capital, all other words are in lower case, unless there is a full stop in the title, in which case the subsequent word begins with a capital letter.

Journal articles and articles appearing in volumes:

- c. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry* 30, 2004, pp. 225-248.
- d. Daniel W. Smith, "Deleuze's Theory of Sensation. Overcoming the Kantian Duality", in: Paul Patton [Ed.], *Deleuze. A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, pp. 29-56.
- e. Uri Hasson, Yuval Nir, Ifat Levy, Galit Fuhrmann and Rafael Malach, "Intersubject synchronization of cortical activity during natural vision", *Science* 303, 2004, pp. 1634-1640.

The title of the article goes in between quotation marks, the title of the book or journal is in italics. If you're referring to the article you should mention the page numbers as in: pp. 225-248. Use pp. in case of several pages, p. in case of a single page. If you're referring to a specific fragment you should mention the page where it appears. If the article appears in a volume, use "in:", if it appears in a journal or magazine only mention the title. The [Ed.] stands for Editor. In case of two editors use [Eds.].

Scientific journals often start numbering pages with every new volume, which need not coincide with a year. Some journals have volumes as well as issues. In that case you may refer to both volume and issue as in: *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 9 (6), that is, *Name of Journal* Volume (Issue). Once more, what matters is consistency.

In case of two authors the names are separated by the word "and". In case of several authors, the names are separated by a comma, except for the last two names in the list.

7. Style 2

- a. Foucault, M. (1975), *Surveillir et punir. Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard.
- b. Foucault, M. (1991), *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (Trans. Alan Sheridan). London: Penguin Books.
- c. Latour, B. (2004), "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry* 30, pp. 225-248.
- d. Smith, D.W. (1996), "Deleuze's Theory of Sensation. Overcoming the Kantian Duality", in: Patton, P. [Ed.], *Deleuze. A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 29-56.

- e. Hasson, U., Nir, Y., Levy, I., Fuhrmann, G. and Malach, R. (2004), “Intersubject synchronization of cortical activity during natural vision”, *Science* 303, pp. 1634-1640.

Note that the difference here is that the surname of the author is mentioned first, then the initials of the first name(s), NOT the full first name, then between brackets the year of publication, then a comma, then title etc.

8. In footnotes or endnotes subsequent references to the same book or article are referred to as Foucault, 1991 or Foucault, 1991, p. 132 if you’re using “style 1” and Foucault (1991) if you’re using “style 2”.
9. Subsequent references to an article with several authors are referred to as Hasson et al., 2004. You may choose to write Hasson *et al.* (2004).
10. If in two or more consecutive footnotes you refer to the same article or book twice in a row, you may use *Idem* instead of Foucault, 1991. Thus, if footnote 15 reads: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (Trans. Alan Sheridan). London: Penguin Books, 1991 (1975), footnote 21 may read Foucault, 1991 and footnote 22 may read *Idem*.
11. If in two or more consecutive footnotes you refer to the same *location*, you may use *Ibidem* or *Ibid.* which stands for “in the same place”. Thus, if footnote 15 reads: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (Trans. Alan Sheridan). London: Penguin Books, 1991 (1975), p. 52, footnote 21 may read Foucault, 1991, p. 102 and footnote 22 may read *Ibid.*, but only if it refers to the same page as footnote 21.

The Last Word

1. Try to enjoy the writing and what you are writing.
2. Avoid writing when you’re feeling down or depressed. Quite often it will not appeal to you when you later re-read it. You will sense that somehow the sentences don’t seem to flow and that your argument falters.
3. Don’t worry if you get stuck. Think of something else, get yourself a drink or go for a walk.
4. Ignore the above. Don’t run away if you get stuck, but try to find a way around what is blocking you.
5. Don’t continue writing until your pen runs dry, but stop at a high point. From there it is much easier to pick up again.
6. Go to the toilet if you have to.
7. Don’t continue working until late at night unless you have to. The next morning much of what you wrote when you knew you were getting tired will turn out to be garbage.
8. Never mind if what you wrote is garbage, you can always write another essay!